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To cite this article: John Bryan (1992) Down the slippery slope: Ethics and the technical writer as marketer, Technical Communication Quarterly, 1:1, 73-88, DOI: 10.1080/10572259209359492

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10572259209359492

Published online: 11 Mar 2009.

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Down the Slippery Slope: Ethics and the Technical Writer as Marketer

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This article discusses some of the ethical dilemmas faced by writers who prepare marketing materials in engineering organizations; such writers include traditional technical writers whose documents are influenced by the marketing interests of the company and "boundary spanners" who write both technical and promotional materials. The article describes social, political, economic, and legal changes in the professions during the last 30 years and the growing influence of market-driven decisions on ethical decision-making. It briefly surveys the marketing literature that engineering marketers are reading. Finally, it suggests a question that marketing writers should ask themselves in examining rhetorical choices.

We as technical writers—whether we come to the field from the humanities or from a technical discipline—have traditionally relied on the ethical orientation of the organizational families that adopt us. In organizations offering the traditional professional services—accounting, architecture, engineering, health care, law—that approach may have seemed reasonable up until the mid-1970s. All of those professions offered their members rigid codes of conduct that demanded adherence to high moral standards, that promised selfless public service, and that rejected practices associated with crass commercialism: intraprofessional competition, advertising, direct solicitation of clients, and criticism of other members of the profession. That members of the professional societies occasionally violated those codes hardly mattered for most of this century. The professionals' perceptions of themselves and the public's perception of the professional remained largely positive. However, an array of social, legal, political, and economic changes over the last 30 years have changed the concept of professionalism and have chal-
Challenged our assumptions about the ethical grounding of professional service organizations and their writers.

Stepping onto the Slippery Slope

In 1979 I joined an international consulting engineering firm as a technical writer. My principal duties consisted of editing and rewriting feasibility reports for massive water resource projects in Asia and South America. Within a year, however, my work had shifted from reports to proposals, and my de facto boss became the vice president in charge of marketing. Among others, the cause of that shift was the rapidly changing marketplace for engineering services. Within another year, I became a marketing manager. With no formal training in either engineering or marketing, I found myself drawing upon a handful of resources and models for the various promotional materials I had to write (ads, brochures, proposals, statements of qualifications, newsletters, news releases, and sales letters). Most of the models both from inside the company and from competitors were bad: full of puffery (exaggerated statements or opinions), unresponsive in form and content to the particular interests of the clients and projects we were pursuing, void of the basic elements of segmentation and positioning. I joined the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS), which had been founded in 1973 by and to help people like me. In the early years of my membership, though, I found that most of the people attending the chapter meetings had less marketing experience than I. True promotional writing had been virtually unbroken ground in engineering before the early 1970s, and so for models I looked to the promotional writing associated with the marketing of consumer goods.

Having spanned the boundary between technical and promotional writing and having made the leap from models within engineering to models in consumer marketing, I found that the success rate of my proposals dramatically improved, but I also found that almost daily I faced ethical choices, choices having to do mostly with the phrasing of promotional material.

Let me offer an example. In 1984, I became the marketing director of a medium-sized architectural and engineering firm. Located in a small city in the Midwest, this company had a difficult marketing position. (A marketing position comprises the perceived differentiation of a company, service, or product among competitors in the marketplace. A company that fails to distinguish itself or its products in a way desirable in the marketplace often finds itself consistently losing to competitors despite its competence.) The firm for which I worked competed with both large national firms and small store-front consulting operations. Consistent with the marketing notion of positioning, I wished to distinguish my firm from my competitors in the eyes of our potential clients. Certainly one of the most important elements in
positioning the firm as we pursued major projects was to provide evidence of our size—125 people at the time, and the credential most efficient in providing that evidence was to cite our position on the Engineering News-Record list of top 500 design firms, the engineering consulting field's equivalent of the Fortune 500. Having clung to the list for 14 years, we proudly touted our listing in all our promotional material.

Not long after my arrival at that firm, however, numerous national market factors resulted in our dropping off the list. We had hope and some confidence that we would regain a place on the list in the next year, but what was I to do about our positioning in the meantime? Relying on my rhetorical ingenuity, I began to use the following phrasing: “For 14 of the last 15 years, Engineering News-Record has ranked us among the top 500 design firms in the nation.” The facts of the sentence were true and were expedient in distinguishing us from the thousands of small firms that had never been on the ENR list. But was the use of that phrasing ethical? In the struggle for market position, I had implied that my firm possessed a position that it could no longer claim, and if questioned, I am sure that most clients would say that an engineering firm’s current size and capability—not its history—are what matter.

