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Consumers' views on text characteristics of product recall notices

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Consumers who have suffered as a result of a product defect can claim compensation from the producer. By placing a product recall notice, producers can reduce their liability. Ideally, such a notice should protect the image of the company as well as warn consumers. The problem is that a clear warning may damage the image of the company that placed the notice.

This study reports on experiments carried out among 128 female shoppers to gain insight into how a recall notice should be worded in order to protect the company's image and, yet to be clear. Split-run tests were carried out to determine whether Minimisation (minimising the danger of the defect) and Bolstering (stressing the company's good traits) contributed positively to the image of the company and whether inclusion of pictures, a list format, a reader-oriented approach, Minimisation, and Bolstering contributed positively to the clarity of the notice. Likert scales were used to determine which heading drew most attention and through which channels consumers preferred to be informed about a product recall.

According to our respondents, a recall notice including Minimisation strategies protects the company's image more than one without such strategies. A recall notice is considered clearer when it includes a picture, when it contains elements to highlight the structure of the information, and

when it does not include Bolstering. According to our respondents, the most attention-grabbing heading is 'Waarschuwing' (warning), and they prefer to be informed about product recalls through newspapers and television.

Product recall notices: Finding a balance between clarity, drawing attention, and image protection

Consumers who have suffered as a result of a product defect can claim compensation from the producer. In 1990, Dutch legislation concerning product liability was changed, making it easier to claim for damages in such cases (Riezebos, 1995, 6). By placing a product recall notice to warn the public, producers can reduce their liability, because, in doing so, they take steps to limit the possible damage to consumers.

A number of publications make recommendations for elements to be included in product recall notices in order to make sure that the consumer is warned as clearly as possible (Huijskens 1995; Riezebos 1995, p. 20-21; Van den Akker 1996, p. 150-151), while others point out that a recall notice can also be used to protect the company's image (Groenendijk & Boulogne 1994, 14, p. 123). However, in practice, it may be difficult to strike a balance between clearly warning the public and protecting the company's image. The heading 'An important announcement about peanut butter' will probably not damage the company's image, but how many people will recognise that it signals a warning about a defective

product? Conversely, while most people will recognise the heading 'Glass in meat salad produced by X' as a warning, it is also likely to damage company X's image. Our study sets out to examine whether 1. recommendations which aim at ensuring that recall notices present a clear warning and 2. image repair strategies which are used in crisis situations, such as product recalls, (Benoit, 1997) indeed have the desired effect, and whether the use of such image protection strategies counteracts the warning function of recall notices.

The following section discusses the suggestions that have been made for the elements a product recall should contain in order to fulfil its warning and image protection function. Section 3 describes the design of our study, and the results are presented in Section 4. The final section of our paper presents the conclusions that can be drawn on the basis of our findings as well as a number of recommendations for writers of product recall notices.

Three requirements for recall notices: Drawing attention, clarity and image protection

The two functions that a recall notice must fulfil — warning consumers and protecting the company's image — imply that it must meet the following requirements:

1. it should be effective, i.e., it should get the target group to do what is required: read the notice and do with the product what should be done;
2. it should limit the damage to the producer's image.

We will first discuss the requirements a recall notice should meet in order to be effective, according to the literature (1). We will focus on Drawing Attention (1.1) and Clarity (1.2). In (2), we will discuss the characteristics a recall notice should have in order to minimise the damage to the producer's image.

Although, in theory, it is possible to separate the three requirements, drawing attention, clarity, and image protection, in practice, they may interact. Where possible, we will point out such possible interconnections.

1. Effectiveness

Producers generally place recall notices to warn the public that something is wrong with a particular product. In order to succeed in warning the public, a product recall notice should be effective. Consumers should be made to read the notice and to take the action that is required. De Jong & Schellens (1995: 23–26) formulate eight conditions that a public information leaflet should meet in order to be effective:

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| 1. Contact | The place and layout should ensure that the target group wants to read the text. |
| 2. Selection | The most important information should actually be read. |
| 3. Comprehension | The information should be understood by the target group. |
| 4. Acceptance | The information should be accepted. |
| 5. Relevance | The information should be relevant to the reader. |
| 6. Completeness | The text should provide clear and complete answers to all the questions a reader may have. |
| 7. Appreciation | The presentation of the information should be appreciated by the target group. |
| 8. Applicability | The target group should be able to apply the information with ease. |

Although these effectiveness requirements were formulated for public information leaflets, they can easily be applied to recall notices. The eight guidelines Riezebos (1995, p. 20–21) formulates for recall notices can be subsumed under the conditions mentioned by De Jong & Schellens. According to Riezebos, product recall notices should

1. have a format that is large enough to attract attention;
2. be clearly recognizable as product recall notices to consumers; it should be clear to consumers at a glance that they are warnings, for instance, through a striking heading, and it should be immediately clear what product/

- brand the warning refers to, for example, because the notice includes a picture of the package of the product or the logo;
3. give a clear description of the shortcomings of the product;
 4. give a clear description of the possible dangers of using the product as well as of the damage that may result if the product is used;
 5. give the consumer full and clear information on how the defective product series or batch can be identified;
 6. give information about possible compensation for the consumer (financial or otherwise);
 7. state where and how the consumer can get more information about the product;
 8. state clearly when the defective product will be replaced and how these new products can be recognized.

