
UNIT 3 ETHICS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALISM

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit, third in the series of Block 1, is aimed at highlighting the vital function that Public Relations communication serves in society which necessitates ethicality in this profession. At the end of this Unit, you should be able to :

- Define ethics and explain its need in society;
- Relate the impact of Public Relations profession of society;
- identify the potential for unethical practices in Public Relations activities;
- discuss the role of Public Relations communication in information and persuasion;
- estimate the inherent potential for positive gains to society through persuasive communication;
- outline the code of ethics adopted by Public Relations organisations;
- Justify the ethicality in persuasion;
- explain the concept of social audit;
- discuss the need to relate organisational interest with public interest;

- state some guidelines for ensuring ethics in communication; and,
- Point out the legal consideration in Public Relations activities.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, we have talked about the nature of Public Relations, its scope and the process by which its activities are carried on. We had also looked at the theoretical aspects of communication as the relevant concepts of advertising, publicity and propaganda, and Public Relations. The concept of social marketing was also examined.

In this Unit, we shall discuss the special importance of ensuring ethical standards in the practice of Public Relations because of its being a vital function involving public opinion. Certain misconceptions about Public Relations being a play or gimmick have brought some disrepute to this profession in its nascent stage because of a few unscrupulous persons. Today, it is a sophisticated and vital management function with its own code of ethics.

We will examine the role of Public Relations in society, its potential for good use as well as for abuse. We will also examine the code of ethics and how it was adapted in India.

We shall also study the relationship between the Code of Ethics and the development of professionalism in Public Relations. Public Relations has today helped evolving as an effective tool for motivation and management.

Freedom of expression in democratic societies, growth in communication technology, industrial growth and increasing public awareness, globalisation, etc. Are some of the factors that have contributed to the need for professionalism in skilful mediation and information communication making it an essential service today. Thus, having established its essentiality and its persuasive and informative role, we will examine its impact on the society as a whole. Also, we will consider some ethical and legal implications in Public Relations. We will discuss a few ways to minimize distortion and some ways of maintaining and sustaining high moral and ethical standards in the profession.

Finally, we shall discuss the concept of social responsibility of business and the need of Public Relations to relate private with public interest. The practice of social audit, to evaluate the extent to which various organisations are fulfilling their social obligations, will be explained briefly.

This lesson will provide you with a sense of direction, place in your hands a compass that will enable you to chart your course in the stormy seas of Public Relations practice.

3.2 ETHICS DEFINED

Ethics is defined as "that branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions". By dictionary definitions ethics and morality are interchangeable. Both are concerned with conduct that is right or wrong, according to the accepted standards or principles.

To elaborate further, it is the consequence of a conduct that determines ethicality e.g. when the consequences range from being harmless to being beneficial. We consider it ethical or right. If the results are harmful, it is considered wrong or unethical. However, the concept of right or wrong varies with time, place and situation. They evolve over a period of time and cannot be applied uniformly as they are relative concepts. Behaviour that is considered unethical by one society or a generation may be quite acceptable to another. However, ethical conduct remains of significance to the society ultimately.

Need for Ethical and Moral Standards of Society

The dividing line between civilised and primitive societies is that, in the former it is the rule of law that prevails as against the jungle law of survival of the fittest, in the latter. However, even in civilised societies the legacy of the past continues. Standards of professional conduct, as all ethical standards, have their genesis largely in the moral codes as expressed in

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various religious doctrines, for lending sanity to the civilised world. But with the spread of ideology whether Marxism, with its emphasis on centralised planning, or Capitalism, which thrives on the concept of free enterprise, religious and moral codes have given way to materialism and technological determinism. This, in turn, has led to the corrosion of ethical and social values, which leads to newer forms of exploitation. The only way now open to correct the wrong is to inject strong doses of morality into our personal working lives and thereby into national life. Hence, there is a growing concern for ethical standards or codes of conduct. A reflection of this concern is the importance that the subject of human rights has been receiving of late.