That particular choice rises in my memory because it entailed a rather guileful resolution, and in some ways it does not typify my daily ethical dilemmas because it offered a fairly limited set of options:

1. I could drop any claim to the ENR 500, which would force me to use less efficient means of establishing our market position;
2. I could straightforwardly explain that we had a long history on the list and had fallen from it more because of inflation and other companies’ mergers than because of any diminution of our strength, but such an explanation would be inefficient and would draw too much attention to a potentially negative fact; or
3. I could make the choice I did make.

Most ethical choices in writing promotional material do not present such clearly defined options; indeed, to me they seemed not to present options at all once I was thoroughly imbued with a marketing orientation. Take my example again: “For 14 of the last 15 years, Engineering News-Record has ranked us among the top 500 design firms in the nation.” The phrase “top 500 design firms” is used by the magazine itself, often on the cover of the issue carrying the list every May. The term top, however, may imply that the magazine’s editors have made a qualitative ranking of firms; certainly that is the hope of the firms listed. The ranking, however, is based solely on billings reported without audit by the engineering companies themselves. The ambiguity of the term top offered me other choices. I could not replace it with the word largest without encouraging other kinds of
misinterpretation; after all, does largest refer to the number of engineers, the number of all personnel, the billings, the revenues, or some other measure? I could have explained straightforwardly what our position on the list meant by saying “Engineering News-Record has ranked us among the 500 U.S. firms with the highest billings during the last year.” That solution fails its marketing purpose, however, because it shifts the focus from the issue of our professional prominence to the issue of our commercialism.

Such crafting of language for promotional purposes in the technical environment is everyday fare now just as it has been throughout the history of consumer marketing. Is it an issue of ethics at all, or is my questioning of such distinctions a naive indulgence of moral sensibilities? Some of my colleagues in marketing argue that it is the latter. They suggest that marketers are engaged in an amoral activity or that asking people to be “moral heroes” is asking too much. As Richard De George puts it, “We cannot reasonably expect engineers to be willing to sacrifice their jobs each day for principle and to have a whistle ever by their sides ready to blow if their firm strays from what they perceive to be the morally right course of action” (1).

Others argue that we are engaged in a highly competitive game that has its own rules. One writer, quoted in Lee Friedman and David Rothman’s book directed to marketers of engineering and other professional services, repeatedly advises readers to “be moral toward your competitors” (27). However, the advice always carries the rationale of expediency. “You never know with which companies you’ll team up on major projects in the future,” he says. “Mind you, I’ll qualify that. There are certain practices within the services industry that by normal standards skirt the line—for instance, showing up at the other guy’s company for a job interview to snoop on the competition. But that’s part of the game: Play, or become a social worker. You’re really no different from a reporter posing as a jail inmate, or from a policeman going undercover.”

Reflecting the last decade’s rush toward deregulation and free-market independence, some libertarians have suggested to me a somewhat more complex casting of the marketing game theory. People recognize promotional writing for what it is, the argument goes. They cite the Federal Trade Commission’s (FTC) acceptance of puffery in consumer advertising as evidence that all adults know the rules of the marketing game. According to Dean Fueroghne, “Courts have reasoned that consumers do not rely on expressions of opinion by advertisers about their products” (39). Instead, the free market represents a kind of closed system, resembling the adversarial structure of our judicial system. In the courtroom, no one expects either the plaintiff or the defendant to present balanced or objective arguments; instead, they offer their own oblique perspectives, and the jury decides where the truth lies. Similarly, in the free market, the marketers of products and services present their own skewed versions of fact and
the consumer chooses through trial and acceptance or rejection. If consumers decide that Coke is not truly "the real thing," as free-market jurors they may try Pepsi or RC. If the clients who hire my engineering firm decide that we do not live up to our self-representations, they may fire us and hire another firm. So the rationale goes.

The frequent counter to that argument is that even sophisticated institutional consumers often cannot judge the promotional claims or the services of engineers and that, more importantly, the potential for catastrophe in the event of failure is much greater than in the failure of a soft drink. To recognize the difference, we need only remember the Hyatt-Regency disaster in Kansas City, the Challenger explosion, the Ford Pinto gas tanks, and numerous other examples of engineering failure.