Riezebos's Guidelines 1 and 2 are like De Jong & Schellens's notion of 'contact' (Requirement 1), and Riezebos's Guidelines 2 to 8 are covered by their criteria 3 ('comprehension') and 6 ('completeness'). We have not been able to test all eight conditions listed by De Jong & Schellens. We have limited ourselves to 'contact' (1) and 'comprehensibility' (3). We expect that texts which are written in such a way that the target group is going to read them and which are easy to comprehend will be more effective than texts which do not possess these characteristics.

1.1 Drawing attention

If it is to be read, a recall notice must first draw the attention of the readers. This can be categorized as 'contact' in De Jong & Schellens's list of criteria for effectiveness: the position and layout of the text should ensure that the target group wants to read the text. Riezebos recommends that product recall notices should have a format which is large enough to draw attention, that they should have a striking heading, that they should include a picture of the product, and that they should be placed on frequently read pages (Riezebos 1996, p. 20-21; Keur 1996, p.6).

We investigated whether the absence or presence of two layout features, the use of pictures and the use of a list format, would draw people's attention more, and which heading would draw most attention. We also investigated which media could be used best to inform consumers about a product recall.

1.2 Clarity

In order to be effective, i.e., to get the reader to take the action required, a recall notice should be clear. Consumers should see straightaway that the notice is a warning about a defective product, understand what is wrong with the product and know what action they should take. Guidelines relating to this have been formulated by Groenendijk & Boulogne (1994, p. 125), Huijskens (1995), Riezebos (1995, p. 20-21; 1996, p. 46), and Van den Akker (1996, p. 150-151). Riezebos's guidelines are the most extensive and include most of the guidelines formulated by the other authors.

Since we were not able to research the effect on clarity of all eight guidelines formulated by Riezebos, we focused on the aspects discussed in Guidelines 2, 3, 4, and 5 (see 1). We studied the effect of including a picture, of using strategies to clearly mark the structure of the information, and of a reader-oriented instead of a writer-oriented approach.

We suspected that two of the image repair strategies discussed by Benoit (1997) (see 2) — Minimisation and Bolstering — might have a negative effect on the clarity of a text, since their use means using more words, and we investigated therefore, whether texts including these strategies were perceived as less clear than texts which did not include these strategies.

2. Image

A crisis can destroy a company's good image in a matter of hours (Groenendijk & Boulogne 1994, p. 14). Therefore, the form and content of a recall notice should be such that the image of the company is damaged as little as possible. There

are no specific sets of guidelines for image protection in recall notices, but the image restoration strategies that companies use to respond to attacks or complaints as described by Benoit (1997) can be used to analyse recall notices. An analysis of a corpus of 51 Dutch recall notices (Kreps, Van Meurs & Planken 2001; cf. Kreps, Van Meurs & Planken 1999, 123, p. 125–127) showed that the following 4 strategies occurred frequently:

Compensation	(N=49, 96%)	Offer something to the consumer to compensate for the damage (or the inconvenience)
Minimisation	(N=46, 90%)	Minimise negative feelings on the part of the public by reducing the seriousness of the situation
Bolstering	(N=35, 68%)	Evoke positive feelings among the public by stressing the company's good traits
Mortification	(N= 39, 76%)	Make apologies

Because of time restrictions, we decided only to investigate whether two of these frequent strategies, Minimisation and Bolstering, were indeed considered by consumers to protect the producer's image.

Since it seems likely that elements that increase the clarity of a text and make it attract more attention have a positive effect on the image of the organisation that published the text (Van den Kieboom & Van Kleeff 1996, p. 86–87), we researched the effects on the producer's image of a text including a picture and using strategies to clearly mark the structure of the information.

Design

This section describes the design of our study. For the sake of clarity, the specific experiments used to determine which aspects make a recall notice clearer, draw a reader's atten-

tion, and protect a company's image, will be presented along with the results in Section 4.

