

PRODUCT RECALL PRINT ADVERTISING: A TYPOLOGY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Product recalls are pervasive economic phenomenon, which occur frequently and can have devastating consequences for the recalling firm. This paper documents the significance of product recalls, and of advertising as a means of recall communication

This paper presents a taxonomy of the major modes of advertising encountered in product recall campaigns. Additionally, certain prescriptive admonitions are suggested for each of the three dominant print modes; direct mail, display ads, and point-of-sales messages.

Finally, a series of basic generalizations about recall print advertising are advanced.

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Consumer product recalls are relatively frequent occurrences, with potentially profound consequences. It is no overstatement to suggest that successful consumer product recall is a matter of life and death.

Product recalls may be inevitable, in light of the complexity of modern manufacturing processes, the diversity of materials, and the dangers inherent in manufacturing, storage, and distribution. However, considerable evidence indicates that while recalls may be unavoidable, the resulting damage might be minimized by effective product recall communication. The key to effective recall might well be commercial communication.

This paper offers a prescriptive taxonomy of consumer product recall print advertising tactics. Three specific major print advertising tactics will be identified, described, and exemplified; 1) direct mail, 2) display ads, and 3) point-of-sale messages. Prior to considering these print communication modes, we'll realize the quantitative and qualitative significance of recalls, and the relative importance of advertising as a product recall communication tactic. This paper closes with some generalizations about product recall print advertising.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CONSUMER PRODUCT RECALLS

Consumer product recalls are quite significant, in that they occur frequently and there are potentially catastrophic consequences. No one knows exactly how many recalls there are, due to fragmentation between and within the various levels of government, and because of local, voluntary recalls which escape regulatory and media attention. There is little doubt, however, that they occur frequently, and can have profound consequences.

Quantitative Significance of Product Recalls

In 1997, for example, there were at least 2,447 recalls; that amounts to an average of 6.70 each day, or almost 47 per week (Gibson and Thomsen, in press). At least 493,691,554 product units were recalled.

In 1996, there were at least 1,885 recalls, involving 1,754,214,642 product units. That is an average of 5.16 recalls daily, or 36.24 per week (Gibson, 1998, 773).

It should be a matter of concern that the number of recalls, particularly of dangerous food items, may be increasing. According to the Office of Water, in the Environmental Protection Agency, "Certainly, FDA is finding greater problems, e.g., the number of products recalled for life-threatening microbial contamination has increased almost five-fold since 1988" (1998; pp 4, 7).

Qualitative Significance of Product Recalls

The real significance of recalls cannot be discerned solely from statistics, however. For consumers, recall failure may result in death or serious injury. Anna Gimmestad was a sixteen-month-old brightening the lives of family and friends in Denver, CO, until she drank an Odwalla 'Smoothie,' in mid-October, 1996, and encountered the E-Coli bacteria (Hilliard, 1996, C8). While Anna's death was tragic enough, it would be even worse if others would suffer and/or die because a recall failed.

A 1996 study by the Consumer Product Safety Commission examined three recent recalls, and concluded that "These three examples alone were estimated to result in about 28 lives potentially saved due to the recalls and about 19 lives saved annually due to redesign or ban of the products" ("CPSC Works With Industry....," 1996, 1).

There is another reason to appreciate the gravity of recall situations, one of enormous salience to corporate executives. While recalls may mean the literal demise of a product line, or even an entire corporation, the good news is that an effective recall can minimize short-term damage and guarantee long-term survival.

One study concluded that "In the final analysis, effectively communicating concern for consumers (both through statements and, more importantly, through actions) is the best way to maintain corporate credibility through all stages of a product recall, and after" (Komisarjevsky and Reifler, 1984, 96). Malickson concurred; "The success of a recall, and the subsequent effect of public regard for the product and its manufacturer, can in large measure be related to the way the company handles the recall program" (1982, 25).

THE ROLE OF ADVERTISING IN PRODUCT RECALLS

Initially, it must be conceded that most product recall campaigns currently emphasize public relations strategy and tactics, as opposed to advertising. However, we will conclude that there is a major potential role for advertising in recall campaigns.

In fact, there are seven reasons to consider advertising a valuable recall communication option: 1) Ads are controllable; 2) Ads can create safety awareness in consumers; 3) Ads have ultimate communication potential; 4) Ads provide cost-effective communication; 5) Ads are a necessary alternative to publicity; 6) Ads serve recaller's post-recall communication needs; and 7) Ads provide imaginative communication solutions.

