The Anglo-Dutch Margarine War:
The Use of Advertising in Commercial Combat During the Great War, 1914-18

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Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of newspaper consumer display advertising by a retailing and manufacturing business to campaign for a change in British government food policy which favored Dutch competitors during World War I. This placed in the context of an Anglo-Dutch margarine war which in the long run resulted in a Dutch victory.

Source material – Neither the Maypole Dairy Co. business records nor the personal papers of Sir William George Watson have survived. This paper is primarily based on contemporary British and Danish newspaper articles together with some fragmentary British government archival records.

Introduction
During World War I Dutch margarine manufacturers’ ally, Sir William Capel Slaughter, the chairman of Home & Colonial Stores, manipulated British government policy to seize market share from Britain’s principal margarine retailer and manufacturer, the Maypole Dairy Co. The chairman and founder of this company, Sir William George Watson (1861-1930), sought to change the policy using traditional government lobbying, such as for example letters to ministers, together with the novel use of retail consumer advertising in Britain’s newspaper of record, The Times. This paper is focused on this advertising campaign.

A short history of the Maypole Dairy Co.
The Maypole Dairy Co. was founded by William George Watson as the Danish Dairy Co. in Wolverhampton in 1887. Together with his six brothers, Watson built a chain of dairy stores across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland specializing in the sale of premium margarine imported premium Danish and Swedish butter. Backward integration was central to Maypole’s success. In the early 1890s the business established subsidiaries in Denmark, and later Sweden, to purchase butter directly from the producers. In 1889 the brothers also became partners with Danish premium margarine manufacturer, Otto Mønsted, in the first dedicated British margarine factory at Godley, near Manchester. Later an additional and bigger factory was opened in Southall, west London. It also acquired an edible oil processing factory in Aarhus, Denmark shortly before the outbreak of World War I. By 1914 the business had grown to chain of over 800 stores.

Maypole’s wartime advertising campaign
On the eve of World War I Maypole experienced for the first time a serious decline in earnings caused by intense and remorseless competition from rival dairy chain stores. The war further disrupted its business. Restrictions were placed on the import of Danish butter. In November 1914, Maypole’s subsidiary Otto Monsted Ltd. sold its Godley margarine works to Lever Bros., a competitor, in support of the war effort. Maypole’s principal competitor, Home & Colonial Stores, took advantage of Watson’s altruism. Its chairman, Sir William Capel Slaughter, used his membership of the government’s Royal Commission on the Sugar Supply and Government Committee on Food Prices to undermine Maypole. From July 1916 the Sugar Commission granted a monopoly of the supply and sale of sugar to those retailers who sold it in 1915. It also allowed them to make its sale dependent on the purchase of “other goods” at unrestricted prices. Maypole did not sell sugar. Maypole customers who required sugar were forced to transfer their custom to stores selling imported Dutch margarine. Watson complained to the government in August and September 1916 that his firm was being “being penalized and ruined for the benefit of Dutch margarine makers.” He noted that the government had encouraged Maypole to double the capacity of its mills and factories supposedly to reduce Britain’s dependence on imported Dutch margarine. Although the government acknowledged Watson’s complaint, it failed to take any action.
So Watson placed a series of advertisements in The Times publicizing the injustice to his company (see Illustration 1). The advertisements were ostensibly targeted at purchasers of margarine at Maypole stores with information about the adverse effects of the government’s wartime food policy. However, given The Times was read by the British elite, including the monarchy and the aristocracy, it seems highly unlikely many readers were margarine consumers.

