CASE V-B
Role of Public Relations in the Alar Scare
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David Fenton was given a difficult task in October 1988: to get the public interested in yet another study by an activist group with a small budget. The group was the 100,000-member Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the study was entitled “Intolerable Risk: Pesticides in Our Children’s Food.” At issue was the effect of the pesticide Alar on cancer rates in young children. For a fee of $25,000 (Anthan 1990), Fenton attacked the challenge with vigor, and met with huge, but controversial, success.

Fenton’s work began when he agreed to promote the group’s announcement that children were being exposed to the pesticide Alar beyond recommended levels, according to NRDC calculations. Alar, the trade name of the chemical daminozide, acts as a growth retardant to keep apples on the tree longer and preserve them on the way to market, producing redder fruit with a longer shelf life (1989).

However, exposure to an excess amount of Alar is linked with cancer, and the EPA has established strict levels acceptable for human consumption. Unlike pesticides, Alar is absorbed into the fruit, making it impossible to wash off. NRDC contended that children were at risk of receiving too much Alar for two reasons: the disproportionate number of apples they eat and their smaller body size.

Fenton’s goal was to create a story “to achieve a life of its own” (1989, 9). Obtaining this goal required deal making not unlike that of a Hollywood press agent. An agreement was made with 60 Minutes to allow breaking the story on February 26, 1989. Interviews with monthly magazines, which operate on the industry’s longest lead times, were booked months in advance to ensure publication at the peak of the talk-show appearances by recruited celebrities.

Media exposure of the Alar announcement included the covers of Time (Toufexis 1989), Newsweek (Beck 1989; Begley and Hagar 1989) and Consumer Reports (1989). Fenton also claimed credit for placing the story on Good Morning America, Today, CBS This Morning, Donahue, and the network newscasts. Additional coverage came on the cover of USA Today and in other newspapers, as well as in U.S. News & World Report (Siberner 1989), People, Redbook, Family Circle, Woman’s Day, and New Woman magazines.

Other methods were used to spread the message. A 900 phone number was installed to give consumers up-to-the-minute information on the Alar situation. Meryl Streep and cast members from the television shows thirtysomething and L.A. Law joined news conferences. Streep conducted sixteen interviews by satellite with local anchors in major television markets and testified before a U.S. Senate subcommittee on Alar’s use.

Controversy over the message came almost immediately, while controversy over the method soon followed. The initial 60 Minutes report opened with Ed Bradley
making an assertion called a “flat-out lie” by the Washington Apple Commission. He began:

The most potent cancer-causing agent in our food supply is a substance sprayed on apples to keep them on trees longer and make them look better. That’s the conclusion of a number of scientific experts. And who is most at risk? Children who may someday develop cancer from this one chemical called daminozide.” (Warren 1989, 1)

The 60 Minutes segment was viewed by approximately 30 million viewers. This report and the resulting intense coverage led to a scare in the marketplace. Actions taken included the banning of apples by several school systems, including New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and the opening of pesticide-free produce sections in grocery stores, actions that Fenton claims occurred as a result of his publicity.

“Our goal was to create so many repetitions of NRDC’s message that average American consumers (not just the policy elite in Washington) could not avoid hearing it—from many different outlets within a short period of time. The idea was for the story to achieve a life of its own and continue for weeks and months to affect policy and consumer habits.” (1989, 9)

Evidently the strategy succeeded in that respect. The spokesperson for the Chicago Board of Education, Bob Saigh, blamed a “media stampede” on the Chicago school system’s decision to ban apples in its cafeterias.

Why the intense media publicity and the massive public reaction surrounding the findings? The effect of Alar was not a recent discovery. In fact, in 1973 tests on animals showed its carcinogenic qualities, and the EPA had earlier tried to ban it.

Theories of the media’s fascination with the Alar announcement abound. Newsweek’s environmental reporter suggested that perhaps the attraction to the media was what Hitchcock played out in his movie The Birds: one of our deepest-seated fears is that the benign will suddenly turn menacing (Carlson 1989). Forensic psychiatrist Park Dietz suggested that “part of what happened here is something characteristic of all mass hysteria incidents, a perceived threat to children or childbearing. Then there is the element of invisible hazards. Here you have the issues of children and invisibility. They were very powerful” (Warren 1989, 1).

Peter Sandman, former director of the Environmental Communication Research Program at Rutgers University, thinks it was the made-for-media symbolism of the apple. “Apples are a symbol of innocence and innocence betrayed. Kids eat them. There’s the Adam and Eve story and Snow White” (Haddix 1990, 44).

When a well-orchestrated media campaign threatened to challenge the age-old assumption that “An apple a day keeps the doctor away,” the media appeal was irresistible.

The media rarely, if ever, revealed that the information they were airing came from the NRDC’s point of view. Chemical industry spokesperson Elizabeth Whelan was, by her own count, quoted in or interviewed on the Alar issue by the two U.S. wire services, several newspapers including the Chicago Tribune and the Washington Post, two news services, and talk shows such as Larry King Live, without the
media once mentioning that she was funded by industry sources, including Uniroyal Chemical Company, the manufacturer of Alar (Kurtz 1990). In an interview for *Columbia Journalism Review*, Whelan said that to worry about such matters is “chilling the discussion,” adding that “Everyone is funded by someone” (Kurtz 1990, 44).