I believe, however, that another and in some ways more insidious problem threatens the marketers of professional services. My contacts with the marketing representatives of many other consulting firms suggest that my own progression from technical to promotional writer occurs commonly in engineering and in other professions, such as law and accounting. In small firms and even in some large firms, the writer continues to work at least occasionally on technical projects—such as in writing and editing reports. Sometimes the marketing writer helps a project group to meet a project deadline; sometimes the marketing writer remains involved in a project that he or she helped to secure; sometimes the dual duties are institutionalized. Such boundary spanners almost inevitably bring to their technical writing a marketing orientation. (Boundary spanners are communicators who, as defined by Teresa Harrison and Mary Beth Debs, "bridge social and physical distances between groups of individuals within and outside the organization, enabling these communicators to mediate the flow of information between the groups" [6].) When that marketing orientation brings the virtues of clarity, succinctness, and audience awareness, the boundary spanning has benefitted the technical project. If that orientation brings puffery, distortion, misrepresentation, pandering to the audience, or the omission of important information out of personal or corporate self-interest, then the boundary spanning has harmed the project, the client, and, in many cases, the public.

This infection of technical work may result from an integrated marketing approach in which a marketing orientation pervades an organization. I witnessed its effects at one firm where I worked and—from various sources—heard about such effects at many other firms. Some employees—especially low-level engineers—regard it as an infection, others as a useful influence. Many of the books and newsletters aimed at the executives of professional-service firms couple the areas of marketing and management and, in trying to rid marketing of its huckster image, define marketing as a means to better serving clients. Under the old regime of selling, the professions developed their services and then promoted them through a haphazard pattern of
client contact, such as joining the Rotary and the country club, supporting charities, and entertaining potential clients with meals, trips, and golf. In the industrial sector, the process of developing the product before analyzing the market’s needs and interests is said to be “technology-driven.” According to Eugene Johnson, Eberhard Scheuing, and Kathleen Gaida, “In contrast, the marketing concept focuses on the needs of the buyer.” It places “the buyer at the heart, not at the end, of the marketing process” (7). This “market-driven” approach subordinates the development of technology to the market’s need for such technology. And as the recognition of buyer (client) needs travels through the marketing department into those sectors of the company that develop and deliver products or services, the technical staff become increasingly aware of their role in the satisfaction of the buyer, the success of the project, the success of the company, and—by extension—their own success.

I don’t mean to suggest that the awareness of such roles has just occurred. A generation ago, most engineers would have said that the best marketing is a job well done. Others would have added that the best marketing is a job that never has to end. For example, a dozen years ago, during a time of double-digit inflation, I heard frequent criticism of economists at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation for basing the cost-benefit analyses of major Western water projects on inflation projections of six percent over the economic life of projects. The Bureau’s critics had no doubt: without such assumptions, the projects would prove infeasible, and the Bureau personnel might find themselves looking for work elsewhere.

In recent years, however, every aspect of client contact has come to be seen as an opportunity for marketing. Professional-service firms teach telephone etiquette to their professionals as well as their secretaries. They involve most or all of their professionals in the full range of marketing, from publishing newsletters and scholarly articles to giving commencement speeches and making cold calls. And many of them teach their professional staff how to write with marketing implications in mind. As soon as firms factor a professional’s success in marketing activities against billable hours as part of the compensation as many firms do, they again pit self-interest against client interest.

W. Harvey and Henry Sims’s study into the issue of ethical decision-making clearly demonstrates that “when unethical decision behavior was extrinsically rewarded, ethical decision behavior was lower” than when no reward was involved. This research, which posed decisions regarding the simulated acceptance of kickbacks by graduate business students assuming the role of a regional sales manager, further showed that competition “tends to decrease ethical decision behavior” (455).

Where then is the marketing writer—whether boundary spanner or not—to find ethical grounding? Two sources commonly mentioned are as follows:
1. A sense of professionalism, especially as expressed in the codes of conduct that form the basis of the professions' self-regulation (Johnson, Scheuing, and Gaida 198); and

2. A "consciousness raised" by the frequent examination of ethical issues in our discipline's journals.

For reasons I am about to explain, I believe that neither of these sources offers any real hope of effectiveness.