The issue of human rights has indeed assumed such paramount importance in the world today that the United Nations which was set up after the Second World War adopted a "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", and the charter of the United Nations has affirmed its faith in these fundamental rights.

A number of international conferences have subsequently been held to discuss how far these rights are being implemented. Currently, India is taking steps to constitute a Human Rights Commission of her own to ensure that violations of these human rights do not take place in the country.

We shall see later that the Code of Ethics that was adopted by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), is based on these fundamental human rights.

The question of human rights and the observance of ethical standards is a matter of concern for humanity as a whole for all organisations and all professionals, be they accountants, bankers or doctors. It is even more so for a Public Relations professional as it deals with influencing public opinion. This is because the Public Relations Manager in any organisation is expected to function as its conscience-keeper.

The pressures that create ethical dilemmas in the government, business, universities, family relations, and all other spheres, also affect the field of Public Relations: emphasis on immediate gains and extreme monetary benefits; lowering of all standards resulting from overzealous desires to provide benefit to the backward classes, emphasis on materialism and desire for self-gratification, etc. Another factor is the doctrine of management by objective, with its emphasis on the end result becoming the overwhelming criterion in all decision making.

Thus you see that the question of ethics is as important to Public Relations as to any other profession. Those who are responsible for ensuring that the organisation they serve be value-based, must necessarily observe strictly the principles of morality and ethics, themselves. Having established the need for ethics, we will now examine in detail where ethics comes into Public Relations activity and how it is handled.

Activity 1

The following news item appeared in a national daily. Read it and debate on it with a chosen group of friends or neighbours to find out opinions on the ethicality of this issue.

Watching death live

WASHINGTON - If advocates of televised executions have their way, American families will soon be able to witness, in the comfort of their own living rooms, the death of some convicted killed by lethal injection, hanging, electrocution or gas.

It could be the ultimate video experience - instant replay, slow motion, fast forward into the netherworld.

The gruesome ultimate in tasteless TV? Or, a morality lesson ?

televised executions argue, to allow people to see the consequences of capital punishment, which polls show 70 per cent of American favour ?

They could see those sentenced to death "twisting, slowly, slowly in the wind" as in the wild West when crowds gathered to watch a hanging, or in the French region of terror when people cheered the guillotine as it lopped off heads.

If he could have his way, talk show guru Phil Donahue would televise the scheduled execution on June 15 of David

violence on video day and night, watch a human die, for real ?

And for what purpose ? To hype television ratings?

Or, is supporters of

Lawson, convicted of killing a man in 1981 during a burglary.

Lawson will be killed by lethal injection of gus under State law. (Reuter)

SOURCE - INDIAN EXPRESS JUNE 5, 1994

3.3 ETHICS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public Relations has now become a vital function affecting management decisions and influencing public opinion in every non-profit or profit making organisation. However, Public Relations passed through tumults phases before evolving as a profession and gaining universal status. Today, it is indispensable for any organisation. The reasons for it being so are as follows:

- Recognition of right of expression and freedom of information.
- Advance in telecommunication and transport.
- Opening up of traditionally closed societies and increasing globalisation.
- Governments employing Public Relation practice for staying in power, for developmental tasks etc.
- Growth in business, amalgamations, collaborations, operating with subsidiaries, spreading across national boundaries and in different cultures.

Let us now focus on the ethics of professionalism in Public Relations.

Unethical Practices in Public Relations

In the early growth stages of Public Relations there were quite a few people posing a Public Relations persons but working as press agents who indulged in puffery and other unethical practices to achieve their ends. This wrought considerable damage to the discipline and it has been difficult for Public Relations profession to outgrow such labels as 'white washing', 'sugar coating', 'fixing', 'propaganda' etc. even today.

