White Paper

Tylenol (Acetaminophen) Poisoning & How it Changed Medicine Today

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Introduction

Prior to the crisis that changed medical industries throughout the nation, Tylenol was the leading over-the-counter product within the United States in regards to the one hundred million users. Being a part of the Johnson & Johnson company, according to Fortune, Tylenol was accountable for nineteen percent of their corporate profits during its first three quarters in 1982. In that same period, an attack was placed upon the company, for reasons still unknown to this day. This was done by replacing Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules with cyanide-laced capsules, resealing all of the tampered packages and putting them on the shelves of over a half-dozen pharmacies and local food stores for consumers to purchase in the Chicago area. Within one day and seven unsuspecting deaths later, McNeil Consumer Products Company, which makes Tylenol, abruptly, and with no warning, was in the spotlight for explaining to thousands of people in the U.S why it’s long-time dependable product was suddenly killing people. The media’s overwhelming reporting that went hand-in-hand with this continued to spiral out of hand by focusing solely on the deaths that were made available to the public. This fueled fear in thousands of American consumers and their overall protection for themselves and loved ones when it came to over-the-counter drug purchases and consumption.

It was evident that through this crisis, Johnson & Johnson instilled a forgiveness and sympathy strategy to gain forgiveness back from the numerous publics affected by this while also creating acceptance for the crisis as a whole. This was a big component in regaining the public’s trust back into the brand’s name and for the company as a whole to boost its image back. The Johnson & Johnson Tylenol crisis exemplifies how a company handling such a major and detrimental crisis can come back with more respect and profits than ever imagined.


Background

Having been such an extraordinary and profitable business, there seemed to be no reason for worry through the eyes of James Burke, CEO of Johnson & Johnson, and his successful industry. It was reported in Fortune that, “Earnings were up to 16.7% in 1981, and 1982 looked even better. In fact, Burke’s main concern at the executive committee’s annual three day-strategic planning review was that things were going too well.” While discussing any future crisis occurrences that is inevitable to come up with any company, nobody in the conference could think of, let alone imagine any downsides to this booming business.

On the tragic morning of September 29, 1982, a horrific medical mystery was created from a simple sore throat and stuffy nose. The murders came to life when Mary Kellerman, a 12-year old girl from a suburb of Chicago brought attention to her parents about her sore throat and runny nose, like thousands of schoolchildren complain to their parents about. By giving her just one Extra-Strength Tylenol capsule that was unknowingly laced with the deathly potassium cyanide, Mary was dead within hours of consuming. She was only the first. Within that same week, her death would send a national panic to purchasers of this widely consumed product. Within months, it completely changed the way people purchased and consumed over-the-counter medications.

On the same horrendous day, another victim was found in Arlington Heights, Illinois with what was thought to be a massive heart attack but later was found to be the vastly spreading cyanide poisoning that took Adam Janus’s life at only 27-years old. Janus’ brother and his brother’s wife were also victims of this poisoning after complaining of headaches while grieving over the loss of Adam. A few short days later, three more mysterious deaths occurred within the
Illinois area, 35-year old Mary McFarland, 35-year old Paula Prince and 27-year-old Mary Weiner all in which were similar fatalities from consuming Extra-Strength Tylenol shortly before they died. As the death toll for these innocent lives grew, so did the confusion for those investigating this crime to bring these killings to an end.

By the following morning, toxicology tests examined each death and came to the conclusion that the capsules were found to hold potassium cyanide. After each individual was tested to see if there were any similar traits within their deaths, it was confirmed that there was an overwhelming amount of cyanide in the blood of each victim. As shown in Figure 1, the Extra-Strength Tylenol pictured on the left is what a normal capsule looks like from the outside while still in one piece to when it is crushed or dissolved when consumed. The Extra-Strength Tylenol pictured on the right is what a Cyanide induced capsule looks like. It is very clear how they differentiate from one another by the texture and roughness between the two. Although it is clear when comparing the two side by side, any consumer that purchased one of these bottles at that time would never have taken any extra precaution to notice this life-ending difference of capsules.

