

**Code of Conduct by the Austrian Ethics Council for Public Relations  
“Ethics in Content Marketing”**

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## INTRODUCTION

Digitization has opened up a host of new opportunities for organizations to communicate with their target groups. Organizations are taking advantage of these opportunities by increasingly developing their own media products to reach their target groups directly. Established traditional news media, in turn, offer their online sites and also their editorial capabilities to organizations, to place paid content in the form of native advertising. Agencies and marketers support organizations in many ways to do this; thus, rounding out the content business.

### What is meant by content marketing within this code?

Content marketing includes the creation, provision as well as the distribution of content that is intended to be relevant, useful, appealing and activating for a target group. This is intended to achieve specific strategic goals such as generating interest, stimulating communication, forming preferences, positioning a brand or organization, image building and generating support and revenue. Content marketing takes a variety of forms and formats (print, online, audio, video) and can be practiced in many different media types.

This code focuses on two significant forms of content marketing: corporate publishing and native advertising. This is understood to mean:

- **Corporate publishing** comprises journalistically prepared corporate and marketing communication within owned media. It combines strategic, content-related and technical expertise in order to create content and media with which new customers can be won and relationships with stakeholders can be created and maintained. (adapted from Godulla, 2020; Forum Corporate Publishing, 2014).
- **Native advertising** is paid advertising in third-party media (paid media) that is designed to match the appearance, form and function of the medium in which it appears. (adapted from Native Advertising Institute, 2020)

### What's the issue?

Content marketing in the form of corporate publishing and native advertising makes use of journalistic stylistic devices so that it appears as editorial-journalistic as possible and not as advertising. However, the closeness to journalism is limited to the external appearance. The central demands of journalism, such as autonomy, striving for objectivity and performing a corrective function, are not taken into account. In contrast to journalism, where the medium is the end in itself, in content marketing the medium is the means to an end in order to achieve certain strategic goals. This gives rise to the following problematic issues:

- The commercial intent of the sender of content marketing is more difficult for media users to discern compared to traditional advertising. Thus, there is a risk of deceiving and misleading media users.
- The mixing of editorial content and content marketing as well as the offering of journalistic-looking native media can endanger independent journalism. Especially with native advertising, there is a risk that journalism will lose credibility, and thus no longer be able to adequately fulfill its corrective function, which is important for democracy.

It is therefore important that content marketing follows ethical principles and binding guidelines in order to avoid deceiving as well as misleading media users and to protect independent journalism as an important instrument of democratic discourse. This is essential to also preserve the credibility of PR as a practice and industry.

In addition to the principles and guidelines laid down here, the codes of the PR industry are also fundamental for content marketing, in particular the Code of [Ethics in Digital Communication](#) and the [Influencer Guide](#) of the PR Ethics Council, the [Code of Honor of the PRVA](#), and the corresponding [legal frameworks](#) (see the website of the PR Ethics Council).

## OBJECTIVES AND ADDRESSEES

### What are the objectives of the Content Marketing Code?

The code is a recommended course of action for how content marketing media and content can be designed to be transparent and communicatively ethical for recipients. The aim of the code is to enable the recipients of a content marketing medium or content to immediately and directly classify the sender and its interests.

### Who are the addressees of the Content Marketing Code?

The addressees of this Content Marketing Code are all those who are remunerated monetarily or non-monetarily for publishing content or who use content marketing tools. These include communication and marketing managers in companies, organizations and institutions, media/platforms, PR service providers, media and advertising agencies, online and digital service providers and agencies, publishing service providers, marketers of digital products, multichannel networks and service providers for blogger/influencer relations and seeding, as well as bloggers/influencers. This code also applies to private individuals acting in their commercial interest.

## PRINCIPLES AS A BASIS FOR CONTENT MARKETING

The PR Ethics Council has drawn up five basic principles for content marketing – in particular its forms of corporate publishing and native advertising. They serve as guidelines for ethically correct behavior in content marketing. These five principles supplement those laid down in the Code of [Ethics in Digital Communication](#).

### 1. Fairness – not abusing communicative power.

With the communication possibilities expanded by digitalization, the communicative power of organizations has also increased markedly. All organizations, media and agencies that use paid content to communicate have a duty to use this power carefully. They must behave fairly and honestly toward their communication partners, and they must never misuse their communication power to harm them.

For media users, harm can occur when they are left in the dark about an organization's intentions or when they are even deceived and are thus led to conclusions and actions that would not have occurred if they had been properly informed.

Journalistic media can suffer harm if they either take actions themselves or are pressured into actions that endanger their editorial independence and credibility (e.g., favoritism), which, as a further consequence, also harms media users and democracy as a whole.