1. Experiments

Most of the experiments we used were split-run tests within subjects. The respondents were presented with two versions of one text (see under Results, Fragments 1 to 5) and asked to express their preference for one of these versions. Both versions of the text were printed in a large font and pasted onto pieces of cardboard. For each question, the two versions were presented to the respondents in a random order, so as to make up for carry-over effects. The respondents were first asked to read the two texts, and after that questions were put to them. In some cases questions about clarity, the extent to which a text draws the reader's attention, and/or image was included in the same split-run test. If this was the case, we varied the order in which the three different questions about the same text were asked, the different possibilities being divided equally across the respondents.

All the split-run questions were designed in the same way. One version of a text was always a fragment of a recall notice from a corpus of 22 Dutch recall notices published in 1998–1999. The second version was adapted from the original fragment in such a way that it was identical to it except for one aspect. All the original company and product names were removed or replaced with fictitious names. This was done because the corporate image study 'motivation', conducted among a representative sample of the Dutch population, showed that well-known brand and company names usually evoke favorable responses (Blauw 1994, p. 182). Such favorable responses might preclude a fair and open-minded evaluation of the texts.

In all, 17 questions were put to the respondents. Since most of the questions were fairly extensive, there were two sets of questions. Each set was answered by half of the respondents. The two sets were not completely different. Both sets contained split-run questions about the effect of including a picture and the effect of the use of lists to present information (see Section 4.1, Fragments 1 and 2).

2. Respondents

The experiments were carried out among respondents who resembled the target group of the majority of recall notices as much as possible. The list of product recall notices analysed by Kreps et al. (1999: 141–143) reveals that 72% of the products for which recall notices are published can be bought in supermarkets. Therefore, it was decided to administer the experiments to shoppers in supermarkets. Interviews were conducted in three fairly small Dutch supermarkets on different days and at different times in the summer of 1999. Because we expected men to respond differently to the questions than women (Tannen, 1994) and because it was not feasible to include the variable sex in our study, only women were interviewed. Another reason for this was that we had the impression that women shop in supermarkets more frequently than men and are, therefore, more likely to come into contact with products that are recalled from supermarkets. The tests were carried out among 128 women. The non-response was 35%.

Three age groups can be distinguished among the respondents. 33% were 50 years of age or older, 38% were aged between 40 and 50, and 39% were 40 or younger. The division of the respondents over the different educational levels was not completely equal. 44% had a fairly low educational level (primary school, LBO, MAVO), 32% had been educated at a middle educational level (MBO, HAVO), and 24% had a high educational level (HBO or university). If a significant effect for education and/or age was found in any particular test, this is reported.

3. Interview set-up and data analysis

The split-run tests were administered in face-to-face interviews with one young female interviewer. Women entering the supermarket were asked at the entrance whether they would like to take part in research. If they agreed to take part, the questions were put to them in a quiet corner of the supermarket.

Before starting with the actual tests, the interviewer gave the following explanation of a product recall notice: "Product recall notices are warnings placed by a company in the media when something has gone wrong with a product. Consumers are warned that a product should no longer be eaten/ drunk/ used, since this may be dangerous. Examples include Felix cat food and Olvarit baby food a few years ago".

The data were analysed statistically using SPSS 9.0. For all the tests, the significance level was .05, except for the Wilcoxon tests, for which a significance level of .01 was used, because a large number of these tests were carried out.

Results

1. Clarity

In order to investigate whether recall notices that followed guidelines aimed at enhancing the clarity of a text (cf. 1.2) were perceived as clearer than notices which did not follow such guidelines, we studied the effect of including a picture illustrating the defect, the effect of using strategies to clearly mark the structure of the information, and of using a reader-oriented instead of a writer-oriented approach. We also investigated whether the use of Minimisation and Bolstering strategies increased the comprehensibility of the text.¹

The effect of including a picture was tested with Fragment (1a), without a picture, and Fragment (1b), with a picture. Respondents were asked which version they considered clearer. We expected that including a picture would increase clarity, on the basis of the recommendations in the literature about recall notices (Huijskens 1995, Riezebos 1996, p. 20) as well as what research has shown about the effect of including pictures in instructive texts (Fukuoka, Kojima & Spyridakis, 1999).

- (1a) In order to preclude any possible risk, we would like to ask every one to check the energy-efficient light bulb. The bulb consists of a metal screw base with a plastic case at the top, from which three curved glass tubes stick out. Across the entire surface of the plastic case, there is a groove from which a wire

texts are easier to understand than writer-oriented texts, because among other things they contain fewer passive sentences and the reader is addressed directly. The fragments in (3) were used to study whether this is also true for recall notices. The respondents were asked to indicate which text, the reader-oriented version (3a) or the writer-oriented one (3b), they found easier to read. The improved version of a recall notice was partly inspired by the improved version of a recall notice written by Michael Steehouder (1999, p. 8), in which active sentences replace passive sentences, and direct forms of address ("we at Albert Heijn" and "you" [as "u" in Dutch]) are used instead of third person references ("Albert Heijn" and "customers").

