

Nestle India Maggi : Rebuilding Trust

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Abstract

During the second half of 2015, Nestle India had to withdraw Maggi noodles from the Indian market as the Indian food regulator (FSSAI) banned it, considering it unsafe for consumption. The company refuted the claims of the food regulator and communicated it to the stakeholders through media. Nestle India approached Bombay High Court and got relief from the ban. During November 2015, Nestle India re-launched Maggi noodles in India. Now, the big question is that whether Nestle India timely responded to the crisis? Has Maggi been able to rebuild trust among consumers?

Keywords: crisis, communication, crisis communication, organization reputation, brand, stakeholder

Teaching Objectives

Specific teaching objectives include:-

- (i) The primary objective, while teaching the case, is to provide students with the skill of designing a crisis communication plan.
- (ii) The second objective is to develop students' abilities to formulate communication strategy as per situation crisis communication theory (SCCT) and attribution theory.
- (iii) The final objective is to make students understand the importance of various stakeholders while planning a communication response during crisis.

Subject Area: marketing, advertising, business communication, integrated marketing communication

Supplementary Material : The Teaching Note is not available in print form in the journal, but will be available in the digital form once the digital edition is available on the website. Please see this link for accessing the Archives : <http://www.indianjournalofmarketing.com/index.php/ijom/issue/archive>

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On June 4, 2015, Nestle India decided to recall its Maggi noodles from stores after a controversy erupted over the product's contents. The next day, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) ordered the company to withdraw all nine variants of its instant noodles from stores ("Nestle takes Maggi off the shelves, says 'will be back in markets soon,'" 2015).

Though the Bombay High Court had set aside the FSSAI ban after the tests were cleared by three accredited laboratories, the incident still affected the brand. The brand managers of Maggi are now contemplating crisis communication strategies that are to be used by Nestle India and whether the image of the brand has been restored among the stakeholders.

Note : The case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspective presented in the case are not necessarily those of Nestle or any of its employees.

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Background

During the month of March 2014, food inspectors picked up the samples of Maggi from a local supermarket in Barabanki (Uttar Pradesh [UP]) and sent them for testing to a state laboratory in Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh). On April 24, 2014, the Gorakhpur laboratory reported that Maggi had violated labelling regulation by writing “No added MSG” on the packs; the laboratory found MSG (mono-sodium glutamate - a taste enhancer) in the content (Khan, 2015). Nestle filed an appeal against the report, stating that the noodles contained MSG as a natural process. Then, the Food Safety and Drug Administration (FSDA) in Lucknow sent samples of Maggi noodles to Central Food Laboratory in Kolkata for testing (“As it happened: Nestle CEO Paul Bulcke addresses concerns on Maggi row,” 2015). On April 27, 2015, the Kolkata laboratory reported that the traces of MSG and “Lead” in Maggi exceeded the permissible level set by the regulatory body. The FSDA officials said that the acceptable limit of “Lead” ranged between 0.01 part per million (ppm) and 2.5 ppm, and the laboratory found 17.2 ppm in Maggi (Malik, 2015). The FSDA filed a case against Nestle India. Yudhvir Singh Malik, CEO of FSSAI, based on the reports from various states (Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi), took stringent action as he believed Nestle India had violated the instructions relating to permissible Lead content in food items and misguided consumers regarding their products' MSG content. Moreover, the company had launched one variant (Maggi Oats with tastemaker) without receiving approval from the regulatory body.

The Department of Consumer Affairs alleged that Nestle India had indulged in “unfair trade practices” by selling “defective and hazardous products (Maggi instant noodles)” and, thus, caused injury to millions of consumers. In August 2015, the Department of Consumer Affairs filed a case before the National Consumer Dispute Redressal Commission (NCDRC) seeking ₹ 6400 million from Nestle. A bench of the NCDRC directed Nestle to respond to the notice by September 30, 2015 and allowed the government to send samples of Maggi noodles to an accredited laboratory for tests of Lead content and MSG (Saxena, 2015).

