

Bateman Competition Brief
September 29, 2020

**Modeling Civility: How Public Relations Professionals Can Restore Quality,
Integrity and Inclusiveness to Public Discourse**

A Societal Challenge:

Civil discourse is in a state of crisis. Public dialogues today are celebrated not for what they accomplish but for whom they divide. Well-intentioned efforts at constructive debate are routinely derailed by one-sided diatribes aimed not at finding common ground but at perpetuating disagreement in the counterproductive hope that one side's demeaning invective will win and the other side will be denigrated and lose.

As a society, the biggest danger we face is not that we perpetually default to a zero-sum game in which one side or the other must unequivocally win on any given issue. The greater risk, rather, is the corrosion of civil dialogue to the point where all sides inexorably lose. This degradation of civil discourse doesn't just undermine our nation's fundamental civic values as a democracy; it permeates our interactions at work, at the dinner table, in our communities and online.

Based on strategies of mutual engagement and adaptation, the public relations/communications sector has the reach and expertise to deliver guidance and positive examples at scale to help institutions and organizations of all types function more effectively and realize their goals.

Participating PRSSA Bateman teams have the unprecedented opportunity to engage with PRSA to form a movement that will influence our profession and society. The winning entry has the potential to provide a landmark national campaign extending the Society's influence by addressing a critical public issue while also engaging local communities.

Indeed, embracing civility as both a strategic opportunity and a professional responsibility is called for by PRSA's Code of Ethics, which professes values that directly support making the improvement of civil discourse a priority. These central tenets include *expertise*, through which "we build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences," and *fairness*, by which members pledge to deal fairly with all parties and "respect all opinions and support the right of free expression."

The Client:

PRSSA Bateman teams have the opportunity to collaborate with PRSA to develop a civility campaign that will improve the standards and productivity of public discourse. PRSA is, in

effect, the client with whom the Bateman teams will collaborate to implement a successful campaign providing the strategies, content, tools and tactics to engage key publics in promoting civility.

As a national association of public relations/communications professionals, PRSA is uniquely positioned to convene a broader public dialogue about the corrosion of public discourse and deliver programming that can drive meaningful, lasting change. PRSSA student teams will provide a strategic campaign plan to engage PRSA's various membership communities — including the teams' local sponsoring Chapters — as well as the broader profession in modeling civility so that higher standards of quality, integrity and inclusiveness can be restored to public discourse. The importance and urgency of this work cannot be overstated.

Problem Definition:

Although the corrosion of civility has been amplified in recent years, declining norms of civil engagement have been a growing problem for at least the last decade. In their latest joint survey on the subject, Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate and KRC Research found that 93% of those polled believed incivility was a problem in 2019, with 63% describing it as a “major problem.” Those numbers have remained relatively unchanged since the agencies first conducted their survey in 2010. On top of that, 74% of the respondents felt incivility was worse than a few years prior — a figure that's also largely stayed the same since 2010 — and 54% said they believed the level of incivility in society will only get worse in the future. Those surveyed also reported an average of 10.2 uncivil encounters per week.

One area that's seen a significant reported increase in incivility over the past decade is social media. In their first survey back in 2010, Weber Shandwick et al. found that social media wasn't much of a problem to most people, with blogs being the bigger reported internet threat. But in 2019, 63% of those polled said they believed social media causes more harm than good. The number of reported uncivil online interactions also has increased in recent years, going from 4.4 per week in 2013 to 5.5 in 2019. Additionally, of those who believed incivility will grow worse over the next few years, 57% said the internet/social media will be to blame. Only 24% felt that way in 2012, the first year the survey offered the internet/social media as a possible reason.

Of course, the Weber Shandwick poll was not the only survey to see a decline in civility. A 2017 iCitizen poll found that 90% of respondents felt incivility was a problem in America, while a 2016 survey from the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago showed that 74% of Americans felt manners and behavior have deteriorated through the decades. Then there's the American Psychological Association's 2017 Stress in America survey that found that 60% of those polled felt increased stress due to social divisiveness. This stress could lead to an increase in negative civil discourse, according to the APA.

Research shows that the negative effects of incivility extend to the economy where workplace incivility costs companies in terms of lost productivity and work time, and can even result in

workplace violence. Incivility also has a detrimental effect on consumer behavior, as consumers can disassociate themselves from companies that demonstrate incivility, including media outlets that perpetuate it.

Incivility also presents risks to public health and safety as researchers have noted that experiencing or even witnessing incivility can lead to stress, feelings of fear and anger, reduced capacity to absorb information, impaired short-term memory and cognition, lack of creativity, reduced job satisfaction and work quality, aimlessness and a willingness to quit. It can even cause a weakened immune system and damage one's relationships with family.

As if the ill effects on the economy, health and safety aren't enough, incivility also has a significant negative impact on society writ large. Specifically, 73% of people surveyed for the 2019 Weber Shandwick poll said they believe incivility leads to political gridlock, which makes it impossible for needed laws to get passed. Additionally, 71% believed incivility leads to political disengagement, while 61% said it deters people from entering public service. Overall, 89% felt civility is crucial for democracy.

The vast majority of those polled believed as well that incivility brings about a host of other societal problems outside politics. These issues included cyberbullying (89%), harassment (88%), violent behavior (88%) and hate crimes (88%).