It is a difficult task to describe what is ethical and what is unethical. It would be simpler to state it as a matter of choosing between the right and wrong options in keeping with conscience. Anything that causes dissonance in the mind brings about a feeling a guilt and dishonesty. And dishonest communication cannot be an aid to cementing relationships. Publics are also not to be underestimated as fools. As Abraham Lincoln said, "you can fool some people all the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all the people all of the time."

To start with, should you use your talents to promote some concept or cause that you believe to be wrong ? A typical example is smoking which is a proven health hazard. In spite of this knowledge, is it right to publicise a cigarette ? Dilemma situations like this are many wherein you are liable to get confused. Yet basically, it is important to have faith in the organisation or the cause that you are working for. Otherwise you cannot do a good job. You must be yourself convinced before trying to convince others. There are a number of acts that could be classified as unethical, ranging from suppressing of news to misleading the audience. Unethical act may include :

- suppressing unfavourable news
- misrepresenting facts
- undercutting a competitor
- purporting to serve a cause but actually serving some other interest

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- promising results that cannot be obtained
- use of undesirable methods towards pressurising editors for carrying publicity material.

The above only shows that like in other professions, there is scope for abuse in Public Relations too. It is also often thought that wrong doing can be altered by effective Public Relations. This misconception also needs to be done away with.

Public Relations recognises a long-term responsibility and seeks to persuade and to achieve mutual understanding by securing the willing acceptance of attitudes and ideas. It can succeed only when the basic policy is ethical, and the means used are truthful. In Public Relations, the ends can never justify the use of false, harmful or questionable means.

It is impossible to use Public Relations techniques to counter a weak case. We have instance of the Watergate scandal which rocked the entire world and which the large Public Relations staff of the President of the United States could do nothing about. Similarly, if a service industry like a public transport corporation is not running its buses properly or punctually, no Public Relations technique would help to brighten the image of that corporation in the eyes of the public — the commuters. Or if a chemical factory's effluents were contaminating the environment, do you think a Public Relations gimmick would help in stemming the public outrage against it? For this reason, it is often stressed that good Public Relations, like charity, must start at home, and that denials never convince the doubting listeners. Public Relations, therefore, has not only to be practical and positive, but also be always ethical.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note :**
- i) State whether or not you agree with the following statement.
 - ii) Give reasons for your agreement or disagreement briefly in a line in the given space.
 - iii) Compare your answers with the ones given at the end of the Unit.

1) Public Relations communication has scope for abuse.

[] Agree [] Disagree

Reason :

.....

2) Effective Public Relations can alter wrong doing.

[] Agree [] Disagree

Reason :

.....

3) Ethical concepts can be applied universally.

[] Agree [] Disagree

Reason :

.....

4) The public cannot be underestimated.

[] Agree [] Disagree

Reason :

.....

5) It is important to be convinced yourself before you try to convince others about a cause or idea.

[] Agree [] Disagree

Reason :

.....

3.4 IMPACT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS ON SOCIETY

There are no suitable yardsticks by which Public Relations impacts can be measured. Publication of press releases may be a tangible sign but still it does not mean that:

- it has been read by the target audience
- it has been understood as desired by the source
- it has brought about a change in the attitude of the receiver.

Besides, it is difficult to view the results of Public Relations activity in isolation. There may be other factors e.g. an increase in the sale of unsaturated oils could be related to the non-availability of other brands of vanaspati rather than to the results of the campaign. Again, it is also not possible to bring about changes in attitudes by merely exposing the target audience repeatedly to ideas. We have examples of drug education programmes, anti dowry or anti liquor, anti smoking campaigns, yet the malady lingers. This is because of these kinds of 'social engineering efforts' as they are called, require a lot of research into the psyche of the intended audience and need higher levels of skill and judgement on the part of the communicator to be able to transmit the necessary messages into the minds of the audience to bring about a change in them. These are some aspects of the problem.

At the same time, we are aware of the importance of skillful mediation and information communication role of Public Relations as an essential service to the society. This necessitates a closer scrutiny of what Public Relations does or achieves. We will begin by examining its dual role — that of information and of persuasion to see how far they are fulfilled by Public Relations.