**Professionalism and the Codes of Conduct**

The effect of professionalism and the professions' codes is complex and deserves more attention than I can give it here, but let me briefly argue that a variety of social, economic, and political events and movements began to change the social contract with the professions in the 1950s and continues today. Although the changes have touched all the professions, they have affected engineers more than the others—partly because, as suggested by Randall Collins, engineers never achieved the truly lofty status of lawyers and doctors (169). These changes that affected engineers are narrated below:

1. The post-World War II economic and technological boom not only created a demand for the skills of engineers and scientists in the United States and in the nations we were helping to rebuild, it also opened higher education to thousands of veterans who otherwise would not have pursued professional careers. By the late 1960s, the supply of engineers had met the demand for their services in many sectors of the economy and in most regions of the country.

2. In increasing numbers, professional engineers went to work for industry rather than for the government, the military, or independent consulting firms. In many cases, these engineers' compensation and careers became tied to the profitability of the corporation rather than to standards of professional performance.

3. Consulting engineering firms were being bought and set up as profit-centers by other industries. Whereas the engineer-managed firms had often been content with profit margins of two or three percent, they found themselves competing under the umbrella corporation with fellow subsidiaries in oil, computers, real estate development, and other higher-margin activities. In that environment, the criteria for promotion of engineers into management changed radically. Whereas most firms had previously used engineering acumen and company seniority as the principal determinants, the emphasis on profitability led firms to hire and promote people on the basis of their business acumen.
4. The professional engineering societies, whose codes had prohibited competition among their members, discovered that the marketplace was full of engineers who were eager to compete, if not directly on the basis of price at least on other grounds.

5. Dwight Eisenhower's parting warning against the military-industrial complex, the perceived complicity of high-tech industries in the prosecution of the Vietnam war, the radicalism and consumerism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the medical profession's use of the Medicare system for unprecedented profits, the legal profession's prominent representation in the Watergate scandal, the growing awareness that most of the professions had systematically excluded women and minorities all encouraged a distrust of the professions worthy of Dickens.

6. Perhaps most importantly, the free-market era of Ronald Reagan brought deregulation—not the abolition of the professions that neo-classical economists such as Milton Friedman favor (quoted in Freidson 12), but enough deregulation to create real competition in several of the professions and particularly in engineering. That deregulation came not through the ideological conversion of the self-regulating professionals themselves but rather through the changing public perception of the professions and through a series of legal maneuvers.

The catalysts that finally ended the formal prohibitions of intraprofessional competition, however, came from a minority of consumer-oriented attorneys. What they sought at the time was certainly not a relaxation of ethical standards nor was it really even competition. Instead, what they wanted was the freedom to get information to consumers. They argued against restrictions on free trade and won on the basis of the First Amendment. A series of rulings by the FTC and the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1970s and early 1980s forced the various professional societies to throw out most of those portions of the codes of ethics that restricted commercialism—the very heart of the codes and the very elements of the professions' self-definition that their early proponents such as Richard Tawney and Emile Durkheim had pointed to as the professions' reason for being. These rulings ended the prohibition of advertising by lawyers that had existed since 1908 (Lichtenberger 112). The rulings would also become elements in the larger movement that is still defining what is known as the commercial free speech doctrine. The most significant of these rulings was the 1977 case of Bates v. State Bar of Arizona. This ruling was the first to deal directly with the right of professional societies to restrict the advertising practices of their members. The codes of conduct in every other profession felt the influence of the Supreme Court and FTC rulings and soon lifted most restrictions on advertising and solicitation. Along with the broader
movement toward deregulation and increased commercialization and competition, the lifting of such bans threw some of the professions into new and uncomfortable roles to which they are still adjusting.

My own experience echoes the decline in the influence of professionalism and the codes. In my ten years' tenure with two engineering consulting firms, I heard engineers make only four types of references to the codes, none of them bearing on the use of the codes to decide ethical questions:

1. References to the changes that I just described;
2. A warning that we could never criticize another professional engineer in front of clients—even though we knew some who were guilty of unethical practices (such as selling the use of their seals);
3. A warning that we could not review the work of other professional engineers without first notifying them that their client had engaged us for that purpose; and
4. A prohibition on seeking to displace another professional engineer in the service of a client.

