

Fiasco averted - Product Invented

While working on the editing of Speak & Spell I attended the quarterly planning meeting with all my European product marketing colleagues and my boss Irfan Salim. During this meeting we got some bad news.

We had been avoiding a new product called Speak & Spell Compact. Sales of it in the States were very poor, trade reaction was poor and anyway we had a new English Speak & Spell to launch. The bad news was that sales in the US were so poor that we HAD to take some product to shift them - as I recall 25,000 units. I had hoped to get some support from my colleagues in Europe, after all the other European countries were selling Speak & Spell as an foreign language speaking teaching aid. But I was still a new graduate, unable to wield as much persuasion as I could now, and they refused to shoulder any of this burden. It was a nightmare, but I found an answer.

That evening Irfan and I were in the hotel bar, discussing the day and trying to come up with some ideas. We looked at the Speak & Spell Compact and realised why it wouldn't sell.

It was conceived as a low cost Speak & Spell and indeed it hit important price points (in 1981 the UK Speak & Spell was £39.95, the Compact would be £29.95). But it was seen by consumers as an inferior derivative. Speak & Spell consumers were affluent and did not want it, and it was not cheap enough to reach to a mass market where it would need to retail at £19.95.

We didn't have much time before these units arrived, and I then I had an idea. We wouldn't sell it as a cheaper derivative, but as a completely different product Speak & Write. It was not to be a poor brother to Speak & Spell but a relation in the same family of products. It was to have a different purpose, to promote spelling and writing.

We had to recolour the product (I think we even resprayed some cases of already manufactured cases) and looked at both green and blue but definitely not red. We needed to repackage the product for Europe anyway and so we re-designed it with a new logo and used lower case letters on the keypad (as teachers had long begged us to do with Speak and Spell too). We included a pencil and writing pad - it was now about 'writing'.

We created branding, marketing, trade promotion, and sold the whole lot. We did not make more.

NB:

There was one problem - a problem which I knew was an issue even that first night in the Hotel bar.

When you turned it on it said - "Welcome to Speak and Spell Compact" (I paraphrase here, I can't fully recall). We were not going to re-record it and couldn't revoice even 1 small part. So there was no choice, I had to manually create a sentence of digital speech from thin air. I had to write down a 20 character code which would create each 10/s sound bite that made up the phrase "Welcome to Speak and Write". It took me 1 week.

I was only do this at all as I had just spent 3 months editing Speak & Spell. Even Larry Brantingham (the inventor of the LPC speech chip, who was in France at the time) was amazed - it had never been tried before, digital speech created by hand.