3.4.1 Role of Public Relations : Information

One of the functions of Public Relations is to inform the public. Does Public Relations really help to inform the public ?

There are many aspects to a question like this. Firstly, there can be flaws in the kind of information given out and the kind of information suppressed. There can also be several ethical aspects to the content, timing of message and the channel used. Let us illustrate it with an example. In the area of financial Public Relations, full and timely financial disclosure is a major responsibility undertaken on behalf of clients to the investigating public. Truth and accuracy of these disclosures influence the investment decision. The factors mentioned above about the timing, message and channel can affect the quality of decision made by an investor who would have chosen to buy or sell a company's share. This can have ethical implications.

Another aspect often criticised is that there is too much of such information emanating from every side with conflicting claims. This does not help to resolve doubts. Rather it adds to the confusion with the overloading of communication channels with contradictory messages indiscriminately.

3.4.2 Role of Public Relations : Persuasion

Public Relations communication is aimed at bringing about a change in attitude. This itself is open to question. Is it ethical to manipulate public opinion ? Haven't people a right to make their own decisions ?

Answers to these questions should be found by examining what Public Relations is all about.

Basically, a Public Relations person is an advocate of a cause, client, company or institution. Scott Cutlip and Allen Center in their book "Effective Public Relations" describe the Public Relations functions in a free society "to ethically, effectively plead the cause of a client or organisation in the forum of a public debate. It is a basic democratic right that every idea, individual or institution should have a fair and full hearing in the public forum — that its merit is determined by its ability to get accepted in the public opinion market place. To obtain such a hearing today, the individual idea or institution needs the expertise of a skilled advocate. The advocate is essential to make the modern democracy work".

3.4.3 In Defence of Public Relations

Thus, we see that although there is potential for abuse in communication and Public Rela-

tions, and practitioners have come under severe criticism for manipulating opinions of others, still one cannot overlook the benefits of this profession of the society. Public Relations has helped businesses to make profits, expand, provide quality goods for consumers and satisfactory working conditions for employees, created awareness of health, hygiene and environment by providing development support, promoted scientific thinking helped to raise funds for noble cause, promoted tourism and trade and increased our understanding of national and international problems. Thus the good that Public Relations can do is limitless.

Check Your Progress 2

Note : i) State whether the following statements are true or false.

ii) Compare your answers with the once given at the end of this Unit

- 1) Publication of press releases is a definite measure of success of Public Relations activity. ()
- 2) It is not easy to isolate the results of Public Relations activity from other variables. ()
- 3) The quality of financial disclosure does not have any ethical implications. ()
- 4) Truth and accuracy in corporate communication is important for credibility. ()
- 5) Persuasive communication is a basic democratic right in a free society. ()

3.5 RELATION BETWEEN ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM

It is for these aforesaid reasons that all authorities have emphasised the importance of ethics in the Public Relations profession. Says Sam Black, the British Public Relations Expert : "Public Relations work by its very nature must have a high measure of ethical contents". Scott Cutlip of USA points out that "a basic requirement for a profession is adherence to a set of professional norms", and refers to the various codes of professional standards for Public Relations practice as examples of the efforts "to advance the ethics in this field".

In fact, a code of ethics is an essential requirement for every profession. You will no doubt have heard of the "Hippocratic Oath" which all medical graduates are required to take. This is named after Hippocrates, a Greek physician, who was the first to free medicine from superstition and withch craft or magic, and gave a scientific basis for the science and art of the treatment of diseases. It was this that laid the foundation for the emergence of the medical profession.

