

CONSUMER PRODUCT RECALL PUBLIC RELATIONS TACTICS

Crisis public relations practice must rank among the most challenging aspects of this communication discipline. Public, media and regulatory interest may be intense, time is of the essence, and there are no easy answers. At times, the very survival of an institution may be at stake.

Consumer product recalls are particularly pernicious public relations problems, because they occur relatively frequently, have potentially disastrous consequences, and require considerable attention from public relations staff. Even if a corporate recall is managed by the CEO, another manager, or even a committee, the procedure is basically a combined public relations/marketing operation, designed to attain traditional public relations objectives.

A PRODUCT RECALL PROBABILITY

Product recalls occur with significant frequency, although there is some debate over the precise duration and magnitude of harmful effects. Former Conference Board President Alexander Trowbridge proclaims that "product recall is a situation that nearly every manufacturer will probably face at some time or another no matter how meticulous its quality control procedures. E. Patrick McGuire, one of the foremost experts on product recall, described their incidence in this mailer " American manufacturers are dealing with literally tens of thousands of separate product recall campaigns each year."

CONSUMER PRODUCT RECALL PR TACTICS

Bearing in mind the inevitability of recalls, it is time to consider twelve tactics for these PR campaigns. Although specific recall situations naturally vary somewhat, certain generic components of consumer product recall PR are virtually universal rules.

Be Candid

Candor is important in relations between manufacturers and consumers. One Sears executive recently told a panel of product recall experts that "from the standpoint of the public at least, a perception that a company is candid and committed to solving the problem is an important business goal."

A Tylenol recall participant recalled "the key to our success in saving the product and retaining the image of our company ... was our openness with our consumers, our employees, and the government agencies involved."

Perrier showed how not to be candid. One reporter described an evasive press conference performance this way, "They evaded questions on the extent of the recall until frustrated reporters began to chant, 'the facts'! the facts'!"

Be Consumer-Centered

The benefits of voluntary prompt recall to one firm, OPW fueling components, resulted from demonstration of concern for consumers. A recent column in Marketing News disclosed "by making the decision to recall, OPW called attention to itself as a company

willing to sacrifice bottom line for industry and public good." At about the same time, Taco Bell recalled promotional plastic sports water bottles, and an industry analyst applauded the move, because "the chain's hasty action may help its image as a company that puts consumers first."

According to George S. Frazza, attorney for Johnson & Johnson, within an hour of learning of the Tylenol product tamperings on September 30, 1982, company priorities were established and "we set as the number one priority the safety of the consumer."

Be Consistent

If PR messages are even slightly inconsistent, media attention will most likely focus on these subjects. The fact that inconsistent communication occurs in product recalls was recently alleged by two respected Hill and Knowlton PR executives, "much too often, communications to employees, consumers, government agencies and the media are erratic and disjointed. Different messages reach different audiences, giving an impression of a company out of control."

European PR executives and analysts criticized Perrier recall PR. Michael McMurphy, at BSB Europe in Paris, recalled "Every day I saw another article that disclosed new facts, and refuted what had been said the day before."

Be Contrite

It doesn't hurt to say you're sorry, and it doesn't admit legal liability. "We recalled, we recycled, we publicly acknowledged we made a mistake," said Perrier group CEO Ronald David. He added, "we had to say what happened and say we're sorry."

Be Compassionate

Closely related to specific acknowledgment of sorrow is compassion in general. "A decision that indicates compassion and sensitivity for any victims, and yet at the same time suggests confidence and resolve, may not only end the crisis but win new listeners and public support," Thomas Mitchell concluded. Leonard Snyder noted that "when J&J promptly recalled Tylenol capsules... the company did indeed demonstrate its concern for consumer's health." In their list of product recall PR rules, Christopher Komisarjevsky and Kevin Reifler declared, "express compassion for victims."

Be Careful While relating and empathizing with victims, one must be careful not to admit any legal liability through consumer product recall PR. One former Chrysler safety executive reminisced, "once you announce the recall, everyone comes out of the woodwork." One CPSC official stated that "the language of a recall notice is very important to manufacturers. They fear anything that can be construed as an admission of guilt."

Leigh Cook, of the New Jersey Department of Health, observed the importance of being careful about news disclosures, "we have to develop guidelines on what kinds of information to release - we don't want to frighten the public. It's a very fine line on when to tell the public and what to tell the public."

Be Cooperative

Recalling firms must cooperate with the media and involved regulatory agencies. The consequences of not cooperating were exemplified by Gerber's experience in 1986.

"Ironically, Gerber's own insistence on privacy and its outright hostility towards the media resulted in the very publicity Gerber so feared."

The FDA noted the essential nature of cooperation, "The success of a recall depends on the cooperation of industry."

Be Correct

Consumers product recall PR must not be cursory, superficial or otherwise ineffective. If it is, the involved regulator has the authority to correct the incorrect, ineffective recall communication through an alternative communication. McGuire explained that "recently, an appliance manufacturer got in trouble with the Consumer Product Safety Commission because it made what agency officials described as an 'half-hearted' attempt to publicize a shock hazard in one of its product offerings." The CPSC disseminated its own announcement.

Be Concise

Brevity minimizes your contribution to the recall situation. Don't withhold salient information, but be as brief as possible. As one General Motors executive remarked, "the best way to handle a recall is to explain the facts concisely and to complete the campaign as quickly as you can."

CEO Involvement

Consumers respond better to recall information disseminated by CEO's. One study found that subjects "reacted more favorably to the recall" when a corporate officer made statements. Cline and Cline described media and public criticism of Gerber executives; CEO McKinley "did not make himself available at all."

Be Credible

Above all, a primary consumer product recall PR objective involves credibility. Corning decided to emphasize PR instead of advertising during a recent recall, "because of the objective, third-party credibility of news." William T. Schoyer, APR, News Analysis Institute director, observed that "Corning's publicity achieved the higher interest and the credibility for which the reader, listener, viewer turns to news."

Be Quick

Finally, prompt action is essential to minimize consumer product recall problems. One recall analyst declared that "it is absolutely essential that all the steps be taken promptly, because time is most important." Another attributed the success of the Tylenol recall to Johnson and Johnson's ability to "reach all of the media as quickly and simultaneously as possible."

Other examples point to promptness as necessary to successful recalls. Pepsi-Cola, M&M Candies, and industrial components have recently been recalled without lingering damage, thanks to timely action by corporate managers.

In light of the significant incidence of consumer product recalls, PR practitioners in corporate offices must be prepared to handle them. Even though the specific recalls are likely to be factually and situationally different, twelve generic rules have been identified and

exemplified. It is up to the PR practitioner to make sure that the aftermath of recall is not as damaging as the recall itself.