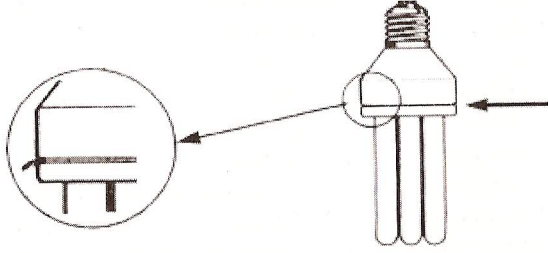
(3a) We at Stropi Ltd. kindly request you to return our bottles Stropi raspberry lemonade. We have decided to do so because some customers have found pieces of glass in the lemonade. You can return the product to the shop, where you will get the purchase price back. We can be reached at the following telephone number:

(3b) It has been decided by Stropi Ltd to recall bottles of Stropi raspberry lemonade from the consumer. This decision was made because some customers have found pieces of glass in the lemonade. The bottles of raspberry lemonade can be returned to the shop, where the purchase price will be paid back. Stropi Ltd can be reached by consumers at the following telephone number:

Because we expected that the use of the image repair strategies Minimisation and Bolstering might have a negative effect on clarity — the use of these strategies means that more words are used — we asked respondents to indicate whether they thought texts including these strategies (4a, 5a) or texts without these strategies (4b, 5b) were clearer. The same split-run tests were used to determine which texts better protected the producer's image: texts with or without Minimisation (Fragments 4a and 4b, respectively) and texts with or without Bolstering (5a and 5b, respectively).

(4a) It has been found that, when the bottle cap with in-built spout is screwed on the bottle, in some cases, glass can break from the

(1b) In order to preclude any possible risk, we would like to ask every one to check the energy-efficient light bulb. A wire may be sticking out from the groove of the plastic case, as is indicated in the drawing below:



If you have such a bulb, would you be so kind as to contact us as soon as possible.

According to Janssen et al. (1992, p. 137), texts with a clear "external structure", i.e., with sub-headings, lists, etc., are easier to understand than texts without such features. We used Fragments (2a) and (2b) to determine whether this also applies to recall notices. The respondents were asked which text they found easier to read.

(2a) If the type number of your computer corresponds to one of the type numbers above, we would like to ask you to no longer use the computer, not to put the plug of the computer into the socket again, and to contact us to make an appointment to have your computer checked and repaired for free.

(2b) What you should do if the type number of your computer corresponds to one of the type numbers above:

- no longer use the computer
- do not put the plug into the socket again
- contact us
- make an appointment to have your computer checked and repaired for free

A number of authors (Hendriks & Van der Spek, 1993, p. 85; Steehouder et al., 1992, p. 152) claim that reader-oriented

bottle opening and end up in the coffee milk. This might result in safety risks.

- (4b) It has been found that, when the bottle cap with in-built spout is screwed on the bottle, glass breaks from the bottle opening and ends up in the coffee milk. This results in safety risks.
- (5a) Make Up Ltd. has suspended the sale of the recently introduced night cream. As usual, this night cream had undergone extensive dermatological tests before it was introduced, without any indication of skin irritation. Nevertheless, it has been found that its use may lead to an allergic reaction of the skin in some cases.
- (5b) Make Up Ltd. has suspended the sale of the recently introduced night cream. This night cream had been tested before it was introduced. Now it has been found that its use may lead to an allergic reaction of the skin in some cases.

Table 1 summarises our findings. The respondents' perception of the clarity of the texts used in our experiments increased statistically significantly by the inclusion of a picture illustrating the defect ($\chi^2 = 128.00$, $df=1$, $p=.001$) and by the use of a list format to present information ($\chi^2 = 50.70$, $df=1$, $p=.001$).² The reader-oriented recall notice was considered easier to read than the writer-oriented recall notice, but the difference is not statistically significant.

The use of the image restoration strategies, Minimisation and Bolstering, in the texts used in our experiments makes the recall notice less clear according to our respondents. In the case of Bolstering, the difference between the two versions is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 13.35$, $df=1$, $p=.001$).³

Table 1 The Effect of Comprehensibility-Enhancing Strategies and Image Repair Strategies on Clarity

	Clearer with	Clearer without	No preference	Total	Significance of effect of use of strategy (Columns 2 and 3)
Picture	128	0	0	128	**
List Format	99	21	8	128	**
Reader-oriented	28	20	16	64	n.s.
Minimisation	23	34	7	64	n.s.
Bolstering	17	46	1	64	**