Action was quickly taken by the Johnson & Johnson company as well as those in the surrounding area to put a halt to this disastrous issue. As shown in Figure 2, Tylenol capsules were removed from numerous shelves by local authorities and drugstore clerks in pharmacies around the area after the tampering in 1986. This went to the extent of going door-to-door to collect any recently purchased medicine from homes in the neighborhoods where people may have purchased tainted bottles. Making the necessary move to recall all capsule versions of the product, which according to The New York Times, reached a massive amount of more than 31 million bottles, would cost Johnson & Johnson $100 million before-tax write-off. This was extremely unusual for being such a large corporation facing a crisis. In various other cases with companies of similar size, it was noticed that the company would always put themselves first, and ended up doing more harm towards their reputation than intended. This was not the case with Johnson & Johnson who took full responsibility from the beginning for the crisis and immediately wanted to better the situation for the greater good of the consumers. With the public being fully aware of how defenseless everyone was to such a wide-spread attack, paranoia swept the nation. Poison control centers packed rooms to the brim while hospitals received over 700
calls in just one day. Burke was in the leading position to manage his company through this unthinkable crisis.

While it was the mission of many to put these killings to an ultimate end, the tampering brought upon Tylenol inspired numerous copycat incidents throughout the U.S, making it even more difficult to stop. The Food and Drug Administration reported a total of 270 different cases that dealt with this constantly growing issue. Ranging from rat poisoning to hydrochloric acid, the wide-spread copycat incidents sickened hundreds of people throughout the country. This went as far as families banning trick-or-treating in their neighborhoods due to food tampering when parents reported finding sharp pins placed into various well-known Halloween candy packages. From years of brand building and image gaining to one incident that diminished everything they had worked towards within a few months, Johnson & Johnson took matters into their own hands.

From the beginning, the company found itself to grow closer to the press to utilize ways of getting their information out as well as boosting their business for Tylenol. Burke was aware of the dangers of trying to manage the media during this time and was firm through his statements to only speak the truth and not give false hope or information that would hurt him and his company further. The media reports began to rise and focused mainly on the deaths of American citizens from such a well-known company. Giving such a negative association with Tylenol and its company, the media was relentless in reporting about the killings and sparked fear in thousands across the U.S. It was however essential at this point to get out as much information to the public to prevent any further panic than what had already occurred.
As shown in Figure 3, this feature released in the Fortune newspapers on November 1982 depicts the effort Johnson & Johnson made to save the Tylenol brand’s reputation and is a testament to Burke’s sympathy in the face of an unimaginable crisis. This one image gave immense amounts of hope to thousands of people who were distraught and to those who had already lost loved ones from this unforgettable event.

Within the short few weeks that followed, the company was put through intensifying trauma from which it still hasn’t fully recovered. Regardless of the company’s widespread reach, this unforgiving event had major repercussions. Focusing towards the beginning in 1960, McNeil consumer Products, the maker of Tylenol, made sure to promote the product to various doctors and pharmacists as an alternative source of medication for people who suffer any side effects that came from aspirin. Fortune brought attention and acknowledgement to this company in becoming more progressive in their advertising with the public. Prior to the events that occurred, Tylenol had a 35% share of the $1-billion analgesic market. According to this source, Tylenol contributed 7% of Johnson & Johnson’s total worldwide sales and accounted for 15% to 20% of its overall profits from 2011. Just before this outbreak occurred, McNeil executives were assured that Tylenol was on pace to take over 50% of the market share within the next three years.
Solution

When handling the situation, Johnson & Johnson decided to strike back quickly. A spokesman for the company stated, “There were a lot of suggestions from the outside that the product name was dead, but we decided not to abandon it.” Working side-by-side with FDA officials, they established tamper-proof packaging that had foil seals and other new traits that would be obvious to the consumer if there were any issues of any sort with the product, as shown in Figure 4. Through developing this new product protection to minimize any risks to the medication itself while also securing their customers overall well-being, this new creation soon became an industry standard for all over-the-counter drugs. The results of this incident dramatically improved the way packaging was handled throughout the nation, reducing the number of fatalities. Developing the safety seal concept as a result of the Tylenol incident has created an entire new industry in itself. Tamper evident seals are now on many products outside of over-the-counter medication. From opening a bottle of orange juice to specialty packing tape, developing methods to indicate and deter tampering has been developed as a direct result of this epidemic. Unfortunately, the Tylenol brand had to bear the negative spotlight that lead to the development of this product safety protocol, but the implementation of this practice has surely saved lives since this case occurred.