In those ten years, I was never shown the text of any of the codes, and I do not recall ever hearing any reference to the issue of ethics in connection with the codes. When my colleagues did refer to the codes, they characterized them as prescriptive documents, not as expressions of their or their profession's attitude toward ethical conduct in the practice of engineering. Written by unknown committee members at a time and place that seemed quite remote from the tangible and immediate problems engineers faced everyday, the codes seemed as annoying and irrelevant to them as the regulations promulgated by Washington bureaucrats and others living outside the "real world." Certainly my colleagues never characterized a code as a resource in deciding ethical questions.

The disinclination of engineers to use codes as an ethical guide has also been reflected in research conducted within the engineering profession. A 1980 survey by Chemical Engineering presented hypothetical cases in ethical decision-making. Of the 4,318 survey respondents, Roy Hughson and Philip Kohn (quoted in Luegenbiehl) report that "fewer than a half-dozen . . . even mentioned a code of ethics at all" in making their decisions (41).

The Raised Consciousness

If we can no longer rely on the engineering organizations' sense of professionalism or on the professional codes, can we rely on the "consciousness-raising" done by our professional journals to reinforce ethical decision-making? For two reasons, I believe we cannot. First, some of the literature on the process of ethical decision-making among
technical writers does not recognize the realities of the marketplace. Much of it suggests that the writer is the corporate equivalent of the technical journalist: responsible only for accurately reporting the truth without accountability for or much interest in the financial effects of such reporting (such as Rubens; Schmelzer). Although many technical organizations would actually improve their images—and certainly their credibility—by allowing their writers in communications, public relations, and marketing to adhere to journalistic standards of objectivity and balance, most managers place more faith in their power to manipulate appearances than in the efficacy of the truth.

More importantly, though, I do not believe that most professional writers working in marketing read the academic journals that raise such issues. Instead, they read the narrow range of nonacademic books, magazines, and newsletters that tell them how to succeed in their jobs. Some of those nonacademic publications—such as those by Weld Coxe, Weld Coxe et al., and Gerre Jones—maintain reasonable ethical standards while offering useful advice. This mainstream of advice is also followed by the monthly newsletter of the Society for Marketing Professional Services although much of the advice reported in the SMPS Marketer (formerly SMPS News) reflects the increasing influence of consumer marketing on professional-service marketing, an influence that is increasing the division between the promotional emphasis and the services offered. For example, in one issue Adrienne Malley reported a number of direct-mail promotions used by firms, including one by Day Brown Rice, “a Texas [engineering] firm that lacked name recognition [and so] sent out a bag of brown rice and a holiday recipe for turkey casserole” (4).

Other writers hold to a middle ground, advocating various forms of puffery. For example, David Cooper advises the manager of an engineering firm on how to discuss a potential project with a client:

> You may never have done this kind of work before, but on your staff is someone who has. Before making contact with the owner, call on your staff member to give you background . . . so that when you talk to the owner, you can appear to have a good grasp of this special field. You may display a strong working knowledge of the subject, but tell the owner that your staff member is considered an “expert” (82).

To claim that a staff member who has “done this kind of work before” is “considered an ‘expert’” is puffery. (Notice the anonymity permitted by the passive voice; presumably the speaker would be the one conferring the approbation of “expert.”) Thus the terms expert, expertise, and specialist have come to mean almost nothing in the promotional writing of engineers. For example, I frequently asked engineers to list their specialties on their resumes. Many of them, it turned out, considered themselves “specialists” in more than a dozen fields.

Other nonacademic writers provide many of the manipulative techniques of current marketing, protesting too much along the way.
that marketers must never resort to unethical, immoral, or illegal acts. George Head and Jan Head's advice on gathering "intelligence" about competitors meekly says,

Our one suggestion is that you be honest and aboveboard at all times. . . . All of the information contained here may not be suitable for everyone. It is not our intent to offend anyone or to suggest that you do anything that, in your opinion, may be questionable. Nor is it our intent to judge what is ethical for you to do in your business. (118)

Following that laborious disclaimer, Head and Head outline six techniques of gathering information. The first consists of calling competitors and asking questions about their business practices.

If they ask you who you are and why you want this information, feel perfectly free to tell them . . . that you are doing a telephone survey of other architectural or engineering firms in the area for a possible future joint venture. This is not a misstatement of fact because you can honestly say that if the situation and financial arrangements were right, you would be more than happy to enter into a joint venture. . . . (118-119)

Joint ventures do occur, but not as the result of such surveys.