3.5.1 Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct for Public Relations

From what we have said in the preceding sections you will be able to appreciate why a code of ethics and a code of conduct have been given a high priority by all professional Public Relations organisations. In the United States, where Public Relations first developed as a profession, a Code of Professional Standards was adopted as early as 1954 and subsequently revised in 1959, 1963, 1977 to meet the requirements of the situation. The next of the code of the Public Relations Society of America is given below. You will see from this code how it bases itself on the fundamental human rights and on the value and dignity of the individual. Without such a code the profession could not have acquired the important place it has in the American Society.

PUBLIC RELATIONS SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Code of Professional Standards
for the Practice of Public Relations
Adopted and Effective April 29, 1977.

Declaration of Principles

Members of the Public Relations Society of America base their professional principles on the fundamental value and dignity of the individual, holding that the free exercise of human rights, especially freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press, is essential to the practice of Public Relations.

In serving the interests of the clients and employers, we dedicate ourselves to the goals of better communication, understanding and cooperation among the diverse individuals, groups and institutions of society.

We Pledge :

- To conduct ourselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness and responsibility to the public;
- To improve our individual competence and advance the knowledge and proficiency of the profession through continuing research and education;
- And to adhere to the articles of the Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations as adopted by the Governing Assembly of the Society.

Articles of the Code

These articles have been adopted by the Public Relations Society of America to promote and maintain high standard of public service and ethical conduct among its members.

- 1) A member shall deal fairly with clients or employers, past and present, with fellow practitioners and the general public.
- 2) A member shall conduct his or her professional life in accordance with the public interest.
- 3) A member shall adhere to truth and accuracy and to generally accepted standards of good taste.
- 4) A member shall not represent conflicting or competing interests without the express consent of those involved, given after a full disclosure of the facts; nor place himself or herself in a position where the member's interest is to many be in conflict with a duty to a client, or others, without a full disclosure of such interests to all involved.
- 5) A member shall safeguard the confidence of present and former clients as well as of these persons or entities who have disclosed confidences to a member in the context of communication relating to an anticipated professional relationship with such member and shall not accept retainers or employment which may involve the disclosure or use of these confidences to the disadvantage or prejudice of such clients or employers.
- 6) A member shall not engage in any practice which tends to corrupt the integrity or channels of communication or the process of government.
- 7) A member shall not intentionally communicate false or misleading information and is obligated to use care to avoid communication of false or misleading information.
- 8) A member shall be prepared to identify publicly the name of the client or employer on whose behalf any public communication is made.
- 9) A member shall not make use of any individual or organisation purporting to serve or represent an announced cause, or purporting to be independent or unbiased, but actually serving an undisclosed special or private interest of a member, client or employer.
- 10) A member shall not intentionally injure the professional reputation or practice of another practitioner.

However, if a member has evidence that another member has been guilty of unethical, illegal or unfair practices, including those in violation of this Code, the member shall present the information promptly to the proper authorities of the Society for action in accordance with

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the procedure set forth in Article XII of the Bylaws.

- 11) A member called as a witness in a proceeding for the enforcement of this Code shall be bound to appear, unless excused for sufficient reason by the Judicial Panel.
- 12) A member, in performing services for a client or employer, shall not accept fees, commissions or any other valuable consideration from anyone other than the client or employer, given after a full disclosure of the facts.
- 13) A member shall not guarantee the achievement of specified results beyond the member's direct control.
- 14) A member shall, as soon as possible, sever relations with any organization or individual if such relationship requires conduct contrary to the articles of this Code.

The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) was set up as a para-national organisation in May, 1955, to raise standards of Public Relations practice in various countries and improve the professional quality and efficiency of Public Relations practitioners. An early achievement of the organisation was the adoption of a "Code of Conduct" for the purpose of establishing standards of professional ethics and conduct in the field of Public Relations for all members of the association worldwide. The IPRA code of conduct has served as a basis for the formulation of a number of codes for national Public Relations and societies.

Along with this an International Code of Ethics was adopted by the IPRA Council at its meeting in Athens held in 1965. Because of this fact, this code is often referred to as the Code of Athens. This constitutes IPRA's moral charter, and its principles have also been inspired by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

The text of the Code of Athens is also given below. It will give you an idea of the moral standards that are expected to inspire the activities of the Public Relations practitioners in every country.

