

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION/THESIS/RESEARCH PAPER/CREATIVE PROJECT: Understanding the Effectiveness of Public Relations Strategies Used During Consumer Product Recalls: A Case Study and Content Analysis Examination of Mattel's 2007 Recall Strategy

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BACKGROUND

With regulatory agencies enforcing increasingly strict quality standards for manufacturers, businesses are finding more and more often that their products are under intense scrutiny. Couple this trend with the fact that modern technology equips consumers with an endless supply of information, both factual and fabricated, and recalls become even more challenging and threatening to consumer product companies. Gone are the days when print reigned as “king” of media. In its place, Web 2.0 is connecting users across the globe—each with the ability to spread their stories of injustice and damage an organization's business.

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's website, infant and children's products accounted for 54% of reported recalls in May of 2011. The year 2007 alone was often referred to as “The Year of the Recall,” the majority of which were related once again to items intended for youthful audiences.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Due to this tidal wave of product recalls, public relations professionals have a greater need than ever to learn from past crisis strategies in an effort to improve their own crisis management plans. Because recalls involving children's products evoke an overtly emotional response, they arguably present a significant challenge to public relations professionals. Preparation and education within this realm afford practitioners valuable knowledge that holds the potential to preserve corporate reputation and maintain consumer loyalty in the wake of a recall.

METHOD

This research paper examines the impact of public relations strategies employed in the midst of a major Mattel recall involving more than 19 million toys from August to September of 2007. First, a literature review of the company's response to the situation was conducted. Based upon the work of Coombs and others, this analysis provides reasoning in which principles and generalizations emerge that apply to the practice of public relations in a crisis situation. Using a single, mainstream case like Mattel, this study meets the four essential characteristics of case study research as defined by Wimmer and Dominick. As such, the case study is particularistic, descriptive, heuristic and inductive in nature to ensure teaching potential for other public relations practitioners.

Secondly, a content analysis was performed using media coverage to further analyze the effectiveness of Mattel public relations strategies. By examining media stories before, during and after the recall, data were generated to analyze media coverage of the company's reputation throughout the crisis. Using LexisNexis, Associated Press coverage was scrutinized for any

relevant content contained throughout the story. Messages, whether positive, negative or neutral, regarding the company's ethics, profits, products and crisis response were sought for the purposes of this research. Content analysis categories were selected on an emergent coding basis using any commonly identified themes found during the preliminary review stage.