

Abstract for: *CRR Conference 2008*  
7-9 September 2008

## **CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY AND PRODUCT RECALLS: THE MATTEL CASE**

Steve New\* and Dana Brown  
*Saïd Business School, University of Oxford*

In 2007, Mattel, one of the world's leading toy makers, suffered a series of unprecedented product recall disasters in which millions of items had to be withdrawn from sale. The story is interesting not just as a first-order phenomenon of quality management, logistics and marketing, but also in terms of the way in which it became an important media event, and the focus of extensive public discourse. In particular, the story became swept up in a wider political and economic debate about, among other things: the reliance of western (and particularly, American) economies on Chinese manufacturing; the effect of globalization on consumer safety; the scope of corporate social responsibility; and, the nature of quality control itself.

This paper analyses the events surrounding this episode. Drawing on press reports and official documents, the paper explores the way in which issues relating supply chain integration, product inspection and quality management become part of political discourse. We observe that the public discourse surrounding these events can become disconnected from the operational reality, and lead to potentially dysfunctional regulatory responses. The structure of our paper is as follows. First we discuss the issue of toy safety, and raise some issues about the rhetoric of public safety. We then present a systematic analysis of the Mattel recall events and the public debate they engendered. We then proceed to a brief discussion of the public discourse and political responses to the Mattel case, which illustrates some of the factors that shape perceptions of risk and responses to global supply chain management. We conclude with some thoughts on the way that the political, historical and cultural contexts have affected reactions and outcomes in the Mattel case thus far.

This story points to an important new research agenda, in which consideration of the design of complex supply chains is informed by the political and economic context. In this particular case, the public discourse surrounding the recalls focused on an image of rapacious multinationals sourcing from reckless, suppliers. The facts of the case do not entirely support this caricature, and instead point to a more complex story which point to the intrinsic problems of managing quality in the supply chain.

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(An earlier version of this paper was presented at *Euroma 08*, Groningen, June 2008)

\*corresponding author: [steve.new@sbs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:steve.new@sbs.ox.ac.uk), Saïd Business School, Oxford, OX1 1HP, UK. Tel: (44) 01865 288922.