Eventually, however, the strategy backfired. In October, 1989, the *Wall Street Journal* (1989) used a leaked memorandum between Fenton and the NRDC in an unattributed editorial that ran under the headline “How a PR Firm Executed the Alar Scare.” The confidential memo obtained by the *Wall Street Journal* outlined the strategies used by Fenton, but taken out of context it looked less like strategy than manipulation. Media watchdog groups, such as Accuracy in Media, jumped on the issue, spending thousands of dollars getting the “real” Alar story out to their constituencies, and trying to force CBS chairman Laurence Tisch to retract the original *60 Minutes* story.

The result was an unwanted type of publicity for the NRDC. Its executive director, John Adams, later told a reporter for the *Washington Post*, “We wanted to get a maximum amount of coverage. What we did instead was that we blew it. We got everybody angry at us. I’ll never let myself get in this situation again” (Haddix 1990, 45).

Predictably, the apple industry struck back with a $2 million campaign launched by the apple growers. Full-page ads appeared on Friday, March 10 in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *Los Angeles Times*, asserting that a person would have to eat 28,000 pounds of Alar-treated apples a day for seventy years to obtain a dose of the chemical comparable to that given the laboratory mice in the NRDC study. By March 14, the ad had run in several dozen other newspapers (Warren 1989).

Other countermeasures were tried as well. The public relations firm of Hill and Knowlton was hired to counter the negative publicity. Both the EPA and the FDA publicly disputed the report. But even while working with a bigger budget, the apple growers’ efforts lacked the media impact of the campaign designed by Fenton. “We got rolled,” explains Hill and Knowlton’s Frank Mankiewicz. “When you’re dealing with a nutritionist named Meryl Streep, you haven’t got a chance.”

Many consumers were not convinced by the rebuttals. By the fall of 1989, the effect of the first apple crop without Alar was being felt, particularly in the Northeast, where the McIntosh apple, a variety particularly susceptible to early dropping, was down more than a million bushels, forcing some growers out of the apple business. Two years later, one Colorado legislator would introduce a bill in the Colorado House of Representatives that would make it a crime to disseminate “false information . . . which casts doubts on the safety of any perishable agricultural food product” (Goodman 1991). Years later in the fall 1996 issues of *Columbia Journalism Review*, the controversy still brewed with claims that the scare was for real, and a long letter to the editor from Whelan in the following issue stated the industry’s position once again.

When questioned in 1989 about his tactics, Fenton says that the methods differed only slightly from the marketing campaigns of the corporations that are polluting the environment with their products. “These corporations spend millions on their cam-
campaigns and when a small group attempts to use the same methods, they get criticized” (Fenton 1989). Clayton Yeutter, agriculture secretary at the time of the incident, is among those who disagree, calling Fenton’s methods “environmental terrorism” (Anthan 1990).

As for the leaked document, Fenton says that the biases of the Wall Street Journal are well-known and that “they do this type of thing all the time” (Fenton 1989). He refused to share any of the rest of the information in the memo, saying that it was proprietary information belonging to the NRDC. Lorraine Voles, national coordinator of Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits, the group that secured the services of Streep, echoed the sentiments of Fenton: “I think those tactics (used by Fenton) have to be used. It’s like handicapping yourself if you don’t do it” (Haddix 1990, 45).

**Micro Issues:**

1. Did the techniques used by Fenton appear to be overly aggressive? If so, in what way? From what you know, were the tactics justified by the evidence?
2. Is there an alternate approach that would go beyond the frequently ignored press release yet stop short of creating the widespread consumer concern caused by this campaign?
3. Was the Wall Street Journal justified in exposing the confidential memo?
4. Is a representative such as Whelan obligated to inform interviewers of the funding for her organization even if she is not asked?

**Mid-range Issues:**

1. The headline of the Wall Street Journal op-ed piece claimed that Fenton’s organization executed the scare. From what you have read in this case study, is that correct or is that an overstatement? What statements, if any, in the case lead you to believe that the scare was executed by Fenton?
2. Fenton’s organization managed the Alar story, including timing the breaking of the story, making spokespersons available for interviews, staging press conferences, and the like. Does that amount of management affect the truthfulness of the story?
3. You are a journalist seeking to write a story about Alar. Of what use are celebrities like Streep and the casts of L.A. Law and thirtysomething to the story? Do you interview them? Do you accept their expertise on the issue? Is the fact that celebrities are being used to spread the message a story in itself?
4. Of the media that ran the story, is there a difference in the amount of fact checking that should be done by the staff of 60 Minutes and the staff of Oprah before airing a story about the apples? Are the editorial expectations in a story such as this different for Redbook than for Newsweek?
5. Were the media guilty of hyping the Alar story since it contained the pathos and good visuals required for airing or publication?
Chapter V

Macro Issues:

1. If you were in the position of helping to publicize an issue like the Alar issue, how important would it be to you to be on the side you perceive to be correct? Could you, for instance, take the apple growers’ money in this case? Could you take the NRDC’s money? If the issue were abortion, could you help either side? Gun control? Toxic-waste disposal?

2. Before issuing a news release, should the public relations practitioner weigh the consequences, such as the farmers going bankrupt? In light of the government’s assurances that the apples were safe, was the action of Fenton Communications morally justifiable?

3. What should be the relationship between public relations and the news? Should public relations press releases be identified as such? Should they always be rewritten if they are used? Should the facts be checked by the media?

4. Should news be labeled as originating from a point of view? Could the average reader or viewer have known the individual biases of the NRDC? Of Whelan? Of Streep?