Ads Are Controllable

The relationship between public relations and advertising has been defined historically in a variety of ways. In the era of Integrated Marketing Communication, these differences are blurring somewhat, but the three traditional differences are cost, credibility, and control. We are concerned

here with the third of these differences, control.

When public relations efforts result in a recall newspaper story in or a television coverage, the content, wording, placement, length, and virtually every variable are out of the control of the recaller. The story slant may be favorable, neutral, or even unfavorable to the recaller.

These three traditional ad/pr differences interact. The reason that public relations-placed editorial material is more credible to audience members is precisely the lack of control afforded interested parties. The public perceives that if editorial material is objective, and filtered through media gatekeepers, the information is more credible than that contained in an ad, which is presumed to be biased in favor of the ad sponsor.

Thus, ads sacrifice credibility, in favor of control over message and executional elements of communication. For this choice, they incur an oftentimes considerable cost. In some recall situations, these tradeoffs might justify using ads in lieu of publicity.

Ads Can Create Safety Awareness Among Consumers

One of the obvious characteristics of advertising is its ability to attract attention to itself. Effective ads are able to create enough interest in the perceiver to motivate him or her to watch, read, or listen to the entire ad. It is also believed that advertising can promote target audience perceptions of involvement with a product, concept, candidate, or other advertised entity.

Chanrdan et al noted that “Used in the right manner, advertising has demonstrated that it can be a powerful tool in creating an awareness of potential hazards in products and bringing about a change in the handling and use of such products” (1979, 40).

Ads Have Ultimate Recall Communication Potential

Advertising, typically produced by corporate marketing departments or by agencies, have ultimate recall communication potential, as recalls are actually “marketing in reverse.” Marketing managers and others involved in that aspect of business are conversant with marketing and advertising terms and are familiar with recalls as corporate phenomenon.

“Advertisers should take a much more positive stance on the issues of product safety than they have done so far. With all their expertise in mass and other forms of communication, advertisers are better qualified than others in the product-marketing chain to undertake this effort. Advertisers can demonstrate the depth of their concern for the consumer’s welfare in many ways,” one study observed (Chandran et al, 1979, 41).

Advertising As Cost-Effective Communication

Although public relations-induced communication is typically placed in media free of charge, there are still a variety of expenses incurred. And, one criticism of public relations communication is that it is sometimes limited, in terms of effective reach and audience penetration.

Advertising, on the other hand, usually circumvents such problems by carefully matching the desired target market to their favored ad mode, and emphasizing those channels in the advertising media mix. This can result in the least-cost, highest-impact communication program possible. The “Recall Effectiveness Study” conducted by the Consumer Product Safety Commission’s Office of Strategic Planning referred to “the cost-effectiveness of different recall actions such as paid written warnings, audiovisual warning, etc” (1978, 4).

Ads Are A Necessary Alternative to Publicity

The federal regulatory agencies charged with recall responsibilities are placed in a difficult position by their enabling legislation. They are required to guarantee adequate communication on recalls, but that presumes the cooperation of the mass media, and the media gatekeepers like editors and news directors in particular. Unfortunately, gatekeeper perceptions of the newsworthiness of recalls sometimes varies substantially from the perceptions of regulatory officials. In these circumstances, when publicity is unavailable, advertising is the only real alternative.

The Recall Effectiveness Task Force of the CPSC confirmed our analysis; “The point is that editor’s perceptions of the ‘newsworthiness’ of a hazard message may not always be equivalent to our perception of the severity of the subject hazard. When this is expected or found to be the case, alternative channels of communication must be pursued, including paid advertising” (1980, 19).

Ads Serve Recaller’s Post-Recall Communication Needs

During a recall event, effective public communication is necessary to reassure the consumers that the product problem is under control, and that things are fine. Such messages, both during and subsequent to the recall, may best be sent through paid advertising.

One team of researchers investigated the relationship between corporate reputation and recalls, and the role of various communication strategies and tactics. Jolly and Mowen concluded that “When the company was described as socially responsible, whether by itself or the government, more favorable feelings were held toward the company. This result indicates that a company involved in a product recall may be able to ‘pat-itself-on-the-back’ in corporate advertisements and achieve a favorable response from consumers” (1985, 474).

Another study focused on product sabotage-induced recall events. Littlejohn substantially replicated the findings of Jolly and Mowen; “One of the biggest problems in product sabotage is trying afterwards to discern how the public perceives the handling and safety of a company’s products. A well-developed media and advertising campaign may be required to ensure that public perception is positive, and the product will continue to survive” (1987, 78).

