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Column: Maggi lesson for regulation

The Maggi episode will do India a great service if it improves our food standards inspection regime

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Brands, whose names and character live on in customers' minds, take a lot of effort to build. It is not only advertising that propagates the brand and its message. It is the characteristics of the product's brand-name that gives it the recall in customer minds. Brands have a life cycle. Many that were iconic some years back are no longer so: IBM, Xerox, Sunlight, Dalda, Mafatlal, Seiko, HMT, to name a few. And then, there are the recent arrivals that now dominate memory: Apple, Samsung, Cafe Coffee Day, Tanishq, etc.

Maggi noodles are a processed food, foreign to India's rich culinary landscape and food habits. But its distinct taste, ease of making along with, of course, persistent advertising and promotion, built huge loyalty for it—especially for the “2-minute” variety. Children were fascinated by it perhaps because noodles were stringy and needed to be sucked in for chewing. Over the years, it became a major national brand.

I was engaged, a little over fifty years ago (in the 1960s), in promoting and launching old and new processed foods-brands. I know how difficult a task it is to offer a tasty, safe and easy-to-eat factory processed food product in India; that looks and tastes the exact same, in every pack, across the country. When legendary business figure and the first Indian chairman of Hindustan Lever Ltd. (HLL), Prakash Tandon promoted Dalda, the first vegetable-oil based hard cooking-fat, as a cheap substitute for ghee in the 1930s, it was a new food concept. He told me that KG Mashruwala who edited Harijan, a paper found by Mahatma Gandhi, wrote in that paper that Dalda could make you blind, citing tests on mice as evidence. Appearing as it did in Gandhiji's paper, it was a terrible blow to the fledgling brand. Dalda, however, survived this blow. It was tried out in thousands of fairs and festivals, and wherever else people gathered.

Salesmen would set up a folding table with a stove and cook shira in Dalda vanaspati in front of the crowd. The hot shira would be tried out by the people. The point made was that the taste was the same as shira cooked in ghee. Soon the government forbade the flavouring of this vegetable oil with the flavour of ghee. Dalda became flavourless, but still retained the texture, graininess and the melting point of ghee. It became a trusted brand and a widely used cooking fat. Salesmen would regularly inspect the stamp at the bottom of the tin with the date of manufacture and withdraw those that were past the expiry date. They would also educate the retailers on this.

In 1964, I headed the introduction in the market of the Hima range of dehydrated products for HLL (peas, onions, ready mixes for various soups, idlis, gulab jamuns, etc). Our primary task was to create a brand identity in the customers' minds for a new food concept—an easy-to-cook product, manufactured hygienically and fresh when the customer purchased it. A housewife could now cook with fresh winter peas in mid-summer, as tasty and fresh as they would have been in the northern winter. She could consistently serve tasty soups almost instantly, and consistently make high-quality gulab jamuns or idlis without the tiresome preparatory work, that often would result in a poor end product. To combat the effects of the Indian climate, we worked closely with companies making packaging materials to develop a foil-laminated packing. This was the first time it had been developed, available and used in India. Our sales force had the difficult task of selling—but not pushing hard to sell—and to inspect retail stocks periodically. They were to withdraw packs that had reached the expiry date as stamped on the packs.

With Maggi 2-minute noodles, Nestle must have gone through all these steps. They must have, like we did over 50 years ago, done regular laboratory checks of the materials used. They must have made certain that no chemicals got mixed with the product. They must have carefully tested different packing materials to ensure that the product would retain its freshness for a minimum number of months. Their salesmen must have regularly inspected stocks in retail stores and withdrawn those at date expiry. They must have educated retailers also about this. They, of course, spent vast sums on celebrity endorsements and advertising. They created a branded product with great brand-recall and loyalty. Yet, they have got hit by the most basic flaw, the discovery (by government's food inspectors) that the product might be contaminated by dangerous chemicals.

What was surprising was the lack—for many days after the news broke in the media—of any public reaction by the company. Their chairman undertook a press conference. Little else was done except the national withdrawal of the product. If the company had taken all the steps described earlier, they could have appeared more confident and acted differently. However, this does not mark the death of the brand. It might well have a rebirth, but the company would have taken a beating in terms of money and reputation.

The role of government food and drug inspectors must be examined and questioned. It is common knowledge that our drug inspection regime is poorly staffed and has too many responsibilities. It is not difficult for manufacturers, distributors and retailers to get away with serious violations of the law and rules. This is equally true of cosmetic items. How much, and how often, are the manufacturing establishments for drugs, cosmetics and processed food products tested for hygiene and manufacturing process? The large number of small-scale manufacturers of drugs, cosmetics and food products, makes the problem much worse. It is only when tough foreign regulators, like the the USA's FDA, punish a Ranbaxy, that we have an inkling of the weakness of our regulatory system.

Processed foods suffer even more from this kind of inadequacy and neglect. Indians have a sense of strong personal hygiene, but a non-existent public hygiene sense. Our lakes, bore-wells, rivers are all contaminated, in varying degrees, by harmful industrial effluents and excrement. Our street-food is very unhygienic. The urban atmosphere is heavily polluted by heavy metals. In rural India, the scale of contamination of soil, water and the farm produce by fertilisers and

pesticides is enormous. We have been exposed for so long that most of us would have probably developed immunity! But the modern society that we are trying to create must not have to build immunity in that way.

We must have a strengthened regulatory system for drugs, cosmetics and processed foods—one that is comprehensive, frequent, and strong on penalties for violations. If Maggi 2-minute noodles succeeds in transforming our regulatory system, it would have done India a great service.

The author is former director general, NCAER, and the first chairman, CERC