** : $p < .01$

2. Drawing attention

A number of questions were asked in order to find out whether a recall notice would actually reach the target group. Firstly, we tried to determine whether placing a recall notice in a newspaper would be the best means of reaching the target group by asking the respondents which three channels mentioned in the first column of Table 2 they thought were the best ways of announcing a product recall to the public. This question was posed because different suggestions are made in the literature as to the media that can best be used to inform the public about a product recall. Groenendijk & Boulogne (1994, p. 125) recommend placing notices in national and regional newspapers, as does the 'Inspectie Gezondheidsbescherming, Waren en Veterinaire zaken' (IGB) (Dutch Inspectorate Health Protection, Commodities and Veterinary Public Health) (Van den Akker 1996, 164, p. 167). The IGB sometimes explicitly advises companies to place a recall notice in a national newspaper (Van den Akker 1996, p. 170). Van den Akker (1996, p. 151) recommends using a variety of media, including radio and television.

Table 2 shows which channels the respondents preferred as means of announcing a product recall to the public. Our respondents saw newspapers and television as very suitable means of informing customers about a product recall. Other channels, such as posters, radio, personal telephone calls, and letters, were far less popular. The Internet was not mentioned.

Table 2 Preferred information channels for product recalls

Channel	Number of times a channel was mentioned	% of 64 respondents that mentioned the channel
Newspaper	55	86%
TV	55	86%
Posters in shops/supermarkets	31	48%
Radio	22	34%
Personal letter/ telephone call (if possible)	16	25%
Advertising leaflets	13	20%
Internet	0	0%

Secondly, we tested which heading would best draw the respondents' attention and thus achieve the desired contact with the target group. Huijskens (1995, p. 41) says that a recall notice should have a clear, catchy heading which captures the essence of the news. Research by Kreps et al. (1999, p. 119) shows that 37% of recall notices have a fairly neutral heading such as 'Mededeling' (Announcement) or 'Belangrijke mededeling' (Important Announcement), which does not directly show that the notice is a warning. The respondents were asked to say to what extent a particular heading would draw their attention on a full newspaper page. The twelve headings used in this test were taken from 22 recall notices published in 1998–1999 (see under 'Design'). The interviewer read out the headings in the first column of Table 3 in random order, and the respondents were asked to rate each heading by giving it a mark from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for 'absolutely does not draw attention' and 5 for 'draws attention tremendously'.

Table 3 summarises the results. The headings at the top of the table are those which drew most attention, while those at the bottom drew least attention. The second column presents the average scores for the extent to which a heading drew the respondents' attention. The heading 'Waarschuwing' (Warning) is clearly the one which respondents claimed would draw most attention, while 'Kennisgeving' (Notification) was judged to be the least attention-grabbing heading. Some respondents spontaneously commented that 'Kennisgeving' reminded them of a death notice.

A Friedman test was used to determine whether the differences between the scores for the different headings were significant. When this turned out to be the case ($\chi^2=309.191$, $df=11$, $p=.001$), Wilcoxon tests were used to determine between which specific headings the differences were significant. The tests showed that there was a significant difference between the extent to which respondents claimed attention would be paid to the heading 'Waarschuwing' (Warning) and the extent to which they thought this would happen with all the other headings listed in Table 3. There was also a significant difference between

'Belangrijke mededeling' (Important Announcement), on the one hand, and 'Opgelet' (Attention) and all the headings listed below 'Opgelet', on the other hand. 'Attentie' (Attention), 'Opgelet' (Attention), 'Terughaalactie' (Recall Action) and 'Belangrijk bericht' (Important Notice) differed significantly from 'Belangrijke kennisgeving' (Important Notification) and the following headings. 'Belangrijke kennisgeving' and 'Mededeling' (Announcement) differed significantly from 'Product X' and all following headings. 'Oproep' (Appeal) differed significantly from 'Bericht' (Notice) and 'Kennisgeving' (Notification), and 'Product X' differed significantly from 'Kennisgeving'.

Table 3 The effectiveness of different product recall headings

	Mean	Standard deviation
Waarschuwing (Warning)	4.41	.68
Belangrijke mededeling (Important Announcement)	3.97	.69
Attentie (Attention)	3.69	.92
Opgelet (Attention)	3.58	.79
Terughaalactie (Recall Action)	3.58	1.02
Belangrijk bericht (Important Notice)	3.56	.64
Belangrijke kennisgeving (Important Notification)	3.05	.92
Mededeling (Announcement)	3.02	.72
Oproep (Appeal)	2.98	.95
Product X (Product X)	2.67	.86
Bericht (Notice)	2.47	.87
Kennisgeving (Notification)	2.28	.84

1 = absolutely does not draw attention and 5 = draws attention tremendously.