PRSA's Role and Opportunity:

As the largest organization of public relations/communications professionals in the United States, PRSA is comprised of practitioners of all levels and interests across countless industries and organizational settings. Within the Society, a broad array of national committees, Chapters and Professional Interest Sections bring their own diverse perspectives to critical subjects like professional ethics and standards, diversity and inclusion, professional development and industry advocacy, and have voiced interest in making the advancement of civil discourse part of their work. There are numerous opportunities as well to guide the future of the public relations profession by engaging students and educators at more than 375 colleges and universities in civility-related programming under the auspices of the Public Relations Student Society of America.

PRSSA's Role and Opportunity:

This year's Bateman competition provides the unique opportunity for student teams to treat PRSA as their client as they develop a comprehensive campaign for eventual implementation — to be done in collaboration with PRSA. The central challenge for PRSSA teams: to formulate the optimal campaign for PRSA that would engage its various professional constituencies as well as its 110 Chapters and PRSSA's 375+ student Chapters in raising the standards of civility and the effectiveness of public discourse.

Embracing civility as a platform is not about promoting politeness or stifling disagreement, nor is it focused on discourse within PRSA or the public relations sector. The primary goal, rather, is:

To lead a larger national conversation about the need to reverse the corrosion of civility in American life and bring our collective expertise, insight and influence to bear on fostering more effective and inclusive civil discourse in all corners of society.

Among the key strategies for accomplishing this will be:

- To establish research, tools, resources and training that empower individuals, universities and institutions to advance the discussion of civility, and take an active role in improving the quality of discourse in their own organizations, industries and circles of influence.
- To enlist interested communications professionals to model and promote strategies for achieving more effective civil discourse in their daily work and lives as part of a national “civility corps” movement that grows organically within and beyond the public relations industry.
- To equip local communities, including your local PRSA sponsoring Chapter, with the tools and resources needed to engage members and the communities/industries they serve by incorporating civility-related programming into their own plans and activities.

Specific opportunities for involvement include, but are by no means limited to:

- National advocacy and public education.
- PRSSA members.
- Your college/university.
- PRSA local chapter(s) and local programming opportunities.

Desired Outcomes:

Proposed campaigns should develop detailed goals, objectives, strategies and metrics for:

1. Positioning PRSA and the public relations profession as resources for countering incivility and promoting civility to enhance the effectiveness of public discourse.
2. Engaging audiences from the list above in adoption of a civility platform that PRSA and PRSSA can transmit to other key audiences at local and national levels.
3. Developing creative, training and education resources to improve understanding of civility and implementation of practical methods to model and encourage civil practices.
4. Enabling public partnerships involving PRSA and other thought leaders and groups in civility so they can explore collaboration on outcome No. 3.

Judging:

The judges for this competition will assess each proposed campaign's:

- Research including situation analysis; fact-finding to determine statistics, trends and attitudes; and use of data to determine tactics.
- Planning including development of a robust public relations plan that includes a statement of goal, objectives and strategies, key messages, target audiences and a description of tactics, timeline and evaluation. Should include rationale for design of the plan.
- Implementation including an outline encompassing all tactical steps and detailing how activities will be documented.
- Evaluation including evaluation methods to measure campaign results and linking to campaign objectives.
- Effectiveness in understanding the fundamental challenges of the situation and developing sustainable, strategic programs to address those challenges on national and local levels.
- Creativity displayed in campaign themes and tactics.

Resources

www.webershandwick.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CivilityInAmerica2019SolutionsforTomorrow.pdf

www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2017/07/02/americans-know-theres-civility-problem-do-they-want-do-anything-it/436429001/

www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/04/160422201040.htm

www.apa.org/members/content/civil-discourse

www.convoconnection.com/blog/5-things-we-can-do-to-promote-civility-in-todays-society

<https://research.msu.edu/hotw-incivility-spreads-in-the-workplace/>

www.ethicssage.com/2016/01/can-civility-in-society-be-regained.html

www.cnn.com/2017/07/03/politics/npr-poll-trump-civility-declined/index.html

www.agilitypr.com/pr-news/public-relations/new-weber-report-finds-erosion-political-civility-harming-democracy/

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<https://riskandinsurance.com/incivilitys-growing-risk/>

www.webershandwick.com/uploads/news/files/Civility_2010_SocialMediaImplications.pdf

<https://positivepsychologynews.com/news/amanda-horne/2013041025769>

<https://hbr.org/2016/04/an-antidote-to-incivility>

<https://hbr.org/2013/01/the-price-of-incivility>

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<https://hbr.org/2013/01/the-price-of-incivility>

<https://nicd.arizona.edu>

<https://onbeing.org/civil-conversations-project/>

www.instituteforcivility.org

<https://civilityproject.org>

- **The Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins:** An academic and public forum that integrates research, teaching and practice to improve and expand powerful civic engagement and informed, inclusive dialogue as the cornerstone of robust global democracy.
- **Institute for Civil Discourse:** An initiative of the University of Arizona, the institute promotes healthy and civil political debate between people of different political parties.
- **Civil Conversations and Social Healing:** Part of the On Being Project, the initiative produces audio and digital resources as well as programs and events meant to repair fractured relationships.
- **Institute for Civility in Government:** The institute's mission is to reduce political polarization by facilitating dialogue, teaching respect and building civility.

- Civility Project: The project aims to enhance people's quality of life by advocating for pedestrian-oriented communities.