

Introduction

The prospect of a deregulated UK milk market prompted Northern Foods to establish a joint venture company – the Northern Milk Partnership – to source as much of its annual raw milk requirement as possible directly from farmers.

In the face of widespread farmer and media suspicion and resistance, fuelled by Milk Marque (which was set up to replace the Milk Marketing Board (MMB)) Northern Foods needed a major effort to convince the industry of the value of its producer/processor partnership offering.

Objective

- Communicate the value of the Northern Milk Partnership to the rest of the industry.

Strategy

Mistral developed an integrated direct farmer communication and media relations campaign to lead a debate within the industry. The campaign focused on the key issues of future market prospects, security and trust, which emphasised Northern Foods' position in the value-added end of the milk market. In addition, the campaign sought to highlight existing major doubts over the political acceptability and long-term viability of Milk Marque.

Mistral commissioned, produced and published a series of 'Milk Debate' papers from leading independent authorities. Examining key milk market and marketing

issues, these were distributed widely and formed the basis of regular media briefings.

A two-level media relations campaign was targeted at the national and regional farming press to communicate firstly Northern Foods' unique value as a marketing partner and, secondly, the Partnership's combination of exclusive market access and producer strength. Independent coverage was also stimulated to highlight the uncertainties and doubts surrounding the future for Milk Marque.

At the same time, a regular magazine was published to communicate directly with the 15,000 farmers targeted for partnership membership. This informed them of the complex political debate which erupted over Milk Marque ahead of the time for farmers to sign up with milk buyers in advance of MMB abolition.



An intensive advertising and direct mail campaign was also organised to maximise contract signing.

Results

Northern Foods rapidly established itself as a highly influential voice in the milk debate as a direct result of the extensive media coverage obtained.

The initial target of farmers registering their interest in receiving contracts was easily achieved. By the start of the deregulated milk market, they had signed contracts for more than a third of companies' annual milk requirement.