USE OF SLOGANS IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS, ETC.

Case No. 98-6

Fact #1:
Engineer A, a prominent professional engineer in her community, decides to run for a political office in Smith County and uses as her slogan the following: "Engineer A: Engineering A Better Smith County."

Fact #2
Engineer B, a sole practitioner, markets himself as "The Everything Engineer" in advertising slogans and sales promotions.

Questions:
1. Was it ethical for Engineer A to use the slogan "Engineer A: Engineering A Better Smith County" when running for political office?

2. Was it ethical for Engineer B to market himself as "The Everything Engineer" in advertising slogans and sales promotions?

References:

Section II.5.a.	-	*Code of Ethics:*	*Engineers shall not falsify their qualifications or permit misrepresentation of their, or their associates' qualifications. They shall not misrepresent or exaggerate their responsibility in or for the subject matter of prior assignments. Brochures or other presentations incident to the solicitation of employment shall not misrepresent pertinent facts concerning employers, employees, associates, joint venturers or past accomplishments.*
Section III.1.	-	*Code of Ethics:*	*Engineers shall be guided in all their relations by the highest standards of honesty and integrity.*
Section III.1.f.	-	*Code of Ethics:*	*Engineers shall not promote their own interest at the expense of the dignity and integrity of the profession.*
Section III.2.a.	-	*Code of Ethics:*	*Engineers shall seek opportunities to participate in civic affairs; career guidance for youths; and work for the advancement of the safety, health and well-being of their community.*
Section III.3.a.	-	*Code of Ethics:*	*Engineers shall avoid the use of statements containing a material misrepresentation of fact or omitting a material fact.*

Discussion:

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The facts in the case presented combine several sections of the NSPE Code of Ethics: the engineers' obligation to participate and be a constructive force in public affairs (See Code Section III.2.a.), and the engineers' obligation to avoid statements that are misleading, deceptive, and causing dishonor on the engineering profession (See Code Sections II.5.a., III.1., III.1.f., and III.3.a.).

The Board of Ethical Review has evaluated cases involving the political candidacy of engineers on at least two occasions. In BER Case 74-10, the Board considered a case involving engineer Richard Roe, a partner in an engineering firm. Roe became a candidate for nomination to the state senate in a primary election and, in support of his candidacy, issued a statement on the firm stationary. The name of the firm on the letterhead was "Richard Roe Associates". The letterhead contained the usual type of listing of partners, their society affiliations and addresses and telephone number. In the basic statement, Roe recites his membership in several professional societies and in a fraternal order, his previous involvement in political activities, and experience in planning and design of various types of public works, including reference to one particular major project. The statement alluded to his close contact with government and the spending of public funds. The announcement also contained the following statement: "He feels that his training and experience will be very helpful in unraveling some of the glaring inequities in state laws relating to employment of professional services…There are more iniquities in the laws than most realize." The Board determined that the use of the engineering firm stationary in the manner indicated to promote the political candidacy of a professional engineer was not ethically permissible, but that an engineer could utilize his professional affiliations, background, and experience in promoting his political candidacy in regular political material. Citing earlier cases, the Board noted that it is both ethical and desirable that professional engineers be involved in political causes and be candidates for public office (See BER Case 61-1). In seeking public office, an engineer may properly utilize his engineering competence and background (See BER Case 61-1).

A subsequent case involved engineer Roe in which Roe, who had previously been the mayor of a town and decided to run again, published a political advertisement in a local newspaper urging voters to vote for Roe and against Roe's opponent, the current mayor. The advertisement charged that many thousands of tax dollars had been spent on engineering and consulting fees by the current mayor and that during Roe's term only a fraction of that amount had been spent on design and consulting fees. The Board concluded that the political advertisement utilized by Roe was not ethically permissible.

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Turning to the facts of this particular case, the Board believes that engineers who are involved in public affairs have a special obligation to promote the public's knowledge and understanding of engineering and not engage in gimmickry and slick sloganeering or promotions at the expense or dignity of the engineering profession. Engineers who run for public office should make special efforts to provide the public - a public which in survey after survey demonstrate an almost complete lack of any meaningful understanding of the engineering profession - with a fuller understanding and appreciation of the accomplishments of engineers to society.

While the Board can recognize that some might object to the use of the term "engineering" in the first context because it might be viewed as a gimmick and cause the public to be mislead or deceived in the context in which it is used, the Board is not of the opinion that the use of the term goes beyond the bounds of ethics and therefore considers Engineer A's actions ethical. Nevertheless, the Board is of the view that a more preferable approach for Engineer A would have been to avoid the use of the slogan and to explain in great detail how her skills as an engineer would be of benefit to the public in her role as a public official. The Board believes that such an approach would both serve the interests of public discourse on the benefits of engineering skill and judgment among publicly elected officials and would raise the stature and the image of the engineering profession among members of the public. The Board has repeatedly encouraged engineers to become more active in civic affairs, and engineers have an obligation to do so in a professional and dignified manner.

With regard to Engineer B's use of the reference "everything engineer" in advertising slogans to promote his engineering practice, the Board is troubled by this type of promotional activity. For one engineer to state or imply that the engineer can perform all areas of engineering, all disciplines of engineering, in all contexts, is misleading and deceptive. While most state engineering licensure laws do not restrict an engineer's practice to one specific discipline and the engineer may practice in more than one area of competency, for an engineer to imply, in a wholly unrestricted manner, competency and qualifications in virtually all areas of engineering practice is beyond the realm of reason. While NSPE has long advocated the preservation of general licensing laws to permit the greatest level of flexibility for individual practitioners, particularly in multidisciplinary practice areas, all professional and technical groups should be fundamentally concerned when practitioners abuse basic professional judgment in this manner. As the Board of Ethical Review noted in BER Case 94-8, in which a chemical engineer was found to have acted unethically because he had designed structural footings without possessing the requisite competence, engineers have an ethical obligation

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to perform services only in areas where they possess educational background and experience or to retain individuals who possess the necessary educational background and experience to perform the work in question.

Conclusions:

1. It was ethical for Engineer A to use the slogan "Engineer A: Engineering A Better Smith County" when running for political office.

2. It was not ethical for Engineer B to market himself as "The Everything Engineer" in advertising slogans and sales promotions.

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