Introduction

Bernard Matthews is the largest turkey producer in the UK. The business has grown substantially since its relatively humble origins in 1950, when Bernard Matthews bought 20 turkey eggs and a second-hand incubator. 12 turkeys successfully hatched from this initial batch and before long, the young entrepreneur was able to give up his insurance job and concentrate full-time on rearing turkeys.

Today, Bernard Matthews rears over seven million turkeys every year. 13 million UK households buy a Bernard Matthews Farms branded product each year. Despite the size of its operations, the company remains close to its roots in East Anglia with its farms located across Norfolk, Suffolk and Lincolnshire. Bernard Matthews’ vision is 'to make turkey the preferred choice of protein for every day and every occasion'.

Bernard Matthews operates in a competitive and fast-changing environment. Consumers are faced with a huge choice of foods to suit different lifestyles, diets and tastes. However, in recent years, buying patterns have changed as consumers have become more concerned about healthy eating, food safety and animal welfare.

Chance events can have a significant impact on a food business. For example, Jamie Oliver’s high-profile campaign in 2005 to improve the quality of school meals singled out foods such as Bernard Matthews’ Turkey Twizzlers as being unhealthy. In 2007, there was an outbreak of bird flu at a Bernard Matthews farm in Suffolk. At this time, the media also discovered that the company imported some of its turkey from abroad. The press published stories that this could have been directly related to the outbreak, a theory that was never proved.

Initially, Bernard Matthews did not speak up and defend its product range, which offered affordable, tasty and convenient food for everyday working mums. This resulted in adverse press coverage and the company lost credibility with the media. When bird flu hit, relations with the media were at an all-time low. The company’s immediate reaction to the crisis was to focus on eliminating the disease, which it did successfully. Communications came low on the list of priorities. This meant that the resulting information ‘vacuum’ was soon filled with damaging and often inaccurate news reports.

Entrepreneur: Person who carries the risk in investing ideas and money in a business enterprise.

Vision: A motivating summary of what an organisation hopes or intends to achieve.
When the company realised the extent of the damage and finally opened up to the press it was too little, too late, as all trust had been lost. As a result, Bernard Matthews’ sales in the UK fell by 35% and the company went into a loss position.

In 2008, the company implemented a business turnaround programme. From a communications perspective this involved:
- more closely monitoring the changing environment in which the company operates
- understanding the customers’ needs better
- communicating in a transparent manner with all stakeholders to rebuild trust in the company.

This case study explores how Bernard Matthews has addressed the challenges of communicating with its customers and other important stakeholders.

What is communication?

The communication process involves a sender (who), transmitting information (what), in a form (how) so that the receiver will understand.

To communicate effectively, Bernard Matthews needs to be clear about the messages it wants to convey. It also has to:
- consider the intended receivers of the communication – its target audience
- seek out the most effective communication channels in order to be heard against the ‘noise’ of competing claims about healthy diets
- find ways to challenge the prejudices and preconceptions of consumers and other key target audiences.

Bernard Matthews firstly decided to focus messages on its core strengths and expertise – British turkey farming and providing great tasting turkey. The company committed to sourcing all its turkey meat from the UK. Additionally, it sold those parts of the business which diversified operations away from turkey.

Secondly, Bernard Matthews wanted to restore the reputation of the brand and challenge consumer misperceptions that turkey was just a processed food.

It would promote turkey as a tasty, versatile and healthy meat by improving consumer awareness through different communication methods. It also aimed to change consumers’ buying patterns by getting them to choose turkey as an everyday meat.

Barriers to communication

Anything that affects the smooth flow of information is known as ‘noise’. This might be, for example, the language used, an inappropriate use of technology or the different levels of skill and knowledge of the sender and receiver. For example, every day in the press and on TV, consumers are bombarded with often confusing or contradictory information about the health benefits or risks associated with different foods. Consumers may not have enough understanding or information to judge between conflicting messages. It is therefore not surprising that many people do not hear these messages and ‘switch off’.

Bernard Matthews had to overcome a considerable amount of direct ‘noise’ caused by the earlier negative press articles. By not responding to these immediately or correcting with facts, consumers were confused and the company lost credibility with the press and the public.

To achieve its vision and encourage consumers to eat turkey all year round, Bernard Matthews needed to give people more information in a way they could easily understand. It has therefore chosen to highlight key facts about turkey meat as the foundation for many of its messages. These include the facts that turkey is tasty and versatile, high in protein, vitamins and minerals and that turkey breast has the lowest saturated fat levels of mainstream meats. It is also an efficient and sustainable product to produce.

Communicating with internal stakeholders

The company needed to improve its communications with its internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders are those individuals and groups within the organisation. They include the employees, the managers and directors of the business and its owners or shareholders. Communications with internal stakeholders help to create a positive attitude within the company. This is particularly important when times are tough as employees may become de-motivated if they see negative stories about their company in the media.

Bernard Matthews aims to ensure that every employee understands the company’s business turnaround strategy and the steps it is taking to strengthen its brand.

Glossary

Stakeholders: Persons or groups with a direct interest in the decisions or behaviour of an organisation, such as shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, creditors, local community.

Noise: A barrier or filter that can distort or inhibit communication between the sender and receiver.

Sustainable: Where the supply chain, processes and products of a business do not compromise the environmental resources of future generations.
For example:

- It produces a bilingual weekly newsletter for all employees. This provides news on business developments.
- Staff also have access to news about the business on the company’s intranet site.
- Face-to-face meetings inform managers about progress and new initiatives.

