Report on a Case by the Board of Ethical Review

Case No. 65-10

Subject: Promotion of Engineering Services - Hospitality Suites
Section 3- Code of Ethics; Section 3(d) - Code of Ethics.

Facts:
In conjunction with the annual meeting of a state association of municipal officials, a consulting engineer in the same state established a hospitality suite in the hotel where the meeting was taking place. He invited the members of the association attending the meeting to visit the suite and partake of his hospitality in the form of snacks and liquid refreshment. As members of the association visited the suite, the consulting engineer talked with them generally, indicating his interest in performing engineering services for the municipalities and distributed the brochure of his firm describing its organization, personnel, experience and other qualifications.

Question:
Is it ethical for a consulting engineer to promote engineering work through the use of a hospitality suite?

References:
Code of Ethics-Section 3-"The Engineer will not advertise his work or merit in a self-laudatory manner, and will avoid all conduct or practice likely to discredit or unfavorably reflect upon the dignity or honor of the profession."

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 are not concerned in this case with the format or content of the brochure which was distributed in the hospitality suite, and assume that it met the acceptable criteria under the Code (See BER Case No. 63-8). Nor do we deal with the question of the appropriateness of the media employed by the consulting engineer to contact interested or potential clients (See BER Case No. 61-7).

Rather, our concern is whether the use of a hospitality suite meets the limitations imposed in the Code that the practice not be "unlikely to discredit or unfavorably reflect upon the dignity or honor of the profession," (Section 3) and that the engineer not engage in any act "to promote his own interest at the expense of the dignity and standing of the profession" (Section 3(d)).

Hospitality suites, where general or blanket invitations are issued to the attendees of the meeting, are an accepted method of customer contact and promotion in the business

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world and are commonly found at conventions and meetings of many types. In many instances they serve a useful function in providing a convenient and comfortable meeting place for business discussions or relaxation. It is not unusual for business organizations which provide products or services to professional persons to provide such hospitality suites at professional meetings, and in some instances the sponsor may provide special services as a convenience to those attending the meeting, such as stenographic aid, telephone facilities, message centers, etc. We may assume that the purpose of business organizations in providing hospitality suites of this type is to advance their economic interests, directly or indirectly by the creation of goodwill.

But we do not think that these otherwise acceptable justifications for hospitality suites can be extended to professionals who offer their services to those attending the particular meeting. Assuming that the hospitality suite is operated with decorum and dignity, and regardless of the type or extent of refreshment made available to those who visit the hospitality suite, the nature of the promotional activity is not consistent with the mandate of the Code in terms of dignity. We view the language of the Code to indicate that while an engineer may engage in promotional activities under certain conditions and limitations there is a line, shadowy though it may be, beyond which the general atmosphere and circumstances will at least bring into question whether it is dignified. Even if this question is only raised in the mind of the public, the result is or may be to unfavorably reflect upon the entire profession.

In this case we think the line has been crossed. Our opinion applies without regard to whether the engineer distributes his brochure or promotes his own interest only by conversational means. Certainly the engineer may talk to the interested and potential clients at the meeting itself about his work and qualifications for their possible needs, but he may not, in our judgment, under the language of the Code, formalize this effort through such means as hospitality suites.

Conclusion:
It is not ethical for a consulting engineer to promote engineering work through the use of a hospitality suite.

Board of Ethical Review: T. C. COOKE, P.E. JAMES HALLETT, P.E. W. S. NELSON, P.E. N. O. SAULTER, P.E. K. F. WENDT, P.E. A. C. KIRKWOOD, P.E., Chairman

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