

ABERFIELD

POSITIVE INFLUENCE

Make the right calls on your product recall

There are, on average, eight product recalls a week in the UK.

From car safety fears to electric shocks from Christmas decorations, there is barely a sector that is immune from faulty and potentially dangerous product issues.

For every manufacturer and retailer in the UK, the prospect of having to withdraw or recall a product is one they face on a daily basis – even if the action they take is only precautionary.

How brands respond when that situation occurs will determine the impact not only on the bottom line but on the brand's reputation in the marketplace, so it's vital to get the communications right.

We've handled dozens of recalls over the years, so here's a few tips from [Aberfield PR](#) on communicating effectively when you're faced with a problem with your product.

Be prepared

The simple rule is: if you manufacture products, something can go wrong. A design or production fault, incorrect labelling, a contamination or a tampering incident – any of these could be a reason to consider a product withdrawal or recall. If there's a potential health or safety risk, or if the product simply won't perform as well as intended, you may be left with no option but to withdraw or recall the product, however minimal the potential risk may seem.

So consider the potential scenarios. How would you respond, and who would be responsible for making it happen? Ensure you have clear crisis communications plans in place.

Withdrawal versus recall

OK, you've discovered a problem with one of your products. So do you withdraw it from sale or initiate a full recall?

If it's clear the problem has only just arisen and there's no public health or safety risk, you might be able to limit your actions to pulling the product from the shelves and halting production. Otherwise, you'll have to go for the recall option.

If there's any doubt, always err on the side of caution and instigate a recall of your product. Yes, it's the more expensive and time-consuming option, but you don't need us to remind you of the potential consequences (financial and reputational) if you gamble and lose.

Don't bury your head in the sand

Whether it's a withdrawal or recall, you need to act quickly. Keeping silent and hoping no-one will find out is not the answer. It's not just a question of how many laws and industry regulations you might be breaking if you do nothing, but of the long-term damage to your reputation (and, ultimately, your entire business) if your inertia leads to disaster.

Assuming you've heeded that warning, speed is of the essence. Don't just do the right thing – do it quickly. If you're slow to respond, that's what you'll be remembered for. If you're quick, you'll be seen as acting responsibly.

Communicate clearly...and widely

The days when you could fulfil your obligations by taking out one (conveniently hidden) ad in a newspaper are long gone. The internet in general – and social media in particular – has ensured that a recall can be shared by millions within minutes of you announcing.

Take control of the PR message. Get the facts out to all your stakeholders (including your employees) quickly and clearly. If there's an information vacuum, fact will be replaced by rumour and speculation, and that's much harder to control. Your best defence is to be open and honest...and proactive. Now, more than ever, you need to be your customers' friend.

Inform the authorities

It's not just your customers, consumers, employees, shareholders and the media you need to inform.

Depending on your industry, there may be a regulator or industry body that needs to be told (such as the FSA, MHRA or even the European Commission). Then there's local authorities, trading standards and others. Make sure they are properly informed and armed with the most up-to-date information, and that it's consistent with what you're saying elsewhere.

Say sorry...

It may not be your fault. You may have been let down by a supplier, or been the victim of a malicious act, but your customers have still been inconvenienced. Even if it was only a product withdrawal, they still had to find an alternative while yours was off-sale. And if it was a recall, there's the added inconvenience of returning it – let alone the potential worries of whether they may have been affected by the dodgy product.

A sincere apology will go a long way to helping you retain your customers' goodwill. Your legal advisers may suggest an apology constitutes an admission of guilt, but it doesn't. "We're sorry for the inconvenience" isn't the same as "We're sorry we killed your cat".

...but don't start blaming people

It's your product, so take responsibility. The first thing people want to know is that you've taken the necessary action to remove any potential threats to people's health or safety. They'll then want to know how it happened, and be assured it won't happen again. Whose fault it was is largely for your own inquests, so leave the finger-pointing until then.

Think about the aftermath

Your customers may have bought alternative products while yours were unavailable, so you need to win them back. After a recall, there are bound to be trust issues, so you need a clear brand strategy aimed at bringing customers back to you.

For more information about our product recall services, or to discuss your own requirements in complete confidence, contact Aberfield on 0113 357 2070.

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