

The Cyber-Revolution in Product Recall Public Relations

Recalls of consumer products are a frequent occurrence, with potentially devastating consequences for manufacturers, retailers, and purchasers. While the exact number of recalls each year is unknown, I counted 2,447 in 1997, using primarily regulatory agency data. That is 6.7 each day, or about 47 each week.

PRQ has included a number of articles on product recall over the years. Warner's 1980 study of the Corning percolator recall was one of several published studies focusing on that particular recall. Heather Schoeny won the Bernays Cup with an essay on a recall, and my study of print recall communication was published in 1997. A study of the Odwalla juice recall ran in 1998, authored by Thomsen and Rawson, and a year later another Odwalla piece by Thomas Evans was published.

The focus of this product recall public relations study is the dominant role now played by computers. It is no overstatement to suggest that the old rules of recall communication no longer fully apply, as they have been supplanted by the new order, a cyber-revolution. We'll examine three topics, to facilitate our appreciation of the significance of cybercommunication in contemporary recalls: 1) Recalls are public relations; 2) The cyber-revolution has occurred; and 3) Cyber-recall problems.

Product Recalls Are Public Relations Campaigns

Initially, it is important to realize the essential similarity between recall campaigns and public relations campaigns. Both involve planned, purposive action, primarily through mass media communication, to attain strategic objectives involving audience attitudes and/or behaviors. In fact, a basic rule of recalls is the necessity of using public relations from the onset of a recall situation.

Both types of campaigns have quantified and time-framed objectives, and both implement persuasive communication to create attitudinal or behavioral compliance with campaign objectives. The mass media are essential to both, although the cyber-revolution has also affected public relations in general.

The Cyber-Recall Revolution

Product recalls have become computerized. Each of the four major stages of recalls are directly affected by if not controlled through computer applications: 1) Recall investigation; 2) Recall purchaser identification; 3) Recall planning; and 4) Recall communication. We will conclude this survey of computerization in recalls with a consideration of the dazzling array of cyber-recall information sources.

Computers In Recall Investigation

Recalls begin as investigations of consumer complaints, which may be registered via computer, or through corporate or government safety testing. People seeking ways to report recalls to the appropriate Federal agency can receive complete assistance on the Internet.

Chat rooms can be monitored, if it appears that a particular recall will be a discussion topic. When the regulatory agencies receive complaints, and launch investigations, the information is fed into databases.

Computers In Recall Purchaser Identification

Effective recalls depend upon the ability to identify and locate purchasers of the defective product. If recallers have sufficient product purchaser information, it is relatively easy to notify purchasers directly and maximize recall return rates.

Computers have revolutionized recall purchaser identification in two ways. First, retailers and manufacturers can maintain accurate records much easier now, thanks to computerized inventories and cyber-procurement of point-of-sales information on purchasers

In addition, purchaser identification has become computerized. It is possible for purchasers to register their product over the 'Net, and there are even commercial companies which specialize in on-line product registration and recall notification.

Computers In Recall Planning

Recall planning involves computers in intrinsic ways. Most important corporate data is computerized, as databases have replaced physical libraries and computer files have replaced their predecessors and partial namesakes.

Recall planning, especially internal communication, will quite likely occur through E-mail, and list-serves might suddenly become valuable public relations assets. Information not obtainable through corporate avenues might be available on the 'Net.

Mock recalls, or recall drills, can be operated from computer simulations.

The Computer In Recall Communication

Recall communication has become increasingly computerized, and it is likely that trend will continue for some time. The role of computers in recall communication is extensive, and at least six major dimensions of cyber-recall public relations can be discussed.

Internal communication, both within the recalling firm and between that firm and its distributors, stockholders, employees, and other recall stakeholders, probably will occur electronically, through E-mail. Other traditional recall communication tactics, like news releases and VNR preparation and distribution, conducting special events, and the holding of press conference, all now are facilitated by computer applications.

Even traditional news release delivery-- mail, courier, personal delivery-- has been replaced by the Fax Blast, where a computer transmits your message simultaneously to hundreds, thousands, or millions of recipients. Of course, thanks to word processing, each release is individualized and localized, in a fraction of the time it used to take.

