
Case Study 1

Discovering The Launch Date for A Competitor's New Product

What our client needed

A number of press reports had announced that our client's competitor was about to launch a new product. Our client wanted to know the date of this launch.

How did we get it?

We knew – from the press reports – that the launch was going to be high profile. Several newspapers had published articles about the forthcoming product – as part of the pre-launch publicity. From these sources, we knew what the product was and what it offered. We even had a good idea what it would look like – from the photographs accompanying the press articles. What we – and our client – did not know was the actual launch date.

Our first calls were to the journalists concerned. Although our client's competitor had briefed these journalists, none had been given the exact launch date. All they knew (or were willing to say) was that the launch was going to be within a couple of months.

The next step was to call other companies who would have known details about the launch. These included the competitor's PR agency (whose name was available on company Press Releases), advertising agency, and packaging supplier. (The packaging supplier involved some guesswork. We first had to identify major packaging companies, with the capacity to supply the type of packaging that would be required – and then find out if they had been contracted to do the work). As well as suppliers, we also talked to some customers – for example, supermarket managers. The supermarkets would need to allocate space for the new product – and so accordingly would need to know when the product would arrive onto their shelves.

We also called the competitor company directly – saying that we were interested in the press reports, and was there any more information available.

Customers contacted did not have exact information required, while the competitor's suppliers had been appropriately briefed – and refused to give any information out about the launch. All suggested that we speak directly to the company for further information.

We telephoned the company, and said that we were interested in the press reports about the new product – and was there any more information available that could be sent to us. There was not – and we said that was a shame. We then asked a bit about the press information – totally innocuous and non-threatening questions. We concluded with *"This sounds really exciting – when will we be able to get hold of the product in the shops"*. And we were given the date!

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How was the information used?

Our client's product was equivalent to the new competitor product. The danger of the launch was that customers would think that the new product was superior as it had come out later. If they were not reminded about our client's product benefits there was a risk that they could switch products to the later arrival. Accordingly, our client wanted to hold back advertising until the actual launch – when they could begin a parallel advertising campaign that would keep their product in customers' minds.

Lessons to be learned

A number of lessons can be learned from this work.

1. Pre-launch publicity for products can be dangerous if there are existing products on the market. You forewarn competitors, who can then damage the success of your actual launch.
2. It is important that all suppliers are made to sign confidentiality agreements and that they act on these, referring all enquiries regarding clients' products back to the company concerned. In this example, suppliers were exemplary in their refusal to supply information. However this is not always the case.
3. The company itself needs to have a counter-intelligence process in place. When we phoned, we could only speak to a departmental secretary rather than the relevant product manager who was away. It is possible that the product manager would have been more aware of the importance of the launch date and that this should not be divulged. However, if this was the case, he had not briefed his secretary who, instead, followed the company maxim, that everybody is a customer and should be helped where possible.

(Note: It is important to stress the difference between published information, such as brochures, and similar literature distributed routinely to customers, and the sort of information we were seeking which should have been viewed as confidential. Companies do need to supply information to potential customers. However this should be authorised, and if there is any doubt about providing information, then contact details should be taken so that somebody with the relevant authority can get back to the caller. Otherwise there is a risk that inaccurate or, as in this case, sensitive information will be made public. Another case example – Due Diligence – looks at the dangers of not providing any information).

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