

## Ethics Tests



### Viral News Test - Identify Ethical Issues

Would you like to see your proposed action making headline news?

#### How to identify an ethical issue using the Viral News Test

Ethical judgments are made about actions or situations that are right or wrong, good or bad. One clue that an action or situation needs an ethical rather than simply a business judgment is that the action or situation involves actual or potential harm to someone or some thing. Another clue would be that there seems to be a possibility of a violation of what we generally consider right or good.

The Viral News test (sometimes called the **Smell Test**, **Newspaper Test**, **Spouse Test** or **Grandmother Test**) is familiar ground in most businesses and is a good place to begin. It is a “quick and dirty” test for deciding if something is an ethical issue and useful because brand name and a person’s reputation are important in business.



#### How to use the Viral News Test

To use this test, ask

- How would the action or situation we are considering be viewed by others if it became viral headline news?
- Would we be comfortable reading a Wall Street Journal story that our company was doing this or letting the current situation continue for long?
- Would you be comfortable explaining to your spouse or grandmother what you are about to do?

#### Strengths

- Focuses us on what other ethical people in the society would think. It prevents us from taking special advantages for ourselves.
- Recognizes that morality is about what others think as much as it is about what I think.
- Enlists the emotion of shame, a powerful motivator to be sure we are getting this right.

## Weaknesses

- The viral news test is only as good as the society we live in. The society may be blind to the ethical dimensions of an action or situation, may accept unethical actions as ethical, or be divided on whether the action is right or wrong.
- The sometimes used other name for this "Smell Test" points out a major danger -- living with bad smells or unethical conduct for a long time may dull a person's ability to notice them or realize that they may be upsetting to others.
- Can alert us that something is an ethical issue, but not why it is right or wrong. Knowing why an action is right or wrong can help explain it to others. Knowing why it is wrong can also help to modify the action to make it right. To determine why, we will have to move beyond the smell test.

For links to descriptions of ethical theories, go to **Ethical Decision Making** ([www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making)) at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics web site. For a discussion of the Viral News test at that site, go to **What is Ethics** ([www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/whatisethics.html](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/whatisethics.html)).