Toward the end of that section, the writers again say, "Remember, you are not being dishonest. We feel confident that you can honestly say . . . " and so on. The writers also suggest answering competitors' employment ads to find out about their workload and calling the landlords of the buildings in which competitors are housed in order to help assess the likely overhead rate of those firms (Head and Head 118-124). To observers outside the profession with a traditional view of the supposed altruism of engineering, the most outrageous advice for marketers comes from Friedman and Rothman's Zero Defect Marketing. This 1988 book—published about the time I was leaving the field—lacks the sophistication of the books by Jones and Coxe but more accurately reflects the seemingly inevitable course of engineering marketing. Consistent with the rough-and-tumble business climate of the 1980s—in which much of corporate America expressed more interest in making money through deal-making rather than through product-making or service delivery—Zero Defect Marketing describes a marketing posture that places little emphasis on the actual services offered but instead focuses on the outmaneuvering of competitors and the manipulation of clients. The ruling metaphor throughout the book casts marketers as lions and clients as their prey.

Don't shrink away from hard chases, as long as the antelope looks juicy enough. And run at full speed, each time. Ignore the psychobabblers who claim that competitiveness leads to personality disorders. Those laid-back wimps, not you, are the true sickies, and if Americans ever end up as janitors, sweeping up behind robots in Japanese-built factories, the babblers will share no small part of the blame. (21)
Saluting competition as the “corporate reckoner” that “weed[s] out the inept,” Friedman and Rothman fault engineering schools for failing to “nurture sound, competitive instincts” in their students. Nowhere do they even hint at the traditional vision of engineering as a collegial, altruistic profession. Instead they say, “Too many techies can’t understand that the amiable professional colleagues they see at conferences and seminars are threats to their livelihoods; and so these zoo-bred lions reveal weaknesses their competitors can pass on to buyers; or they blab about new techniques that rival companies then pick up and use against them” (27-28).

So what do real lions do? Friedman and Rothman offer fifteen ways to outwit rivals, noting that some of them “may not be legal to use with certain clients” (160). The methods include the following:

- Offering “loss leaders” (sometimes called a “low ball,” often in the form of a proposed fee that would result in a net loss on a project’s initial phase but would put the firm in a position to recover the loss and make a profit on subsequent phases of the project);
- Helping clients to circumvent their own budget restrictions by obscuring costs;
- Ghostwriting specifications for clients to favor the writer’s own products and services;
- Giving to the client’s pet charity (as Charles Keating donated to Alan Cranston’s favorite projects);
- Conducting what they call “siege campaigns” (putting the firm and its irresistible services in the way of the client at every turn); and, of course,
- Entertaining. (159-75)

Only three of the fifteen methods pertain to offering better technical service than the rival.

Beyond these guidelines, Zero Defect Marketing offers two other “tricks” (their term) for beating the competition: (1) filling promotional materials with “hot buttons” and (2) appealing to “latent drivers like client pride and fear” (176). A hot button is a term or phrase of putative power in evoking a response from clients. Friedman and Rothman furnish a list of hot buttons, such as dollar savings, time savings, reliability, integrity, safety, and security. They state, “Latent drivers include client image, pride, fears, hatred, competitiveness, greed, and curiosity” (178). By ascertaining the “feelings and compulsions” that the client is subject to but has not put in the request for proposals or the bid specification, the marketing writer can appeal to the client in ways that competitors do not.

Their discussion entirely ignores whether the claims expressed by such rhetorical devices have any validity, and the insulting assumption behind the use of both hot buttons and latent drivers is that clients are irrational creatures who respond to such manipulation with Pavlovian
predictability. The discussion of such techniques never approaches the issue of whether promoting engineering services on the basis of the client's emotions is appropriate. I agree with most marketing consultants that the intangibility of most professional services demands that the client be reassured and feel comfortable with the service provider; lawyers, architects, accountants, and engineers as well as doctors should have bedside manners. However, I do not believe that Friedman and Rothman or other proponents of the hot-button and latent-driver methods are simply advocating hand-holding. After describing a hypothetical use of a latent driver in which the engineer helps a buyer to outmaneuver a corporate rival, Friedman and Rothman say, "Yes, you'll help your client do his job better. But you'll also be getting your hooks into him" (178).