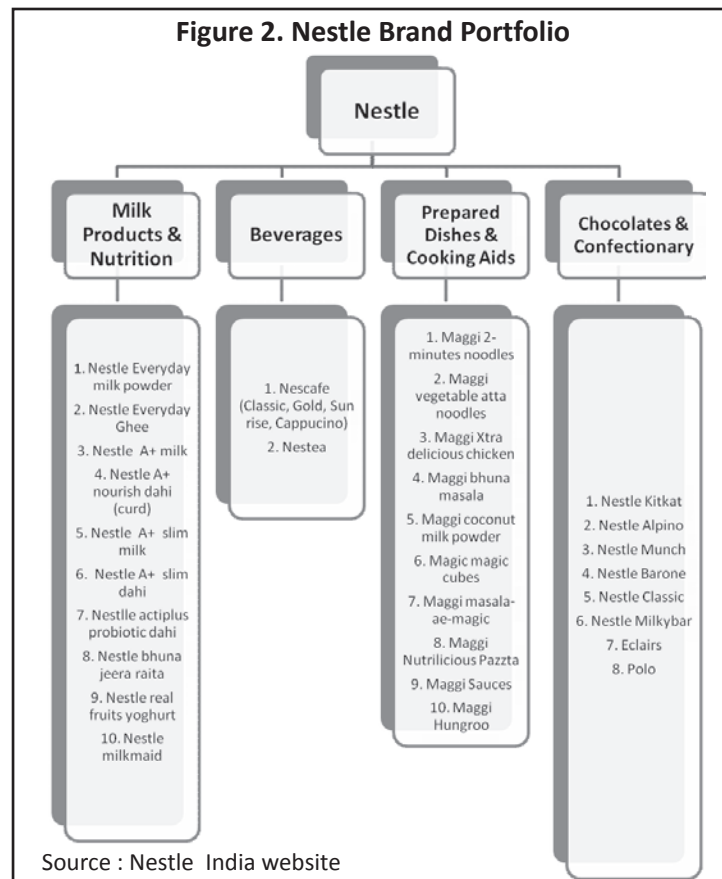
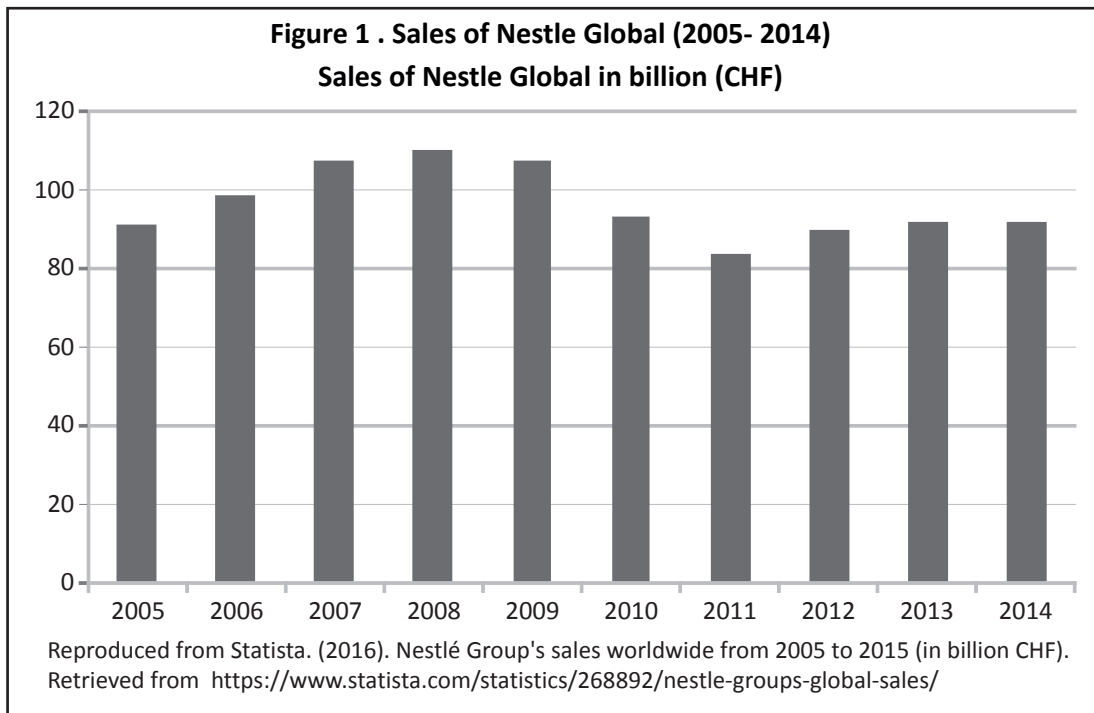
About Nestle