Ads Provide Imaginative Communication Solutions

Frequently, good ads are imaginative. Some equate the American, Madison Avenue-style advertising with imaginative, creative communication. From the Jolly Green Giant of yesterday through today’s Coca Cola-guzzling polar bears, ads are imaginative.

Recalls require such imaginative communication. The previously mentioned CPSC Task Force on Recall Effectiveness recalled that “Commission staff has sometimes dramatically improved recall rates by agreements by firms to ‘target’ hazard messages in imaginative ways designed to reach a particular audience likely to own the subject product” (CPSC, 1980, A-16).

A TYPOLOGY OF PRINT RECALL ADVERTISING

Product recall campaigns are basically the same as advertising campaigns. The objectives, policies, and materials of the two can be virtually identical. One thing is clear-- recall success depends on communication effectiveness, which in turn may be situationally dependant upon

advertising.

Oftentimes that communication is conveyed through print media. This paper discusses three primary print advertising channels; 1) direct mail, 2) display ads, and 3) point-of-sales messages.

Direct Mail

If press releases aren't the most common print product recall communication tool, then direct mail is. Direct mail is an important print communication tactic in recall campaigns.

Research by the Food and Drug Administration found direct mail, with follow-up telephone calls, to be the most effective recall communication method (1978, 174). The CPSC's Office of Strategic Planning study determined that personal notification, through mail, telegram, telephone, or personal visit, was the most effective means of reaching recall target audience members. According to the study conclusions, "As one might expect, the recalls with no or limited direct notification generally had effectiveness levels in the 0 to 30% range. The exceptions were either local...recalls with point-of-sales warnings or newspaper, radio, and television warnings..." (1978, 20).

It is the basic communication vehicle used by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; "Whose responsibility is it to notify the consumer, how is that accomplished, and what do we as consumers need to do where recalls are concerned?... The policy is pretty much standard. The manufacturer sends a notice to the original owner" (Sharp, 1993, S-2). According to an NHTSA publication, "Motor Vehicle Defects and Recall Campaigns," recalling auto manufacturers "must notify all registered owners and purchasers of the affected vehicles, by first class mail, of the existence of the defect and give an evaluation of its risk to motor vehicle safety" (1990, 7).

In light of the relative prominence of direct mail communication in recall events, considerable attention is warranted. We will consider five topics about recall campaign direct mail: 1) types; 2) regulatory standards; 3) examples of prominent recall direct mail campaigns; 4) the direct mail problem; and 5) direct mail communication criteria.

Types of Direct Mail

We'll consider five types of direct mail: 1) recall notice cards; 2) product tracking cards; 3) follow up cards; 4) recall explanation letters; and 5) "non-recall" letters.

Recall Notice Cards

"RECALL NOTICE--Read Immediately," declares the Chevrolet/Geo recall notice card. This simple, relatively inexpensive print device scores very well on attracting attention and information dissemination.

Similarly effective was American Motor Corporation's "Notice of Product Recall Campaign Involving Your Vehicle." This card, while not quite as clear and compelling as the Chevrolet/Geo card previously described, is nevertheless still relatively well-designed, arranged, and written.

Product Tracking Cards

Some consumer products are traded, sold, or otherwise disposed of by the original purchaser. Automobile manufacturers, for example, will send product tracking cards to registered vehicle owners, according to their lists, which oftentimes are inaccurate.

One such Chevrolet product tracking card requests the recipient to choose from the following:

- 1) I have never owned this vehicle,
- 2) Vehicle damaged beyond repair,
- 3) Vehicle stolen and not recovered,
- 4) Vehicle sold/traded/returned,
- 5) Campaign Completed.

Recall Non-Compliance Follow-up Letter

Chevrolet sent a very brief, clear, and persuasive letter to registered car owners who hadn't complied with the initial publicity of a December, 1992 recall. On one side of the letter is an efficient, three-paragraph appeal for compliance; the reverse is a full-page sheet explaining the problem and giving complete consumer campaign compliance information.

Recall Explanation Letters

Standard business letters can be sent to owners of recalled products. These letters have already been exemplified in Figure Four. Another example was written by Ted Keith, Manager for Argosy Manufacturing Company, to owners of 1977 and 1978 Argosy travel trailers.

This letter revealed that Argosy "has determined that a defect which relates to motor vehicle safety exists on some 1977 and 1978 Argosy travel trailers" (Keith, 1978). No specific danger is mentioned, except "LP gas bottles shaking loose from the assembly and falling off the trailer frame."