Recall web pages might represent the most important advance of the cyber-recall revolution. Companies can use web sites, usually linked to the corporate home page, In the dawning digital age, companies can effectively disseminate recall safety information, and instruct purchasers in the recall procedure. Thomsen and Rawson referred to Odwalla's use of a recall web page in their 1998 *PRQ* recall study.

Another computerized recall tactic involves recall phone banks. Adaptiv Communications, for example, offers "ReCall," a recall system of trained operators who call recalled product purchasers and dispatch recall information quickly and personally. Such telephonic assistance was

rendered quite effectively in the Tylenol case.

Government agency provision of recall information through the 'Net is the final manifestation of computers in recall campaigns. Each Federal regulatory agency, such as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the US Department of Agriculture, places recall information on their web site as quickly as possible, usually within a month of the recall and sometimes sooner.

Numerous Computer Recall Information Sources

The plethora of cyber recall information sources defies detailed description. There are four major categories of 'Net recall resources; corporate web pages, nonprofit recall information sources, commercial recall information services, and a variety of specialized recall information vendors.

Corporate web pages have already been mentioned. Firms like Rubbermaid, Graco, and Omega Fire Alarm Systems have publicized their recalls through web pages.

Several major nonprofit recall information services can easily be located on the 'Net. Central Notice, US Consumer Gateway, Consumer World, and SAFETY ALERTS.Com are four prominent examples of organizations who provide recall information free of charge, over the 'Net.

Those willing to pay can receive recall notices from commercial recall information firms such as Recall Info.Com and RAInfo. In-Time Systems will charge you \$1.99 per month, or \$19.95 a year, for recall information, and the National Information Services Corporation offers a CD-ROM of recalls for \$695.

Finally, there is a wide variety of specialized recall information vendors. Trade associations have web sites, as do universities (University of Maryland) and consumer groups (Center for Science in the Public Interest). Insurance companies (Nationwide), manufacturers (Baby.Com), retailers (Baby Depot), and safety companies (New Hope Eagle Fire Company) provide cyber-recall information. The media (Channel 3000, WISC) makes recall information available, as do parent's groups (ParenthoodWeb) and health care providers (University of Arizona Medical Center).

Cyber-Recall Problems

The Cyber-Recall revolution is a fact; it has transpired, whether we like it or not, and regardless of our state of preparation. Despite the relative advantages afforded recallers by computers, at least four problems might be identified from such practices: 1) The Digital Divide; 2) Requires An Active Learner; 3) the Needle in the Haystack Effect; and 4) Cyberexpertise Required.

The Digital Divide

Simply put, access to and literacy in computer use is neither universal nor entirely equitable at the present time. Many lack computer skills, and are effectively disenfranchised from participation in this media.

Unfortunately, such access is not guaranteed to all, neither is it random; instead, there are ethnic, economic, educational and technological variables at play. The cyber-playing field is a decidedly uneven one, with the haves enjoying their status, while the have-nots do not.

Computers Require Active Learners

Computer use presupposes that someone is relatively active, in the information-seeking sense. That is, you must choose to use your computer to obtain recall information; that information will not come to you, unless you are enrolled in an automatic recall notification plan.

Since many public opinion polls have declared the American electorate to be relatively passive most of the time, on most public policy issues, it is unlikely that one can count on many active recall information seekers. Thus, the informational attractiveness of the 'Net is somewhat mitigated.

The Needle In The Haystack Effect

Ironically, the very magnitude of information available on the 'Net can be a deterrent to its use. There are hundreds of thousands of items indexed in the ExCite search engine; many of them do not deal with recalls, because of classification problems, but one must wade through lists of items and/or the items themselves to discover their irrelevance.

Cyberexpertise Required

To fully participate in the bounty of Internet recall information, one must be able to use a computer to obtain topical information. That might not seem like a formidable task to today's high school or college students, but many of us who are a little older recall pre-computer days quite well.

Computers are expensive and complex technology. Their successful operation requires training and some degree of operator intelligence.

Conclusion

Product recalls will never be the same again, as they were before the computer revolutionized their conduct. Change is not always good, however, and not all stakeholders participate as fully as others. Nevertheless, an effective product recall public relations practitioner will use cyber-recall communication tactics to good effect.

In initial investigations and purchaser identification efforts, and during planning and communication activities, product recalls have been transformed by the computer. Like all modern communication tools, understanding cyber-recalls is a necessary first step in developing strategic and tactical product recall acumen.

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