Nestle is the world's leading nutrition, health and wellness company, and it claims to have a mission of “Good Food, Good Life.” Nestle provides a wide range of food and beverage categories for various eating occasions. The company was founded in 1866 by Henri Nestlé in Vevey, Switzerland. It has employed around 280,000 people and has factories or operations in almost every country in the world. Nestle sales for 2014 were CHF 91.61 bn (Statista, 2016). Nestle worldwide sales have not been consistent in the last decade (Figure 1). According to Nestle website, nine month sales (January to September 2015) of the company globally were CHF 64.9 bn (Nestle, 2015a).

Nestle India set up its first manufacturing facility at Moga (Punjab) in 1961. This was followed by its manufacturing facilities at Choladi (Tamil Nadu) in 1967; Nanjangud (Karnataka) in 1989; Samalkha (Haryana) in 1993; Ponda (Goa) in 1995; Bicholim (Goa) in 1997; and Pantnagar (Uttarakhand) in 2006. In 2012, Nestle India set up its eighth manufacturing facility in Tahliwal (Himachal Pradesh). The four branch offices located at Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata help facilitate the sales and marketing activities. Nestle India's Head Office is located in Gurgaon, Haryana (Nestle, n.d.a). Nestle India opened a R&D centre at Manesar to help the company cater to the specific nutrition needs and taste desires of the South-Asian region. Nestle has four product lines: milk products & nutrition, beverages, prepared dishes & cooking aids, and chocolates & confectionery (Figure 2).

Maggi in India

Nestle India launched Maggi instant noodles in the country in 1983. During the 1980s, Indians mainly consumed rice and wheat along with pulses or vegetables during meals. At the time of the launch of Maggi, Indians were not



receptive towards Chinese foods. Maggi was initially introduced in four variants: Masala, Chicken, Sweet & Sour, and Capsicum. Maggi's tag line, "Fast to cook, good to eat," highlighted "convenience" as the product's unique selling proposition. Advertisements in the initial years focused on the "mother-child" bond and a mother's desire to conveniently prepare a light, wholesome meal for her kids when they are hungry. The mother says, "Just two minutes." Maggi reached out to school children by sponsoring and organizing various activities, such as the Maggi Good Food Quiz and Maggi Minithons, rewarding participants with Maggi samples and gift hampers. The product was introduced at a price of less than ₹ 5 for a 100g pack. Maggi was made available at millions of retail shops through wholesalers, distributors, and re-distributors. As Indian consumers became more health conscious, Maggi began to be perceived as being an unhealthy food, which led to stagnation in its sales in 2003 - 2004. Maggi re-positioned the brand by introducing its Classic Masala variety (fortified with micro- and macro-nutrients), along with atta, rice, and dal atta noodles, under a new advertising campaign with tag line "Taste bhi, Health bhi." Maggi launched cup noodles in 2008 to target teenagers. The company also introduced Maggi Multigrainz in 2010, which were targeted at customers of a higher socioeconomic classification (SEC). Maggi launched the "Me & Meri Maggi" advertising campaign in 2009, inviting customers to recall their own "Maggi Magic Moments" so as to appeal to all age groups (Meri Maggi - see advertisements and campaigns of Maggi at the company's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/MeriMAGGI>). Maggi launched three new flavors : Thrillin Curry Noodles, Tricky Tomato Noodles, and Romantic Capsica Noodles, after taking cues from the magic moments shared by the consumers.