Bernard Matthews is a private company. This means that it does not have the same legal obligations to publish formal, regular company reports as a public limited company would. However, it still keeps its owners and stakeholders informed through regular meetings and by publishing financial statements.

**Communicating with external stakeholders**

One of the most significant groups of external stakeholders is Bernard Matthews’ customers. However, other important external stakeholders include the government and regulatory bodies, the company’s suppliers, the media and the communities that live close to the company’s farms and operations.

Bernard Matthews’ communications programme aims to improve perceptions of the company and brand and to increase public awareness of turkey as a tasty, versatile and healthy meat. These are important parts of rebuilding trust with consumers and restoring the company’s reputation. Bernard Matthews uses written, visual and face-to-face forms of communication to get its messages across to external stakeholders.

**Advertising**

Bernard Matthews advertises on television and in the press. This is a powerful and effective way of getting a message to a wide audience. It helps to keep the brand in the minds of consumers. However, advertising is a one-way channel and needs follow-up, for example, through market research, in order to understand the impact it has.

In the past, Bernard Matthews’ advertising focused on its more processed products or Christmas range. However, its 2011 campaign not only promotes fresh turkey for the first time, it also emphasises its versatility, taste and low-fat benefits and that it can be enjoyed all year round. This builds on recent campaigns designed to reconnect the brand with its farming origins, containing messages such as ‘100% British turkey’.

**Internet and social media**

Bernard Matthews currently has four websites targeted at different audiences. These promote new products and the company’s farming credentials and publicise new initiatives and the health benefits of turkey:

- A corporate website that provides an overview of the business.
- A consumer site, giving information on the turkey product range.
- A Foodservice website, providing information to the catering trade, including pubs and schools.
- A campaigning website, Change Your Meat Not Your Menu (www.changeyoumeatnotyourmenu.co.uk), which supports Bernard Matthews’ drive to get consumers to make turkey part of their everyday meals.

Engaging with **online communities** through social media is also an important part of the company’s overall communication strategy. For example, the website ‘Mumsnet’ is a forum for parents to exchange ideas and share tips and advice. By engaging with discussion groups and blogs on ‘Mumsnet’, Bernard Matthews encouraged mothers in 2010 to discuss the value of including turkey in the family diet.
Media and public relations

Bernard Matthews also seeks to communicate indirectly with consumers by engaging with the media and other influential opinion formers. The management of Bernard Matthews regularly meets with journalists to ensure that they understand what the company is doing. For instance, these meetings may highlight the emphasis the company places on animal welfare or its approach to sustainability. By rearing all its turkeys in the UK and sourcing wheat for the majority of its feed from East Anglia, Bernard Matthews’ products have low food miles.

Bernard Matthews regularly issues press releases on new products and initiatives. They enable the media to understand and report accurately on what the company is doing. For example, one press release highlighted that it had removed all artificial colours, flavours and hydrogenated fats from its branded products. It has also lowered levels of saturated fats and salts. This message is reinforced by improved product labelling and use of the Quality British Turkey and Red Tractor quality marks. These symbols on food packaging form a small part of the company’s communications strategy by providing a guarantee of quality for consumers that words alone do not express. They show that the turkey meat comes from farms that meet high standards of food safety and hygiene, animal welfare and environmental protection.

The company also attempts to influence consumer opinion in a non-verbal way by using ‘celebrity status’ in its campaigns. Michelin-starred chef Marco Pierre White and Olympic gold medalist Rebecca Romero help to present the ‘Change your Meat not your Menu’ campaign. Their image helps convey the versatility, taste and health benefits of turkey. In addition, the company has previously held face-to-face sampling sessions to take its message directly to consumers. These events show consumers how versatile turkey is and how it can be used in everyday meals, not just as a traditional roast. They also give consumers the opportunity to try turkey for themselves and realise what a great tasting meat it is.

As the largest employer in East Anglia, Bernard Matthews also needs to build relationships in the local community through its corporate responsibility strategy and community-led projects:
- Bernard Matthews provides educational sponsorship support and mentoring for several local schools.
- It has launched a youth awards scheme for young people in Norfolk and Suffolk to recognise individuals with outstanding talent and community spirit.
- It works with the Norfolk Community Fund, supporting local charities and organisations in the local community.

Conclusion

In mass consumer markets, such as food, businesses need to use a range of channels to communicate effectively with all stakeholders. They also need to respond to changes in consumer tastes and opinions and challenge any misconceptions or inaccurate stories in the media.

It is still a little early to evaluate the full effects of the change in Bernard Matthews’ communications strategy. However, there are already clear indicators that the company’s integrated marketing and advertising campaign is turning around the earlier negative opinion in the media. It is improving consumer perceptions of the brand and is starting to regain the trust of its stakeholders:
- Press coverage has improved as the company has rebuilt trust and relationships with the media and become more open and transparent.
- Some major retailers are starting to increase the visibility of turkey products in store.
- Sales of turkey, fresh turkey in particular, are increasing. In 2010, turkey consumption rose by 9% year-on-year, the biggest increase since 1996.

Questions

1. Using an example, describe what is meant by ‘noise’ within the communications process.
2. Explain, with examples, the different communications channels a business might use to reach consumers.
3. Analyse how Bernard Matthews changed its business strategies and discuss why it needed to emphasise the importance of communications.
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the various ways in which Bernard Matthews communicates with external stakeholders.