Finally, the fragments with and without a picture illustrating the defect (1a, 1b) and those with and without a list (2a, 2b) were shown to the respondents, who were asked to say which text would first draw their attention on a full newspaper page. We expected that the text with the picture and the text with the list would draw respondents' attention most.

Table 4 shows that almost all the respondents said that notices with a picture and with information in list format — features which also make a recall notice easier to understand

(see Table 1) — would draw their attention sooner than notices without these features ($\chi^2=128.00$, $df=1$, $p=.001$ and $\chi^2=113.29$, $df=1$, $p=.001$, respectively).

3. Image

Of the image restoration strategies discussed by Benoit (1997), we decided to study whether Minimisation and Bolstering had an image restoring effect. Since we suspected that the use of strategies recommended for making a text clearer and making it draw more attention could have a positive effect on the company's image as well, we also investigated what the effect would be on the image of a company if it published a clear and attention-grabbing recall notice. We researched the effect of the inclusion of a picture (1a,1b), the use of a list format (2a, 2b), and of reader-oriented approach (3a, 3b).

In each case, respondents were asked to say which of the two versions they considered more sympathetic. Fragments 4a and 4b were used to test the effect of Minimisation, and Fragments 5a and 5b to test the effect of Bolstering. The 'a' fragments are the fragments including the image restoration strategies, while the 'b' fragments are those without such strategies.

Table 5 summarises the results. For both image repair strategies, the difference between the notice with and without the strategy is statistically significant. In the case of

Table 4 The effect of comprehensibility-enhancing strategies on the extent to which recall notices draw respondents' attention

	Would Draw Attention Sooner with Strategy	Would Draw Attention Sooner without Strategy	No Preference	Total	Significance of Effect of Use of Strategy (columns 2 and 3)
Picture	128	-	-	128	**
List Format	122	3	3	128	**

** : $p < .01$

Minimisation (4a, 4b) is the difference as was expected: the recall notice which includes Minimisation was considered more sympathetic than the one which does not ($\chi^2=21.08$, $df=1$, $p=.001$). In the case of Bolstering (5a, 5b), however, the notice without Bolstering was considered more sympathetic ($\chi^2=3.76$ $df=1$, $p=.053$).⁴

Strategies recommended for making a text clear had a positive effect on the image of the text, according to our respondents. They considered recall notices which included a picture illustrating the defect (1b), a list to present information (2b), and a reader-oriented approach (3a) significantly more sympathetic than notices without such strategies ($\chi^2=123.00$, $df=1$, $p=.001$, $\chi^2=101$ $df=1$, $p=.001$, and $\chi^2=10.29$ $df=1$, $p=.001$, respectively).

4. The Connection between clarity, drawing attention and image protection

In Section 2, it was postulated that, although it is easy to make a theoretical distinction between strategies aimed at making a text clearer, making a text draw more attention, and protecting the company's image, in practice these strategies may interact. We investigated therefore, not only whether a particular strategy affected the characteristic it was intended to boost, but also whether this strategy affected other charac-

Table 5 The effect of image repair strategies and comprehensibility-enhancing strategies on the image of the recall notice.

	More Sympathetic with Strategy	More Sympathetic without strategy	No Preference	Total	Significance of Effect of Use of Strategy (columns 2 and 3)
Minimization	38	14	12	64	**
Bolstering	16	29	19	64	*
Picture	123	-	5	128	**
List Format	116	5	7	128	**
Reader-oriented	40	16	8	64	**

** : $p < .01$, * : $p < .05$

teristics. In this section, we will determine whether there is indeed an interconnection between respondents' answers to questions about different aspects of a recall notice in the same split-run test.

First of all, we checked whether there was a correlation for clarity, drawing attention, and image protection between the answers to the questions in the split-run test involving the notice with and without a picture (1a and 1b) and in the split-run test involving the fragments with and without a list (2a and 2b). No correlations could be calculated for notices with and without a picture, because the answers in at least one cell showed too little variation. Virtually all the respondents thought the notice with the picture was clearer, drew more attention, and was more sympathetic. In this case, therefore, there is a clear interconnection between the respondents' answers concerning the three different aspects of a recall notice that were included in the split-run test.

It turns out that there is an interconnection between clarity and image (.18*) and a somewhat stronger interconnection between drawing attention and image (.59**). Respondents who said that the notice with a list was easier to understand generally also said that the notice with a list was more sympathetic. Respondents who said that the notice with a list would draw more attention usually also said that this notice was more sympathetic.

For the split-run test involving the effect of a reader-oriented approach (3a, 3b), the effect of this approach on clarity as well as on image was measured. It turns out that there is a high correlation between the two (.61**): the majority of the respondents who found the text with the reader-oriented approach easier to read also found it more sympathetic.