"Non-Recall" Letters

This fifth category of recall direct mail is, in a sense, subsumed within another category, that of explanation letters. But, in this specialized type of recall letter, one of the basic messages is that there is no recall. Thus, the firm involved in the product problem disavows that the problem is serious enough to warrant a recall, but takes corrective action anyway.

In 1992, Oldsmobile sent the direct mail letter depicted in Figure Five to registered purchasers of the Oldsmobile 1991 Ninety Eight Regency Elite and the Nineth Eight Touring Sedan. This letter, necessitated by door lock actuator problems in some vehicles, contains this sentence; "This is NOT a recall" (Oldsmobile Division, 1992, 1).

In a similar letter, Chrysler Corporation simultaneously denied any problem with the liftgate latches on 1984-1994 Chrysler, Plymouth, and Dodge minivans. The opening line of this direct mail piece refers to "recent and highly visible media coverage questioning the safety of liftgate latches," which motivated the writing of the letter.

The second paragraph delivers the basic Chrysler position; "Chrysler Corporation firmly

stands behind the quality and safety of our minivans, including the liftgate latches. There has been no formal determination that a safety defect exists with minivan latches. However, to help ensure peace of mind that your minivan is safe, Chrysler has decided to provide a stronger latch. We will replace your minivan's latch with a stronger component at no charge to you" (Cunningham, 1).

Regulatory Recall Direct Mail Guidelines

Each of the three regulatory agencies with the largest involvement in recall events, judged quantitatively (CPSC, NHTSA, and the FDA), have standards which recall direct mail must meet. For instance, Fisk and Chanrdan noted the existence of CPSC standards; "Ambiguous letters or news releases that do not spell out the product defect clearly may lull dealers and the public into a false sense of security... In such cases, the CPSC has come down hard on these manufacturers and has requested changes in the wording of letters or news releases" (1975, 94).

The FDA has similar technical requirements for direct mail; "The FDA had paid considerable attention to the format and content of recall letters, envelopes, telegrams, etc., used to notify distributors, recallers, and consumers. For FDA uninitiated recalls, their procedures specify first class mail and conspicuously marked envelopes for recall letters Both letters and envelopes are to be marked "URGENT RECALL" CPSC, 1978, A-9).

The NHTSA direct mail standards are articulated in the "Motor Vehicle Defects and Recall Campaigns" publication. It describes NHTSA recall communication policy; "In other words, the manufacturer must explain to the consumer the potential hazards a defect may pose to the safety of the public...The letter must instruct consumers on how to get the defect corrected, remind them that corrections are to be made at no charge, and inform them when the remedy will be available" (1990, 7-8).

Direct Mail Recall Ad Campaigns

Three examples can be cited to demonstrate the potential efficacy of direct mail in recall campaigns. The FDA records a case where "of the individuals who still owned a set needing repair and who had been notified by letter, 80 percent had had the repair work completed" (CPSC, 1978, A-7).

Sears recalled a dishwasher in October of 1973, and direct mail (certified, return-receipt first class letters) was a major part of the campaign. Diamond observed; "From a search of sales files, service records, and warranty information, Sears was able to identify 72% of the dishwasher owners and to notify them of the recall by letter. If the local Sears outlet did not receive a response within two weeks of the mailing a follow-up telephone call was made in order to prompt a consumer response" (1977; 18-9).

OPW Fueling Components used three main recall communication tactics; news release placement, paid ads, and direct mail. Jackson described the OPW strategy; "In addition to the press releases and ads, a series of publics was identified as needing direct, written communication in the form of specifically targeted letters" (1990, 10). These salient targeted publics included current customers, as well as potential hot prospects.

The Direct Mail Problem

Direct mail recall communication depends on accurate customer mailing lists. In many cases, those lists result from returned product warranty cards. The problem is that consumers frequently fail to return those warranty cards.

“It is the consensus opinion of government and industry personnel that warranty cards are returned by less than 30 percent of consumers” (CPSC, 1987, 20).

Teresa M. Schwartz and Robert Adler wrote “Product Recalls: A Remedy in Need of Repair,” a critique of CPSC, NHTSA, FDA, and other recalling agency activities. They suggested three improvements: 1) lower the reading level of recall letters; 2) “highlight the safety consequences of the defect;” and 3) send a follow-up card (Kahn, 1984, 55).

Display Ads

Press release-placed information is relatively inexpensive, especially compared with full-page ads in major American metro daily newspapers. We'll examine a number of ads here, involving a variety of American corporations---Camel, Philip Morris, McCulloch, Gerry Guardian, and Ford/Lincoln/Mercury, to name a few-- and a variety of ad sizes.