Defying all the odds against the Tylenol name, Johnson & Johnson also initiated price cuts and a new and improved version of their capsules, called the “caplet” which was an easy-to-swallow gelatin that helped purchasers of this product consume the caplet while also diminishing any risk to be tampered with. This brought ease to American consumers all over the U.S in minimizing concerns of unsafe or in this case fatal outcomes after consumption.

**Persuasion**

When commenting on the ideal way to handle such a catastrophic crisis for this company, Fortune states, “James Burke of Johnson & Johnson may be the first CEO ever to have confronted such a horror. He managed it so well that he not only restored Tylenol, his company’s single most important profit-maker, to preeminence, but he also enhanced the company’s fine reputation in the process.” The handling of the tragic tampering by Jim Burke is a clear reflection of his main concern which was the public’s safety. There is no guarantee with any company that issue’s and crises won’t occur, it is however certain of how people react to situations such as this that will led to one’s overall success or failure. Not only was this a big wake up call for medical industries everywhere and how they conceal their products, but also a model of how businesses and local authorities can work together for the public good. It is uncommon in today’s society, having such an emphasis on the media, to have such a well-known company use such open, ethical and honest ways of responding to such a detrimental event. There was no time during this period where the company tried to persuade its consumers through doublespeak or any other self-protecting tactics to benefit its own safety. Staying completely true to their word and only wanting what was best for the public, Johnson & Johnson made it through this time with dignity, courage and even more respect now than they had in the past.
Johnson & Johnson’s ultimate failure in establishing a positively tied relationship with the media, an essential stakeholder, forced the company in many ways to respond to this crisis in more of an advertising way. This is something that could have been minimized if more effort were put towards the media and would have recovered its overall market loss during this time. Today they have fully reestablished its market loss during the crisis which shows that there is constant progress with this company. Also, through the help of Burke and his communication with the media, this played a big factor in overcoming this problem of false information.

When discussing the long and hard process that this company was put through to earn the trust back into the public, PBS concludes, “Sadly, the tragedies that resulted from the Tylenol poisonings can never be undone. But their deaths did inspire a series of important moves to make over-the-counter medications safer for the hundreds of millions of people who buy them every year.” If it were not for the necessary steps that Johnson & Johnson boldly took without knowing the repercussions, many of the medical advancements may have not taken place while also leaving more room and opportunities for situations like this to occur in the future.

**Conclusion**

Following the events that occurred due to the Tylenol poisonings, food and pharmaceutical industries improved their packaging by instituting tamperproof seals to minimize any future cases from taking place. Gaining it’s trust and name back into the public, Johnson & Johnson’s fearlessness in taking on this hardship when faced with the choice between self-preservation and looking out for the well-being of society and their customers, took a path that not many corporations have chosen. The Tylenol brand was successful in reestablishing its name, recovering the market share lost during this scare, and then some. Though things could
have taken a turn for the worse for this company, it instead has become a model for how to handle effective corporate crisis. Johnson & Johnson made it clear to its customers that their safety was a top priority. Choosing to pull products off the shelf immediately rather than deny claims that Tylenol was to blame for the deaths, essentially saved this company. Instead of gambling that they were truly not in the wrong, products were pulled and the chance of any more deaths was immediately eradicated. This was a motion to show the public that selling product that could potentially be harmful was not part of Tylenol’s mission, but the exact opposite. By eating the cost of recalling the products on the shelves, the public was able to have faith in the transparency of the company they had once trusted, and save the Johnson & Johnson Company from losing one of their most profitable branches to bad publicity.
References


