Stephanie Hemmens

Jour 431 – Reis

11/16/10

Case Study Position Paper

My case was a public relations conflict of interest: A Riverboat Casino Seeks Public Relations Counsel. The Lady Luck, headed by Maltese Enterprises, was the first casino in Athena, Mississippi to start gambling operations, but many residents were opposed to it, considering it a “Satanic ritual.” However, some lawmakers viewed legalized gambling as a solution to the state’s financial problems, since their revenues were declining.

Maltese wanted to be represented by a PR company to help its image, lowering the opposition to the Lady Luck and gambling in general. One of the three firms they had in mind was Mason & Pringle. Myra Mason, its senior partner, was concerned, so she spoke with her staff. About half of them were against the representation of Maltese, including her junior partner, Brad Pringle.

Several valid points from both sides of the argument included: gambling is a legal reality and the Lady Luck has a right to be represented; attorneys don’t usually pick their clients so PR firms shouldn’t either; if a PR firm takes on a client that many of its employees personally object it is a conflict of interest; and a PR firm wouldn’t do a good job for a client whose activities are morally questionable.

The main ethical question that Mason had to ponder was: Should Mason & Pringle represent a client to which many of its employees are morally against?

A number of values pertained to this case. Everyone has the right to be represented through justice and fairness. Mason & Pringle’s credibility could weaken, because they most likely wouldn’t do a good job if their employees who are against gambling represented Maltese.

If Mason & Pringle took the job, the question of honesty arises: Should they tell Maltese about their employees’ opposition? If they don’t take the job, one of their competitors will, which could prevent them from taking advantage of other good opportunities. One has to ask if the employees’ loyalties should lie in their moral or professional values. Should Mason & Pringle represent a company that has the right to be represented or stay loyal to clients they already have an established relationship with? The final value is balance. To find a middle ground, should those employees who support the Lady Luck work for Mason & Pringle, while those employees who are against it avoid representing the client?

Two ethical principles could be analyzed in this case. The first, duty-based ethics—or the Categorical Imperative—would state that representing a client whose practices one is morally against is wrong, therefore, it should be avoided. It is the employees’ duty to obey their conscience. Despite other factors involved and even though some employees are in favor of representing Maltese, they shouldn’t do it, because some are against it.

Virtue-based ethics—or Aristotle’s Golden Mean—is the second principle. To find a balance, Mason & Pringle should represent the riverboat casino, but only employees who support gambling should take on the job. Even though not everyone would be working for the client, at least those who are against gambling aren’t contributing, so the client would be represented fairly.

The last quadrant of the Potter Box is “loyalties,” which focuses on who will be affected by Mason’s decision. If her employees are PR professionals and morally against gambling, they need to decide what is more important: to be loyal to their career or to themselves? Some of their existing clients would oppose Mason & Pringle’s representation of the Lady Luck, so the PR agency needs to find a way to stay loyal to them, as well. Furthermore, Mason & Pringle should represent a client or service that people have the right to know about, so they should also have a loyalty to the community.

If I were in Mason’s position, my final ethical decision would be that Mason & Pringle should put in a bid to represent Maltese Enterprises’ Lady Luck riverboat casino. I analyzed this case by comparing it to other situations seen today. For example, not everyone who works for the tobacco industry smokes or is in favor of smoking. It is a job to be taken seriously. Sometimes you have to leave your moral values behind and just focus on your professional values. Public relations is a very competitive business, so if Mason & Pringle were to disregard the opportunity to represent Maltese, another PR company would and they could find it difficult to get more work.

Because gambling was seen as a sin in the south, Mason & Pringle have a duty to create awareness of the Lady Luck. The community has a right to know if these practices were taking place in their area. It is the PR firm’s responsibility to reveal the truth. Moreover, in doing so, many residents might participate in gambling, which will result in more money for the state and solve its financial crisis. This would be a public service, if viewing the case in this way.

I think all companies should have the right to be represented and this case is no different. Plus, if this weren’t the case, many clients would never get publicity in the first place. PR firms shouldn’t just represent a client because all of their employees agree with its practices. What about those employees who don’t? Mason & Pringle shouldn’t just avoid representation because some of their employees object to the client’s practices; otherwise, many opportunities for work would be thrown away.

Furthermore, I don’t believe that Mason & Pringle has an ethical obligation to inform Maltese that some of its employees oppose their practices. I’m sure this happens in real life.