(1) Competitors : Instant noodles were first marketed back in 1958. They were made in Japan by a Taiwanese-Japanese inventor, Momofuku Ando, using a method he invented called flash frying. This technique gave the noodles a longer shelf life, exceeding even that of frozen noodles. Ando's company Nissin marketed the first instant noodles under the brand name Chikin Ramen. Initially, the noodles were considered a luxury item due to their price and novelty; Japanese grocery stores sold fresh noodles at one-sixth of the price (Hungry Forever, 2015).

Though CG Foods (Wai Wai), Indo Nissin (Top Ramen), and Capital Foods (Ching's Secret and Smith & Jones) launched their brands in the 1990s, none of them could challenge Maggi in India. Major fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies like Hindustan Unilever (Knorr brand), Glaxo Smithkline (Horlicks Foodles brand), and ITC (Sunfeast Yippee brand) entered the market in 2009 - 2010 due to the explosive growth of noodles in India (Chakravarthy, 2012).

Indo-Nissin Food Pvt. Ltd. launched Japanese-style soupy noodles in a pillow pack - a product by the name of Top Ramen - in 1991. Due to non-acceptance of the soupy noodles, Top Ramen re-launched the easy-to-prepare snack in 1992. A few years later, it re-positioned itself as "smooth noodles." Top Ramen hired Saina Nehwal, women's badminton champion, for its "Be the champions" campaign targeting kids. Top Ramen is available in masala, chicken, curry, oat masala, and atta masala flavours.

CG foods, a Nepal-based regional player, launched Wai Wai noodles in India. The brand is popular in East and North-East India, but was not well accepted in the other parts of the country.

Capital foods launched two brands, Ching's Secret and Smith & Jones, in the Indian market. Ching's Secret is available in Chinese flavors only - Manchurian, Schezwan, & Hot Garlic - to position it as a genuine Chinese brand. Furthermore, color and graphics on packaging also substantiate its Chinese appeal. Smith & Jones offered noodles with traditional Indian tadka flavors, that is, Masala and Curry.

GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), a British multinational, launched Horlicks Foodles in 2009. Foodles was first launched in South India as Horlicks already had a strong presence there. Foodles targets kids and mothers. Foodles differentiated its offerings through its "health maker sachet," which contains a combination of five essential nutrients.

Hindustan Unilever (HUL), the Indian subsidiary of Anglo-dutch multinational, launched soups under the brand of Knorr. In 2010, the company introduced soupy noodles under the same brand so as to target a bigger

market. HUL promoted Knorr soupy noodles to working mothers as a light meal for their kids.

ITC, British multinational, introduced Sunfeast Yippee brand of noodles in 2010. Yippee differentiated its brand from the market leader by promoting it as non-sticky and longer noodles. Moreover, Yippee Magic Masala used tomato color and flavor so as to appeal to the palette of children. Yippee noodles gained 10.8% market share by the end of 2014, when Maggi controlled 63% of the market, according to a report by Euromonitor International.

(2) Nestle India's Response : Addressing a press conference on June 5, 2015, Nestle Global CEO, Paul Bulcke, said “they are always open to factory check by authorities (“As it happened: Nestle CEO Paul Bulcke addresses concerns on Maggi row,” 2015) (See press conference video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbON9reitvs>). During the mid of June 2015, the company arranged visit of media to their manufacturing facility at Moga in Punjab and Hassangarh in Haryana (Mookerji, 2015).