CODE OF ATHENS

CONSIDERING that all Member countries of the United Nations have agreed to abide by its charter which reaffirms its 'faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person' and that having regard to the very nature of their profession, Public Relations practitioners in these countries should undertake to ascertain and observe the principles set out in this charter.

CONSIDERING that from 'rights' human beings have not only physical or material needs but also intellectual, moral and social needs, and that their rights are of real benefit to them only in so far as these needs are essentially met.

CONSIDERING that, in the course of their professional duties and depending on how these duties are performed, Public Relations practitioners can substantially help to meet these intellectual, moral and social needs.

And lastly, CONSIDERING that the use of techniques enabling them to come simultaneously into contact with millions of people gives Public Relations practitioners a power that has to be restrained by the observance of a strict moral code.

On all these grounds, the undersigned Public Relations Associations hereby declare that they accept, as their moral character, the principles of the following Code of Ethics, and that if, in the light of evidence submitted to the Society, a member of these associations should be found to have infringed this Code in the course of his personal duties, he will be deemed to be guilty of serious misconduct calling for an appropriate penalty.

Accordingly, each Member of these Associations :

Shall Endeavour

- 1) To contribute to the achievement of the moral and cultural conditions enabling human beings to reach their full stature and enjoy the rights to which they are entitled under the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'.
- 2) To establish communication patterns and channels which, by fostering the free flow of essential information, will make each member of the society in which he lives feels

that he is being kept informed and also give him an awareness of his own personal involvement and responsibility and of his solidarity with other members;

- 3) To bear in mind that, because of the relationship between the profession and the public, his conduct even in private — will have an impact on the way in which the profession as whole is appraised;
- 4) To respect, in the course of his profession duties, the moral principles and rules of the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights';
- 5) To pay due regard to, and uphold, human dignity, and to recognise the right of each individual to judge for himself;
- 6) To establish the moral, psychological and intellectual conditions for dialogue in its true sense, and to recognise the right of the parties involved to state their case and express their views,

Shall Undertake

- 7) To conduct himself always and in all circumstances in such a manner as to deserve and secure the confidence of those with whom he comes into contact;
- 8) To act, in all circumstances, in such a manner as to take account of the respective interests of the parties involved; both the interests of the organisation which he serves and the interests of the publics concerned;
- 9) To carry out his duties with integrity, avoiding language likely to lead to ambiguity or misunderstanding and to maintain loyalty to his clients or employers, whether past or present.

Shall Refrain From

- 10) Subordinating the truth to other requirements;
- 11) Circulating information which is not based on established and ascertainable facts;
- 12) Taking part in any venture or undertaking which is unethical or dishonest or capable of impairing human dignity and integrity;
- 13) Using any "manipulative" methods or techniques designed to create sub-conscious motivations which the individual cannot control of his own free will and so cannot be held accountable for the action taken on them.

3.5.2 Adoption of the Code of Ethics in India

In the early days in India there were people who masqueraded as Public Relations consultants but were in reality fixers and manipulators who indulged in unethical practices to get favourable decisions for their clients from the government or other authorities or to secure licences for them.

The first All India Conference of Public Relations Practitioners, therefore, found it necessary to formally adopt the International Code of Ethics to demarcate the genuine Public Relations practitioners from manipulators. This was an important step in the development of professionalism in Public Relations in India.

Having adopted these Codes of Conduct and Ethics, associations of Public Relations practitioners all over the world continuously monitor the activities of their members and deal with case of infringements of these codes. In India too one of the main functions of the Public Relations Society of India (PRSI) is to ensure that standards are maintained that the skill and efficiency of the Public Relations practitioners in the country are raised through training, education and research programmes.

Check Your Progress 3

Note : i) Answer the following question in the space provided.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of the Unit.

