Report on a Case by the Board of Ethical Review

Case No. 64-12

Subject: Professional Affiliations in Cards and on Letterheads
Section 3(d) -Code of Ethics.

Facts:
1. An engineer carries a standard-size professional directory card in a professional society publication and in a daily business newspaper. The text of the card reads:

> "Consultants to Industry
> • Value Engineering
> • Product Development
> • Automation
> (Name of Firm) engineering and design (city and state)"

The right hand portion of the card contains a circle illustration, the outside portion in circular type reading: "Registered Engineers ... Designers." Inside the circle appear the initial letters, "NSPE."

2. An engineer in private practice has the usual type of letterhead, but shown in the margin are the words, "Member of," followed by the names of several well-known national engineering societies.

Questions:
1. Is it ethical for an engineer to use the initial letters, "NSPE," in a professional directory card in the manner shown?

2. Is it ethical for an engineer to indicate on his letterhead the fact of his membership in certain engineering societies?

References:
Code of Ethics-Section 3 (d) - "He will not use his professional affiliations or public office to secure personal advantage and will avoid any act tending to promote his own interest at the expense of the dignity and standing of the profession."

Discussion:
We have previously decided several cases involving advertising (59-1, 60-1, 61-3, 62-2, 62-15, 63-3, and 63-7) and do not treat this case on that basis. However, it may be noted that the use of a professional directory card in a daily business newspaper is controlled by that portion of Section 3(a) of the Code which limits advertising media to those "necessary to reach directly an interested and potential client or employer . . ." In case 62-15 we commented: "This restriction limits advertising to those media which are of a specialized nature and may be calculated to reach primarily readers who

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reasonably can be expected to have an interest in the type of engineering services which are being offered, as distinguished from an advertisement in a newspaper or magazine of general circulation." On that basis, we see no need to discuss the insertion of a professional card in a daily business newspaper which falls within the permissible type of publication defined above.

This case raises the question of the interpretation of Section 3(d) of the Code pertaining to the use of professional affiliations to secure personal advantage. We may assume in both examples that the purpose of showing the professional affiliations of the engineers is to convey the general idea that the engineers are reputable members of the profession by virtue of their membership in recognized professional engineering societies, and perhaps that the engineers are professionally-minded through their support of the professional societies.

Even if these motives be considered "selfish" we do not think the bar to use of professional affiliations for personal advantage extends to mere statements of fact of such membership. It is in keeping with the Preamble of the Code -"to uphold and advance the honor and dignity of the engineering profession"-for engineers to be members of their professional societies and we think that the practice of showing such affiliations is an affirmative factor in demonstrating to the public that engineers have organizations on a professional basis.

The "use" of professional affiliations for personal advantage refers, we believe, to capitalizing on the professional affiliation by some definite act which converts the fact of membership into an implication that such membership gives the engineer a particular or special opportunity to provide services which are not available from other engineers. It would be idle to speculate on the various ways and means by which advantage might be taken of professional society affiliations in an improper manner. The two examples before us do not convey any ulterior or selfish motives.

Conclusions:

1. It is ethical for an engineer to show his membership in NSPE in the manner indicated.

2. It is ethical for an engineer to indicate his membership in professional societies on his letterhead.

NOTE: The use of the NSPE Shield and the P.E. Emblem are governed by NSPE Administrative Policies 25 and 26.

Board of Ethical Review: T. C. COOKE, P.E. L. R. DURKEE, P.E. A. C. KIRKWOOD, P.E. WALDEMAR S. NELSON, P.E. N. O. SAULTER, P.E. KURT F. WENDT, P.E. PHIL T. ELLIOTT, P.E., Chairman

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