Friedman and Rothman represent the most unabashed voice among those publishing on the subject, but theirs is a voice I heard echoed repeatedly throughout the 1980s. It is a voice that the marketing writers in professional-service organizations are hearing and heeding.

In Search of Sure Footing

When I first described this trend to an academic colleague, she quickly proposed that we need new laws to deal with its ethical implications. I disagree. Laws and regulations that address technical marketers' most egregious sins, such as bribery and false advertising, already abound. Indeed, as I believe the examples in this article suggest, the problem is subtle and resistant to solutions imposed from distant quarters (as was the case with the professional codes themselves). Instead, I believe the problem must be addressed at two "local" levels: those of the firm and the individual.

Private companies must make profits; otherwise, they eventually fold. However, the firm that either implicitly or explicitly rewards marketing success—regardless of the means used to achieve that success—more than it rewards ethical service will create a corrupt culture. Of course, the firm as an entity does not have that power; the individuals at its top do. The engineering firm for which I worked last had a few top executives whose personal integrity, traditional sense of professionalism, intense loyalty to our clients, and clear communication of those values influenced the conduct of most of the firm's employees. Many of our competitors and some clients perceived those executives and the firm as a whole as unimaginative and old-fashioned, yielding many of the more glamorous markets inaccessible to us. Nonetheless, the cadre of clients that the firm had built over 30 years ensured sufficient work and profits. And despite the few employees whose excessive self-interest and disregard for the firm's welfare led them into unethical acts, I consider that firm a "success story."
Interestingly, most of the employees engaging in unethical acts remain with the firm—though one left and eventually served time in prison. In those cases, the intense loyalty of the firm's executives often extended to the errant employees—even though retaining the employee contravened the interests of the firm and its clients.

That firm stands against the trend, however, and in most engineering organizations, the executives not only turn their heads from unethical acts, they also argue or concede the "necessity" of such acts because of cultural or marketplace realities. For example, another branch of one company for which I worked frequently included in its proposals the résumés of some employees in my branch because those engineers' credentials impressed international clients. The other branch had no intention of borrowing our employees and continued the practice despite our objections that the practice was dishonest; indeed, they even continued to use the résumé of one of our very well credentialed but dead vice presidents. The culture within that branch—the largest and most successful in the company—grew because of the cultivation it received from its executives, who were themselves rewarded with promotion into the parent corporation's high echelons. From those new positions of power, they pressed every other branch to match their marketing and profit-making successes, offering by implication their own business practices as models for our behavior.

What, then, is the writer working in a corrupt culture to do? When asked that question by students, I hesitate. I left one moderately corrupt organization for one far less corrupt but still employing people engaged in unethical acts. I left that company to return to teaching. But what of the thousands of professional writers who have fewer options than I? Most of the ethical infractions they witness will be so small that blowing the whistle will seem fruitless and self-destructive. And leaving one company for another may prove equally fruitless, given the pervasiveness of the problem. I advise my students to investigate their prospective employers and to seek jobs only with those that show values consistent with their own, but how much can one know about a company from the outside? Even seeming indicators of a company's strong sense of social responsibility can prove to be nothing more than a marketing sham. A vice president at one company where I worked was reputed to be an environmentalist among local environmental groups, a laissez-faire businessman among local Republicans, a progressive among local civil-rights groups, and an irrational bigot among his fellow employees.

A handful of my current colleagues criticize our teaching of professional writing because, in short, we are serving Mammon. We are leading students to work for corporations that will taint them. Our critics have a point, for I believe that people commit unethical acts inside corporations that they would never commit as individuals representing only themselves. Nonetheless, without joining the political
debate and without pointing out the economic naivete of our critics, I must wonder where, if not in our classrooms, our students—few of whom will ever enjoy academic sanctuary—will receive guidance and preparation for the ethical choices they must make. We cannot teach integrity, but we can teach the right questions. The professional writer will always face choices and will often find personal and corporate self-interest pitted against personal integrity. The question that we need to pose for our students, the question they need to pose to themselves when they face such dilemmas, is this: If you were sitting in your home with no corporate byline to hide behind, if your readers could hold you personally accountable for your writing, what would you write? If the writer has scruples, the answer to that question can provide a useful guide. If the writer does not possess a sense of integrity that will argue for honesty and fairness amid the clamor about hot buttons, lions, and wimps, then that writer will become—as one marketing director described himself—just another hired gun.

Works Cited


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