The official statement of the company on the company website (“Nestle,” 2015b) said :

Maggi noodles are completely safe and have been trusted in India for over 30 years. The trust of our consumers and the safety of our products is our first priority. Unfortunately, recent developments and unfounded concerns about the product have led to an environment of confusion for the consumer, to such an extent that we have decided to withdraw the product off the shelves, despite the product being safe. We promise that the trusted Maggi noodles will be back in the market as soon as the current situation is clarified. (para 1)

Suresh Narayanan, Managing Director, Nestle India (the first Indian born head of Nestle India in 16 years appointed on August 1, 2015), said the company would engage more actively with regulators in the country. Nestle had set up internally, a digital platform called 'Employee Advocacy' to encourage employees to talk about the big and small things that they do, what engages them, and how they contribute to quality at the company. Narayanan planned a 24/7 consumer helpline, more active engagement on social media, and a revitalization of what he described as "an organization in agony" (“Nestle sets out plans for Maggi comeback in Indian market,” 2015). Nestle India requested employees and their families to act as the company's brand ambassador in the hard times. Moreover, company posted the responses to frequently asked questions and apprehensions of Indian consumers on its Indian website (See link : <https://www.nestle.in/aboutus/ask-nestle/answers/maggi-noodles-india-msg-lead-ban-recall>).

Narayanan said the company started spending “more on advertising, marketing and promotions across categories to counter the impact on sales caused by the Maggi ban.” Nestle's advertising expenditure on chocolates, including Kit Kat and Munch, increased by over ₹ 50 crore in the past one year, said a person familiar with the company's advertising budget (Mitra & Chaudhary, 2015). Moreover, the company launched a new commercial celebrating 100 years in India to gain consumer trust, although not featuring Maggi noodles. The 92 second commercial has been floating around on the social media platforms, titled 'Nestle: A Part of India's Life for 100 Years' (Nestle [Nirvana Films], 2015 ; "Nestle celebrates 100 years in India with new commercial," 2015) . The video takes the viewers through a journey of Nestle in India, starting from 1912, when the Swiss giant first entered the Indian market.

(3) Impact of Maggi Ban : Share price of Nestle India dropped by 15-20% on the closing of first week of June 2015. The ban on Maggi showed up in Nestle India earnings as it reported a net loss of ₹ 644 million in the quarterly (April - June, 2015) results due to recall of Maggi noodles stock from trade partners and market. Due to the controversy, net sales decreased by 17% ; whereas, net profit plunged by 52% in the year 2015 as compared to 2014 as shown in the Table 1 (“Nestle India Q3 profit plunges 60% to ₹ 124 crore,” 2015) .

Table 1 . Nestle India's Financial Results

	Three Months Ended Accounting Year ended						
	31.12.15 (Audited)	30.09.15 (Un-audited)	30.06.2015 (Un-audited)	31.03.2015 (Un-audited)	31.12.14 (Audited)	31.12.2015 (Audited)	31.12.2014
Net Sales (₹ million)	19,594.6	17,423.6	19,570.1	25,164.8	25,309.4	81,232.7	98548.4
Net Profit (₹ million)	1,831.9	1,242.0	(644)	3,202.8	3,263.8	5632.7	11846.9
EPS (in ₹)	19.00	12.88	(6.68)	33.22	33.85	58.42	122.87

Nestle. (n.d. b.). Financial results. Retrieved from <https://www.nestle.in/investors/stockandfinancials/financialresults>

According to industry estimates, Nestle India destroyed stocks of Maggi noodles worth ₹ 3200 million ; whereas, the brand valuation of Maggi brand was hit by around ₹ 12000 million. The ₹ 25000 million sales of Maggi noodles contributed to approximately 30% of the revenues of Nestle India (Mookerji, 2015).

Approximately 1500 workers engaged in the production of Maggi at Nestle had been re-deployed and engaged in other activities ; whereas Paras Spices, a major supplier of spices, retrenched 300 temporary workers due to the stoppage of 200 -250 tonne supply to Nestle (Kamal, 2015) . According to Nestle India, the ban impacted 3.97 lakh wheat farmers, 15000 spice farmers besides 10000 employees of its suppliers and 3000 contract workers (“Nestle sells 3.3 crore packs of Maggi in 10 days,” 2015).

An FIR (First Information Report) was registered against the Hindi film stars Amitabh Bachchan, Madhuri Dixit, and Priety Zinta for endorsing the Maggi brand (“Maggi row: Court directs FIR against Amitabh Bachchan, Madhuri Dixit and Priety Zinta,” 2015).