1) In what way is the Code of Ethics important for the Profession of Public Relations?

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3.6 RELATING ORGANISATIONAL GOALS TO PUBLIC INTEREST

In Public Relations the exercise of identifying the policies and programmes of an organisation with the public interest is of crucial importance. This has been made amply clear in Unit I. Indeed, among the various definitions of Public Relations, quite a few, place the main emphasis on this aspect of Public Relations. As we have seen, the well-known American journal, "Public Relations News", edited by Denny Griswold has emphasised that "Public Relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with the public interest

Another American authority, Prof. Edward J. Robinson of Boston University also gives prominence to this aspect of Public Relations in his definition of Public Relations :

"Public Relations as an applied social and behavioural science is that function which

- 1) measures, evaluates and interprets the attitude of various relevant publics;
- 2) assists management in defining objectives for increasing public understanding and acceptance of the organisation's products, plans, policies and personnel;
- 3) equates these objectives with the interests, needs and goals of the various relevant publics; and
- 4) develops, executes and evaluates a programme to earn public understanding and acceptance."

This aspect of keeping in view the public interest is so important that it not only a part of the definition of Public Relations but is given priority in the various codes of professional conduct adopted by different Public Relations associations. For instance, the very first item in the code of Professional Conduct of the Institute of Public Relations of the U.K. states, "a member shall conduct his professional activities with respect for public interest." The Code of Professional Standards of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) states in its second article that "a member shall conduct his or professional life in accordance with the public interest."

3.7 LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Ethics practiced by the Public Relations persons vary widely as they too cannot remain immune from the society they serve. Also, adoption of code of ethics is no guarantee that ethicality will prevail in all dealings. Codes can only provide guidance. There is no punishment for isolation of code, nor is there any licensing of practitioners as this could mean infringement of a democratic right to freedom of occupation. Yet it is imperative for a Public Relations practitioner to be self regulating as also be careful about the legal aspects of communication.

With increasing education, the consumers and public have become aware of their rights and a Public Relations person may have to deal with pressure groups like trade unions, consumer protection groups, environment protection activities etc. A wrong act on the part of a PRO because of ignorance of legal aspect can cause legal trouble for the company. Hence it is

better to be aware of legal considerations and work with a legal team or seek advice in order to forestall litigation.

Messages should not be deceptive or unfair to the consumer. Misleading financial releases can be a deadly weapon and invite severe penalties as there are laws to protect the investor from unscrupulous traders with 'inside' knowledge.

Some guidelines to promote ethicality in dealing are the following :

- Minimise credibility gaps by honest and accurate corporate communication.
- Avoid false promise in news releases. Do not make exaggerated claims or promises about product, services or organisations.
- Keep in mind increasing consumer litigation and use simple clear language instead of using phoney phrases.
- Place greater emphasis on research to increase credibility.
- Maintain loyalty and commitment to your organisation, the society and to the system as a whole.
- Keep yourself upto date by constant reviewing.
- Understand media process thoroughly and be scrupulously accurate.

Some legal aspects for a corporation

A company's legal books, manuals, dealings with Company Law Board, Financial Public Relations involving SEBI regulations etc.; Legal Restraints on communication e.g. copyright, privacy right, defamation, libel, etc; labour laws; employee welfare regulations; government controls like MRTP, FERA etc. as applied to business; Environment Pollution Acts, Consumer Protection Acts, Safety and quality of products etc.

Check Your Progress 4

Note : i) Explain briefly the following.

ii) Compare your answers with the ones given at the end of this Unit.

iii) Use the space given below for your answers.

a) Relating organisational goals to the public interest.

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b) Need for legal consideration in Public Relations.