Small Ads

Both McCulloch's gas blower recall, and Gerry Guardian's Convertible car seat recall, were communicated through fairly small print display ads. The car seat ad measured three-by-five inches, while the McCulloch ad was four-and-a half inches by three inches. Both ads contain comparatively complete information, but must resort to very small print due to economically-induced space constraints.

Big Ads

Other corporations prefer larger ads. Both Philip Morris and Ford purchased oversized ads, while Camel used a compromise-sized, quarter-page ad.

When "a very small percentage of cigarettes manufactured recently by Philip Morris USA" were "found to have defective filters," the tobacco vendor proclaimed "we are voluntarily initiating a precautionary recall of all the cigarette brand styles listed below" ("An Important...", 1995).

This full-page ad, a full twenty seven-by-fourteen inches, was well-written and has a nice layout, but the recall and attendant publicity provoked some derisive humor. Some pundits thought it ironic that a cigarette maker would be concerned about defective filters, when the product itself is probably harmful, if not lethal, to the consumer.

Another full-page ad campaign used a series of ads. On May 9 and 20, 1996, T. J. Wagner, Ford's Vice President for Customer Communication and Satisfaction, signed full-page ads in newspapers across the country. Both ads specify exactly which models were sought in the recall campaign of 8.7 million vehicles "to replace ignition switches" because of "the potential for overheating, smoke, and possibly fire in the steering column of the vehicle" (Wagner, 1995a & b).

Both ads stressed common copy elements: few vehicles were ever actually at risk; "less than two hundredths of one percent;" repairs were quick and easy, taking less than an hour; and consumers were instructed in exactly what to do and were provided with a toll-free number.

The final display ad to be analyzed here was an intermediate size, ten-by-six-and-a-half inches. This recall ad, with obvious attempted emphasis, had a headline underlined, in caps, and bold-faced type, "VOLUNTARY RECALL OF CIGARETTE LIGHTER." The recall occurred, according to the ad, "as a voluntary precautionary measure based on a small number of consumer

complaints involving burns." Consumers were informed about how to return recalled lighters.

What common characteristics unite these product recall campaign display ads? Six unifying elements include; 1) limited apology, 2) minimization of risk/harm, 3) provision of consumer instructions, 4) official look, 5) variable size, and 6) reassuring tone.

All of the recall ads expressed regrets. None accepted complete responsibility for the consequences of the situation, or accepted blame per se, but each ad did indicate that the recall was an unfortunate event.

Perhaps the major theme of the ads was minimization of risk or harm. The gravity of the situation was universally minimized. Each ad offered statistics, expert opinion, and/or explanations conclusively demonstrating the insignificance of the product problem situation.

Explicit, clear consumer campaign completion instructions were provided in each ad so consumers could return recalled products or arrange repairs. Toll-free numbers were provided, in addition to step-by-step directions.

An official look was conveyed. Corporate logos graced most of the ads, as did signatures of corporate officers. All of the ads looked very professional in appearance.

The size of product recall campaign display ads varied. Two were relatively small, one was of intermediate size, and three were full-page.

Finally, and most importantly, each of the ads emphasized a reassuring tone. The problem wasn't that bad, few units were affected, product return/repair procedures were quick and easy for consumers, and the company made everything alright.

Point Of Sale

Flyers might be the least frequently used print product recall public relations communication tool. However, they can be useful, particularly as they are the only point-of-purchase print mode.

In 1993, Taco Bell recalled some promotional items given away in kids' meals. Richard Scarry Finger Puppets and Rocky and Bullwinkle Inflatable Balls were recalled, the message conveyed through flyers posted and distributed in the restaurants.

Complete consumer campaign completion information was provided, along with an incentive (a free taco) and a toll-free number.

RECALL PRINT AD GENERALIZATIONS

The final guideline for consumer product recall print advertising is this; remember, the coverage ultimately will be commensurate with the seriousness of the risk, or actual inflicted harm, of the product being recalled. This means that no matter how professional or persuasive your print product recall information may be, the amount and nature of coverage will be determined by how serious the product-induced danger is, not by your communication efforts.

CONCLUSION

Consumer product recalls are a common corporate public relations challenge. Fortunately, an array of print public relations tools are available for recall campaigns. This paper suggests that

press releases, direct mail, display ads and flyers can be successful consumer product recall communication instruments. Prescriptive advice is suggested to facilitate use of these print media, and enhance print product recall campaign effectiveness.

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