In the split-run tests for Minimisation (4a, 4b) and Bolstering (5a, 5b), the effect of these image repair strategies on both image and clarity was tested. In both cases, a significant correlation was found (Minimisation .33**, Bolstering .30*). Respondents who said that notices including these strategies were more sympathetic also said that they were clearer than notices which did not include these strategies.

Conclusion, discussion, limitations of this study, and recommendations

The first aim of this study was to determine whether the intended effect is produced by using strategies to make recall notices clearer and to make them draw more attention, and strategies to protect the image of the producer whose products are described in the notice. A second aim was to determine whether or not the various strategies counteract each other.

1. Clarity

This study has demonstrated that recall notices incorporating strategies recommended to make texts clearer are indeed perceived to be clearer by the respondents (Table 1). All 128 respondents agreed that a recall notice with a picture illustrating the defect was clearer than one without such a picture. This finding is in line with findings concerning the effects of pictures in other text types and in other parts of the world (Fukuoka et al. 1999, Mayer 1999). In order to make it clear to customers what they should do with a defective product, the majority of respondents indicate that it is better to use a list format than running text. A reader-oriented approach is considered to make a recall notice easier to read than a writer-oriented approach, but the difference is not statistically significant.

We tested the effect on clarity of two image repair strategies, Minimisation (4a, 4b) and Bolstering (5a, 5b). It was found that both strategies reduced clarity according to our respondents, although the difference was only statistically significant in the case of Bolstering (Table 1). What is good for a company's image, according to the theory of image repair discourse (see Benoit 1997), seems not to be good for comprehensibility. Moreover, our findings go against the theory of image repair discourse in another, more crucial aspect. Bolstering had a statistically significant negative effect on image. The recall notice without Bolstering was considered more sympathetic than the notice with Bolstering (Table 5).

2. Drawing attention

Whether a recall notice attracts attention depends, among other things, on whether the notice reaches the target group.

In the literature (see 4.2), a number of different recommendations are made with respect to the media that can be used to inform consumers about a product recall: national newspapers, national and regional newspapers, radio, and television. When 64 female shoppers in our study were asked to select the three best channels to announce a product recall to the public, 86% of them chose newspapers. The same number of respondents chose television, a medium that, as far as we know, is not yet used to announce product recalls in the Netherlands, at least not by producers themselves. The other options we presented (posters in shops and supermarkets, radio, advertising leaflets, and the Internet) were chosen by less than half of the respondents. These findings may lead crisis communication experts to conclude that product recalls are best announced in newspapers and on television. They should, however, realize that it matters which newspapers and television channels are used for this purpose. The Dutch Inspectorate for Health Protection sometimes explicitly advises companies to place a recall notice in a national newspaper (van den Akker 1996: 170), but only 34% of our respondents read a national newspaper, while 75% of them read a regional newspaper.

It is important that the heading of recall notice draws the attention of the readers. Van den Akker (1996: 144) recommends the use of the heading 'Waarschuwing' (Warning), a heading which is also used by the Inspectorate for Health Protection in the model notice it sends to companies that it wants to recall a product (Inspectie W&V 1999). Thus the advice given is in line with our respondents' preferences. However, this heading is not used in the majority of recall notices (Kreps et al. 1999, p. 119).

We also investigated whether two strategies aimed at making a text clearer, the inclusion of a picture (1a, 1b) and of a list to present information (2a, 2b) attracted the attention of the respondents. Virtually all the respondents said

that notices including these strategies would draw their attention sooner than notices without these strategies (Table 4). Crisis communication-experts might conclude that enhancing the clarity of recall notice pays off. Not only seems a clearer notice to be understood better, but it also seems to be more successful in catching people's attention.

3. Image

Of the two image repair strategies we studied, only one, Minimisation, had the desired effect. Reducing the seriousness of a situation seems to make a good impression on the respondents. The effect of Bolstering according to our respondents is the opposite of what these strategies aim to do. The notice which did not include this strategy was considered significantly more sympathetic than the notice which did include it (Table 5). Stressing the company's good traits, a strategy which was found in 35 of the 51 recall notices studied by Kreps et al. (2001), was not considered sympathetic by our respondents.

Because we suspected that a clear text could be good for the producer's image, we asked the respondents to say which version was more sympathetic in each of the following cases: a notice with a picture or one without; one with a list or one without; one with a reader-oriented approach or one with a writer-oriented approach. The clearer version, the first one of each pair, was always considered more sympathetic.

Our study indicates that using strategies to enhance the clarity of a text (including a picture, a list, and a reader-oriented approach) are good for a company's image, while Bolstering, a strategy which is specifically used for protecting a company's image, does not have the intended image-saving effect at all, or at least not for all groups. Minimisation is the only image repair strategy we studied which actually had a positive effect on the producer's image.

