

ANSWERS TO YOUR CI QUESTIONS

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Q. My boss has had some business cards printed for me in the name of another company so that I can go around a forthcoming trade show and give the impression that I'm a potential customer and that I'm not from a competitor company. Is this acceptable – and if not what should I do?

The easy answer to your question on whether or not it is acceptable to use a false business card is that it is not. This practice breaches the SCIP code of ethics as you are misrepresenting yourself rather than disclosing relevant information about your identity and organization. In fact, acting this way can even be considered a form of theft – by lying about who you are, you will obtain knowledge that you would not otherwise have obtained and do not deserve.

Unfortunately, as you have found, things are not always so simple in practice. Less ethical companies (and managers) often expect their CI employees to lie about whom they are, and carrying false business cards is not uncommon.

Which leads onto what you should do about it. This is more difficult. Another clause in the SCIP code of ethics states that CI professionals should promote the SCIP code of ethics within one's company. On this basis, you should tell your boss that what he is doing is not professionally ethical. You obviously feel uncomfortable about this practice as there is a conflict in what you feel is right and what you are being asked to do.

This begs the question about the relationship with your boss. Will your boss listen, or will he view your

reluctance to follow his wishes negatively? Only you can answer this. Nevertheless, here are some arguments you can use to help persuade him that what he is asking is often counter-productive and sometimes dangerous.

The first thing to consider is your purpose for visiting the trade show. Before attending you should identify the key questions you wish to answer, and plan what booths you will be visiting, when, and your approach to them.

By posing as a potential customer, you encourage the sales people on your competitors' stands to sell to you. The problem is that as a customer you would not be expected to know the intricacies of the competitor's operation. The moment you start asking questions that go outside those typically asked by potential customers, an alert salesperson will become suspicious. You have now lost the initiative and are less likely to get the answers you might have gathered had you been more open.

It could get worse – if they work out your real identity then you will be giving your company a reputation for underhanded practices. This is not unrealistic in the closed world of many industries. People get information via the grapevine – one of your company's ex-employees could be working for the competitor and recognize your name, for example.

Even if one of your objectives is to find out competitor sales tactics, the false business card strategy is poor. Trade shows are artificial environments and sales people are likely to behave differently from their normal customer sales calls. Furthermore, they will want to follow-up after the show. How will they do this, if your details are false?

An alternative and more effective approach is to observe how the competitor's sales people respond to genuine prospects. Listen in – and join any product demonstrations, where feasible. This way, you can learn pretty much the same information, without misrepresenting yourself.

On a personal note, I've sometimes found that declaring my identity beforehand has actually resulted in more information, rather than less. Sales people love boasting about how much better they are than the competitor – so knowing that you are linked to the competitor just encourages them. The sales agent then talk too much, divulging all sorts of details that would never be given to a regular customer.

Finally, you owe it to yourself to behave ethically. You'll want to feel proud about your achievements, and if you are at all uncomfortable about what you are doing, then rather than pride there will be shame. A golden rule is to avoid any action that will mean that you stay awake at night, or are embarrassed to tell your partner or mother.

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