Nestle India ended its contract with the lone third party producer of its Maggi instant noodles, SAJ Food Products, which meant that the Swiss food giant will no longer outsource production of the popular snack brand that was recently recalled on safety concerns. Analysts felt that Nestle's decision to end its 12 year contract with SAJ could be part of a move to increase focus on quality after ban by FSSAI (Mukherjee & Malviya, 2015).

(4) Other Nestle Controversies : Although Nestle is considered a reputed company across the globe, yet it faced controversies on certain famous products.

(i) Nestle Kit Kat and Greenpeace : In 2010, Nestle had a run in with Greenpeace. Greenpeace is a global environmental organization. Greenpeace accused Nestle, maker of Kit Kat, that it used palm oil from companies that are trashing Indonesian rainforests, threatening the livelihoods of local people, and pushing orangutans towards extinction. Greenpeace uploaded a video exhibiting how the consumption of Kit Kat is leading to extinction of orangutans on Youtube (See video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BCA8dQfGi0>). Nestle's initial response was to ask for a withdrawal of the video, claiming it to be infringement of copyright. Greenpeace then moved the video to Vimeo where it again went viral (“Nestle: Case of bad rumor management,” 2016) . According to Greenpeace website, Nestle finally gave in to Greenpeace's attacks after 1.5 million views of the video, 0.2 million emails, and countless Facebook comments. Thereafter, Nestle developed a plan which will identify and remove companies in their supply chain with links to deforestation.

(ii) Larvae in Nestle Milk Powder : During June 2015, it was reported that larvae were found in Nestle's NAN PRO3 milk powder. A report of the Food Analysis Laboratory in Coimbatore, India, confirmed that the sample contained 28 live larvae and 22 rice weevils. The report confirmed that the sample did not conform to standards specified under Regulation 2.1.9(5) of Food Safety and Standards (Food Products Standards and Food Additives) Regulations as it contained live insects. The sample of milk powder was then declared unsafe by the Tamil Nadu Food Safety Wing (“More Trouble for Nestle: Larvae found in milk powder in Tamil Nadu,” 2016) .

(5) Competitor's Response : The ₹ 35,000 million instant noodle industry in India shrunk after the recall of Maggi to ₹ 10,000 million (Dutta & Pinto, 2015). Fortunes changed dramatically for Yippee noodles after the country's food regulator, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) banned Maggi in June 2015, calling it “unsafe and hazardous”. According to estimates by market research analysts, ITC, after the ban of Maggi, commanded more than 50% of the instant noodles market in India (Mitra & Raj, 2015). Yippee is trying to address the quality concerns among target customers by designing a new advertising campaign communicating about the quality and safety norms followed in the manufacturing process (See advertisement at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4r55grqDOA> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4r55grqDOA>). During mid of 2015, Indo- Nissin re-launched Top Ramen in India. Earlier, the company had to withdraw its brand of noodles as per the instructions of FSSAI. Top Ramen highlighted the new variants of atta, oats, and safety aspect in full page advertisements of leading newspapers (Pinto, 2015).

During the second week of June 2015, HUL decided to recall Knorr instant noodles (launched in March 2015) from the Indian market due to the pending product approval from FSSAI (“Pending approval from FSSAI, HUL withdraws Knorr noodles,” 2015).

Baba Ramdev's Patanjali Ayurved launched vegetable atta noodles at 30% price lower than that of Maggi noodles. Patanjali's veg atta noodles are priced at ₹ 15 for a 70 gm pack against Maggi's veg atta noodles earlier price of ₹ 25 for a 80 gm pack (Sinha & Singh, 2015). Patanjali Ayurved has already launched its noodles across India (Rawat, 2015).

(6) Current Developments : In August 2015, the Bombay High Court set aside the food regulator's FSSAI nationwide ban on Maggi noodles, and told the manufacturer that it will be allowed to resume production and sales once the popular snack is retested and cleared for consumption by the approved laboratories of India. The Bombay High Court called the FSSAI ban on Maggi arbitrary and in violation of natural justice. Moreover, the Supreme Court gave a landmark judgement in favour of the food industry and quashed the FSSAI's advisory on product approvals issued in 2013 (Bhasin, 2015).