## **2. Respect – respecting the independence of journalism.**

PR is committed to a sincere mediating role between the client and the public. That is why it values journalism as a counterpart at eye level. The independence of journalism must be recognized, respected and preserved at all costs. Journalists perform the important democratic function of a corrective. This corrective function must be fully respected. The instrumentalization of the media and/or journalists must be avoided. Instrumentalization in this context means, for example, monetary payments to journalists without disclosure or insisting on the non-labeling of paid content.

Advertising organizations shall respect all actors involved in the process of the production and publication chain, refrain from deliberate manipulation, obfuscation and unruly influence with the aim of deceiving media users into perceiving paid content as editorial and independent.

## **3. Responsibility – responsibility cannot be shifted.**

The advertising organizations are aware of their responsibility for society and the environment and are committed to acting ethically. They bear full responsibility for the transparent and ethically correct communication of their content. In addition, they share responsibility for the actions of all other actors in this context who are involved in the production and publication process of their content and who act on their behalf. This responsibility cannot be shifted.

Agencies or other service providers acting on behalf of companies or organizations are an important interface to journalistic media and other communication platforms. As such, they also bear responsibility and must ensure that both their client and the media meet their responsibilities. The same applies to the other actors involved in the production and publication process (see addressees of this code). The premise that the protection of media users from being misled and deceived is paramount applies to all of them.

## **4. Transparency – disclosing the motivations of the communicator.**

Organizations communicate by using their own media or third-party media to achieve their strategic goals. It is the duty of organizations, agencies, and media to ensure that this motivation is explicit, legally compliant and clearly recognizable to media users at first glance. Poorly legible and hidden references to remunerated content must be rejected, as well as incomprehensible or missing references.

Only if the strategic, commercial intent is immediately and clearly recognizable, even to the layperson, can media users decide freely whether or not to receive a piece of content. Transparency also means communicating overtly by showing the organization on whose behalf the communication occurs.

## **5. Self-determination – enabling self-determined action.**

Only when content is transparent can media users decide for themselves whether and how they want to receive said content. In other words, self-determination is only possible if it is clearly indicated whether content is paid for.

Self-determination must also be a basic principle in editorial departments. Journalists must be able to act uninfluenced by advertising companies when selecting and researching topics. Those editors who are commissioned with paid native advertising or corporate publishing content must be clearly separated from the journalistic editorial staff in organizational terms, in order to avoid conflicts of interest.

This also gives advertising organizations the opportunity to shape their messages in a self-determined manner on third-party websites, within a clearly marked and defined framework.

## 10 GUIDELINES FOR CONTENT MARKETING

Based on the five principles above, the following guidelines apply in practice:

### 1. **Commit to your audience.**

Communication actors in content marketing have an obligation not only to their clients or employers, but also to the recipients. They must always keep this in mind.

### 2. **Be a fair partner.**

The interaction between all actors involved in the production and communication process is fair and responsible. This applies in particular to cooperation with underage communication actors.

### 3. **Clearly label commercial content as advertising.**

Content marketing is clearly labelled so that the commercial motivation is recognizable to recipients at first glance. This also applies in the case of non-monetary consideration. Recommended labels include "Advertisement," "Paid Advertisement," "Sponsored Advertising Content," or some variation thereof (see [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov)).

### 4. **Indicate the sender.**

The sender of content marketing content is made transparent and is also clearly recognizable. The exclusive naming in places that are usually ignored by recipients (e.g., imprint) is not correct.

### 5. **Corporate publishing: display logo or name.**

Corporate publishing products are to be provided with the name and/or logo of the sender or involved client on the title page or start page, so that it is clearly visible.

### 6. **Take responsibility.**

All actors involved in the production and communication process (clients, media, agencies, bloggers/influencers, etc.) bear responsibility for the content marketing content. Responsibility cannot be shifted.

### 7. **Speak the truth.**

Content marketing is truthful communication. The dissemination of false statements and disinformation is not permitted.

### 8. **Separate journalism and content editing.**

In editorial departments, there is a personnel and organizational separation between the content marketing department and the journalistic department.

### 9. **Show respect and tolerance.**

Content marketing does not contain any incitement, defamation, discrimination, disparagement, blanket suspicion or degradation of persons, groups or organizations/companies.

### 10. **Respect the works of others.**

Third party content (images/text/sound) must be correctly attributed to them. Copyright must be respected at all times.

## CONTACT

The Content Marketing Code of the Austrian PR Ethics Council was drafted in 2019 and 2020 after evaluating academic literature and involving industry experts.

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