

Going to the trouble of preparing a comprehensive Ethics Code is certainly appropriate. Not having an Ethics Code says something important about a company, but having one that no one reads or pays attention to also strongly suggests that a company is simply not interested.

Ethisphere Magazine has offered a way for a company to measure if its Ethics Code has any value¹. It has used these criteria to evaluate Ethics Codes of several companies, and these criteria might be helpful to smaller companies as well:

Is the Ethics Code readily available to all stakeholders (e.g. customers, shareholders, employees, vendors, the public)?

Is the leadership of the organization visibly committed to the values and topics covered in the Code?

What is the style and tone of the language used in the document? Is it easy to read and reflective of its targeted audience?

Is there a stated and explicit non-retaliation commitment in the document, and if so, how clear is it?

Does the Code identify its stakeholders (e.g. customers, shareholders, employees, vendors, the public) and if so, what level of ethics or compliance commitment is offered?

Does the Code address all of the appropriate and key risk areas for the company's given industry?

Does the Code provide any learning aides: Q&As and/or FAQs, checklists (e.g. do's and don'ts), examples and case studies to help employees and other stakeholders understand key precepts?

How compelling (or difficult) is the Code to read? This depends on layout, fonts, pictures, taxonomy and structure.

Another way to look at this question is this: If your employees and other stakeholders have not read and understood the document, at best it is only window dressing. The wrong people have written the document and it obviously serves no useful purpose.

¹ http://www.ethisphere.com/Ethisphere_Magazine_0207/50