In light of the Bombay High Court order, Nestle India Limited questioned the jurisdiction of the apex consumer court to continue the ₹ 6400 million suit filed by the Department of Consumer Affairs against it for alleged unfair trade practices pertaining to Maggi noodles ("Maggi ban: Nestle questions NCDRC's jurisdiction to try suit," 2015).

Rival brands are orienting their strategies after Nestle India re-launched Maggi noodles. ITC, maker of Yippee noodles, is planning to launch new variants. CG Foods, maker of Wai Wai noodles, is planning to launch a national advertising campaign (Dutta & Pinto, 2015).

Nestle India launched a digital marketing campaign “We miss you too”. This advertising campaign included five advertisements, that is, we miss you gajar (carrot), pitaji (father), mom (see advertisement at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63FXWBVqjuo>), neighbours (see advertisement at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w1myYavVsE> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w1myYavVsE>), and menu card (see advertisement at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjYA6V9tdbI>).

Samples of the instant noodles tested in the three NABL accredited laboratories in Mohali, Jaipur, and Hyderabad on the orders of the Bombay High Court found Maggi safe as the levels of “Lead” were much below the permissible limit (Sarkar, 2015). Shares of Nestle India soared by 6-7% reacting to the news of lab results. The company released full page print advertisements in leading national dailies after being declared safe by the NABL accredited laboratories. Moreover, print advertisements claimed that Maggi has been declared safe for consumption by food standards authority of USA, Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore (see newspaper advertisements of “Your Maggi is safe, has always been at http://www.afaqs.com/advertising/creative_showcase/index.html?id=54465&media=Print&type=Indian).

Nestle India also launched the video advertisements “Your Maggi is safe, has always been” on the Facebook

page of Meri Maggi, in which mothers are endorsing their decision to allow cooking and eating Maggi by their kids (see video advertisements #LetYourMomKnow at <https://www.facebook.com/merimaggi>). Maggi advertisements did not include celebrities in the comeback advertisement campaign.

On November 9, 2015, Nestle India re-launched Maggi in 100 towns through 300 distributors. Maggi got a good initial response from the consumers, which is reflected not only by offline sales from retail stores but also by the flash sales of 60000 welcome kits (pack of 12 Maggi Masala noodles) of Maggi on Snapdeal within 5 minutes of launch ("60,000 Maggi kits sold out in 5 minutes on Snapdeal, 2015) (see at <http://www.snapdeal.com/flash-sale/nestle/maggi>). Maggi launched the same product but with new label written on it "Our commitment to GOODNESS you can always TRUST with Quality Ingredients". Moreover, Nestle India removed "No Added MSG" from the new pack of Maggi. According to a report in Economic Times, Nestle India sold around 33 million packets in 10 days of its launch. Although Maggi was far behind its own benchmark of 77% market share during January 2015, yet the brand regained the number 1 slot in a year's time by securing 42% market share as compared to 33% market share by ITC Sunfeast Yipee (Bhushan, 2016).

On March 11, 2016, district food safety authorities in Barabanki district of Uttar Pradesh found fresh samples of Maggi noodles to be sub-standard with more than the permitted levels of ash content. Nestle India dismissed the claim saying that the food authorities applied wrong testing standards on wrong product to yield misleading results. On the same day, Nestle India shares fell 0.23 % and closed at ₹ 55166.05.

Dilemma

Top executives at Nestle India believed that the company handled the crisis in an effective manner. Although Maggi has got good initial response from consumers, yet the brand managers are contemplating on appropriate communication strategy for Maggi. Has Nestle India timely responded to the crisis? Has Maggi been able to rebuild trust among consumers?

Managerial Implications

The case study highlights how a company can use various communication tools and techniques during a crisis for regaining trust among the target customers. Potential managers can understand the importance of different stakeholders while planning communication during crisis. Managers can learn about the relation between initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation of the brand.

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