In March 1917, the new government responded by making it an offense punishable by a heavy fine for sugar retailers to compel consumers to purchase margarine (see Illustration 2). This resulted in an immediate increase in sales of Maypole margarine. Unfortunately to tackle a subsequent shortage of margarine the British government’s Food Controller commandeered margarine supplies from Maypole and redistributed them to its competitors. The introduction of rationing also damaged the company as customers favored competitors who retailed sugar. Maypole was forbidden from adding sugar to its merchandise because it had not sold this item before the war. The company resumed the publication of advertisements focusing on the injustice of government policy in The Times (see Illustration 3). The adverse effects of government wartime food policy financially weakened Maypole and it was forced to sell during 1918 its Danish edible oil interests, which included the Aarhus Oliefabrik, raising over £1 million. Normal trading conditions resumed in March 1919. Maypole resumed the expansion of its business. However, the expansion was short lived because the revival of imports of Dutch margarine and new British margarine factories established by competitors made Maypole’s Southall factory unprofitable. In 1924 Maypole was acquired by Home and Colonial Stores and Watson retired as chairman.

The wartime Maypole advertisements in the British ruling elite’s newspaper, The Times, were seen by the people who were in a position to correct the wartime food policy which treated the company unfairly. Watson succeeded in overturning the initial unjust policy. However, the Dutch margarine manufacturers’ ally, Slaughter, influenced the implementation of a new food policy, rationing, which also unjustly discriminated against Maypole. On the second occasion Maypole’s advertisements highlighting the injustice against its stores failed to produce a change of government policy. It can be argued that the advertisements were targeted at the right audience, politicians, but were only partially successful because Slaughter used his membership of the Royal Commission on the Sugar Supply and Government Committee on Food Prices to thwart the altruistic and patriotic Watson. The principal beneficiaries were the Dutch margarine manufacturers and Slaughter’s chain store business, Home & Colonial Stores.

References
Illustration 1

SUGAR
AND
HIGH PRICES
OF FOOD

If you can obtain your necessary sugar supplies without being compelled to pay 1/- per lb. for Dutch Margarine, help the British Maypole Company to keep down prices by buying THE VERY BEST

BRITISH-MADE
MAYPOLE
MARGARINE

AT 7d.

per lb

The Dutch Margarine at 1/- per lb. yields extortionate profits to the Dutch manufacturers and the retailers, but your sugar necessities should not be exploited to force you to pay these high profits.

MAYPOLE DAIRY CO. LTD.
888 BRANCHES NOW OPEN.

Illustration 2

SUGAR QUESTION
AND FREEDOM

Justice to Maypole and British Industry.

The Food Controller has made it illegal to insist upon the purchase of other goods as a condition of obtaining sugar. The public are now free to buy in the best market, so they can now buy Maypole Tea and British Made Maypole Margarine instead of being compelled to buy Foreign Made Margarine.

MAYPOLE MARGARINE
THE VERY BEST
10
10
D.
A LB.

MAYPOLE MARGARINE
MIXED WITH BUTTER
1/
1/
A LB.

MAYPOLE BUTTER 1/11 a lb.
MAYPOLE TEA 2/4 a lb.

MAYPOLE DAIRY CO. LTD.
889 Branches Now Open.

MARGARINE SUPPLIES.

To MAYPOLE CUSTOMERS

Owing to the absence of a national compulsory individual Rationing Scheme, and the great difficulties caused thereby, the Food Controller has been compelled to control the distribution and to take over large quantities of our Margarine. This will considerably lessen the supply available for MAYPOLE customers, and compel many of them to vainly seek their supplies elsewhere, unless an equal share is secured for everybody by the prompt introduction of a national and compulsory individual Rationing Scheme.

MAYPOLE BRANCHES could easily have retailed in eight hours the whole of the week's output of their FACTORY, but they hoped and expected that it would be considered more advisable and fair for them to reserve some supply for sale to their working class customers at the end of each week.

The MAYPOLE DAIRY COMPANY, Limited, are in no way responsible for the shortage, as they have in the face of great difficulty always done their utmost to increase the British manufacture and to keep down the retail price of Margarine.

They therefore hope that these facts will not be forgotten, and their customers will return to them when conditions become normal, and they are again in a position to distribute the MAYPOLE MAKE OF MARGARINE at their 889 Branches.

MAYPOLE DAIRY CO., LTD.

Source: The Times (2017b), 'Advertisement', 28 December.