



WITHDRAW THE PRODUCT

IT'S A TRUISM that we don't know what we've got until it's gone. Sometimes a product becomes so familiar that we become blasé about it—and sometimes sales fall as a result. This often happens with products that we remember from our childhood, the traditional homely products that we don't buy anymore but would hate to see disappear.

A threat to withdraw such a product could well provoke an outcry—as happened when Coca-Cola withdrew the traditional Coke recipe in favor of an “improved” recipe. Despite the fact that consumers preferred the flavor of the new formula, the company had not reckoned with the iconic status of the product (perhaps surprisingly, since Coca-Cola have always promoted the product for its traditional qualities). The lesson of Coca-Cola was not lost, however.

The idea

Salad cream is a traditional British salad dressing, having a flavor and texture somewhere between vinaigrette and mayonnaise. For almost 100 years it has been the salad dressing of choice in Britain, but during the latter part of the twentieth century it began to be replaced by mayonnaise. In 2000, H. J. Heinz announced that their salad cream would be withdrawn due to falling sales.

The media immediately leaped on the story, and the public outcry that ensued created a mass of publicity for the product. Sales revived dramatically, and the product now has its own website, complete with a chef (Dan Green) creating recipes for the product. Pouring it over limp lettuce is a thing of the past—Green offers recipes for

beef wraps, spaghetti nicoise, couscous with wok-fried vegetables, and many more. The website points out that salad cream has 66 percent less fat than mayonnaise, a notable benefit in the health-conscious twenty-first century.

There is no question of the product being withdrawn now—sales have soared, and Heinz are now investing £5 million a year in promoting the brand. Ad agency Leo Burnett have produced an innovative and entertaining series of advertisements, and salad cream is now firmly back in the mainstream.

In practice

- This approach only works with well-known, iconic products.
- The news media must become involved—without publicity, there will be no public outcry.
- You must be prepared to follow up quickly with conventional advertising and other promotion when the publicity is at its peak.
- Care needs to be taken that people do not feel “conned” by the promotion.
- You may need to consider other ways to revive the product, in conjunction with the threatened withdrawal—Heinz promoted new ways of using salad cream, in innovative recipes.