4. Clarity, drawing attention, and image

A recall notice should fulfil three requirements: it should be

clear, it should attract attention, and it should protect the company's image. Although it is theoretically possible to separate these three characteristics, in practice they may interact. The split-run tests with questions about two or three of the above-mentioned characteristics revealed that these characteristics indeed interact. For the use of a list format, a picture, a reader-oriented approach, Minimisation, and Bolstering, there was an interconnection between clarity and image. Most of the women who said that the recall notices with these strategies were clearer than those without also said that notices including these strategies were more sympathetic. For the use of a list and a picture, there was a similar interconnection between drawing attention and image.

These findings lead us to conclude that it might be important for a company's image to publish a recall that is clear and draws people's attention. In the light of the findings concerning image repair strategies (see 3), clarity and drawing attention are even more important for the image of a company than the use of image restoration strategies, because the latter either have a negative effect on image, or, at best, a small positive effect.

5. Limitations of the present study and recommendations

We realize that our study has a number of limitations, which mean its results may not be generalizable. First of all, we only included women among our respondents. It is not unlikely that men may expect different things from product recall notices than women.

We may also wonder whether the results we have obtained with our experiments were ecologically valid. Choosing from given alternatives is not something people do when they respond to recall notices in everyday life. Between-subject tests might have been more valid than the within-subject tests we carried out, but these would also have required much larger numbers of respondents.

Furthermore, it should be noted that we did not test all the strategies recommended in the literature. As far as im-

age restoration is concerned, for instance, we did not study the effects of the absence or presence of apologies or of compensation offers. In most cases, moreover, we tested only one operationalization of each strategy.

We may also wonder whether our questions always measured what we wanted to measure. For instance, the notion of 'image' is much broader than what we covered using the adjective 'sympathetic'. Other adjectives, such as 'reliable' and 'caring', may well be much more relevant to product recalls (for examples of other possible adjectives, see the sample question about image in Maes et al. 1996, p.209).

It is clear from the above that this study is no more than a first step in determining the textual aspects that make a recall notice more effective and limit the damage to the image of the company.

In spite of all these limitations, our study — which was carried out among an important target group of recall notices, female shoppers — seems to have yielded a number of important insights. Firstly, it demonstrates that research into the effects of guidelines recommended in communication literature is highly necessary. Recommendations which have not been tested extensively should be treated with caution. Secondly, the findings of our study would seem to indicate that it would be advisable for Dutch crisis communication experts to keep the following in mind when they have to inform the public about a product recall:

- The heading 'Waarschuwing' (Warning) seems to attract most attention.
- A notice including a picture illustrating where the defect is located is considered to be clearer, more sympathetic, and more attention grabbing than a notice without such a picture.
- A notice with instructions in a list format about what consumers should do with a product is considered to be clearer, more sympathetic, and more attention grabbing than a notice in which these instructions are presented in running text.
- A reader-oriented approach is perceived as more sympathetic than a writer oriented approach.

- The use of the Minimisation strategy is considered to make a notice more sympathetic.
- The channels that are preferred by consumers for com-

municating a product recall to the public are regional newspapers and/or television.

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Notes

1. For this paper, the Dutch texts used in the tests have been translated into English.
2. For all statistical analyses, the respondents who could not decide which text they preferred are left out of consideration. The number of respondents who could not make a choice was small for the majority of our experiments and their data did not yield more information that was useful for answering our main question: do the strategies that are recommended for enhancing clarity and saving the company's image indeed have the desired effect?
3. Respondents with a low and middle educational level considered the texts without Bolstering significantly clearer ($\chi^2=1.56$, $df=1$, $p=.0.001$ and $\chi^2=8.91$, $df=1$, $p=.003$), but for respondents with a high educational level there is no significant difference between the texts. The latter found the text with Bolstering significantly clearer than the respondents with a low and middle educational background put together ($\chi^2=9.32$, $df=1$, $p=.002$). This effect of educational level should be investigated in more detail in further research.
4. The educational background of the respondents again affects their evaluation. Respondents with a high educational level said that notices with Bolstering were more

sympathetic than those without (the difference is almost statistically significant), while respondents with a middle and low educational background found notices without Bolstering significantly more sympathetic (respectively $\chi^2=5.00$, $df=1$, $p=0.025$ and $\chi^2=5.40$, $df=1$, $p=0.02$). The difference between the group with a high level of education and the groups of respondents with low and middle levels of education put together is also statistically significant ($\chi^2=11.08$, $df=1$, $p=0.001$). It should be noted, however, that the levels of significance are not very high and that many respondents did not indicate a preference for a text with or without Bolstering. This effect of educational level should be investigated in more detail.

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