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3.8 CONCEPT OF THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN BUSINESS

There was a period, after the Industrial Revolution, when the captains of business and industry thought that their only responsibility was to make a profit. Following the great Depression of the early 30s, public opinion became hostile to business and felt that it had behaved irresponsibly. A certain measure of State and social responsibility of business was born. It was accepted that apart from its responsibility of making a profit and ensuring a fair return to its

shareholders, every business organisation had a stake in the social environment and must make a contribution towards its continued existence and improvement. Now-a-days, almost all business organisations try to make some contribution to the public welfare outside the scope of their normal activities.

3.9 SOCIAL AUDIT

Following from the concept of social responsibility, there is a growing body of opinion that an organisation's social responsibility should be monitored and evaluated by an independent organisation. The list of areas in which a business organisation is now expected to make a contribution keeps growing, and is already quite a formidable one. To ensure that it is not found wanting in any of these areas, that its performance is in accordance with social expectations, many business organisations in the world subject themselves to a regular social audit, which is as stringent and as systematic as the audit to which their accounts are subjected. So far, there is no statutory obligation in any country with regard to social audit, but many organisations are submitting to such an audit voluntarily, and by doing so, brightening their image in the public eye.

The areas that are generally covered in the social audit include (a) safety, (b) employee welfare, (c) environmental pollution, (d) quality control, and (e) community development.

It may be difficult for an organisation to fulfill all the expectations that society and various pressure groups have and at the same time fulfill its primary function of running a business at a reasonable profit. But it is necessary that it should examine its performance against an exhaustive check list and consider whether any modification in existing policies and procedures is called for. It is this examination which is being referred to as social audit. A social audit of this nature may be carried out by an outside agency or by an internal social audit group. Obviously, an outside agency would be able to give a more objective assessment, but even an internal audit would be useful, if the internal audit team is allowed to function freely.

From this description of the process of social audit, you will be able to appreciate that this is one of the important methods by which the implementation of ethical standards by an organisation can be monitored on a systematic basis.

Check Your Progress 5

Note : i) Answer the following question in the space provided below.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this Unit.

- 1) What is the relationship between social audit and the observance of a Code of Ethics and a Code of Standards ?

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Activity 2

Take a recent edition of a magazine. Read the advertisements of products and services in the magazine. Locate and write all the tall claims, exaggerations, dubious phrases, distortions, which could be termed as 'misleading' in the advertisement. Rewrite or rephrase them to make them more credible and yet impressive. You may use the format and the space given below for the activity.

3.11 SUGGESTED READING

John Marston; *The Nature of Public Relations*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1963.

3.12 GLOSSARY

Ethics	:	science of conduct or moral responsibility.
Code	:	any system of rules and regulations.
Financial Public Relations	:	that area of PR which relates to the dissemination of information that affects the understanding of stockholders and investors concerning the financial position of the company.
Technological Determinism	:	The view that if something is technically feasible, then it is both desirable and bound to be realised in practice.

3.13 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : MODEL ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Yes, suppression or distortion of facts can be misleading and result in unfair manipulation of public opinions.
- 2) No, gimmicks do not pay in the long run. Bad performance cannot be counted by denials or claims.
- 3) No, these vary with time, place and situation.
- 4) Yes, you cannot feel all the people all the time.
- 5) Yes, only then one can do an adequate job.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) False 2) True 3) False 4) True 5) True

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) As for any other profession, certain standards and code of ethics enforced by professional bodies is necessary to gain public acceptability. In Public Relations a code of ethics is even more necessary because the PR practitioner acts as the conscience keeper of the organisation by advising them to follow socially desirable practices.

Check Your Progress 4

- a) Public acceptance for a programme can be gained only if the organisation's policies do not conflict with public interest.
- b) Knowledge of legal aspects of communication, particularly restraints, can ensure greater care in preparation of messages especially financial disclosures. Legal knowledge is also vital in dealing with pressure groups, government regulations, etc. to forestall litigation.

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) Social Audit is the effort to monitor the conduct of the organisation to evaluate if ethical practices are being followed. Whether carried out by external agency or internally, social audit can be a useful and effective tool.