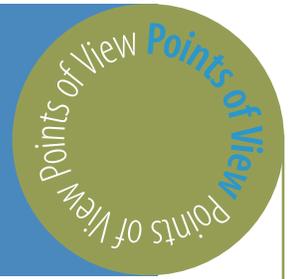


Managing Food-Safety Concerns with Strategic Communications



Food safety has risen to a new level of prominence for consumers, public-interest groups, activists and the media. With this change has come the need for food companies to manage proactively food-safety concerns. Among the steps domestic and international companies are taking to respond to real and perceived threats is the creation of sound food-safety communications strategies. These strategies can be a company's most valuable tool for protecting revenues, reputation, share price and financial foundation.

To create a successful communications program, food companies need to take into account the complexity of the food-safety landscape:

- There are a large number of players in the food chain, from farm to fork, that sometimes have diverse or even conflicting interests.
- A specific concern or issue is often defined, or even controlled, by the group that takes the lead on the issue.
- Discussions about food safety tend to focus on negative issues, such as the risks to consumers of eating certain food products, rather than on the positive implications of food-safety measures that protect consumer health.

The following guidelines can help food companies more proactively address and manage food-safety issues.

TARGET COMMUNICATIONS TO ALL STAKEHOLDER AUDIENCES

The food chain is populated by a wealth of stakeholders. Although direct communications with consumers – the primary stakeholders – can never be overlooked, neither should communications with food-safety and health experts, consumer groups, legislators, and other relevant third parties. By recognizing the importance of all audiences when communicating food safety, the food industry can

ensure that its messages will resound strongly and meet the needs of each stakeholder group.

The credibility of third-party endorsements resulting from stakeholder communications should also never be overlooked. For example, partnerships with scientific experts and constructive dialogue with consumer and activist groups can help reassure stakeholders that food products and food-production practices are safe.

Example: For a leading animal-health company, communicating with all relevant stakeholders on a one-on-one basis at the time of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval was critical to achieving marketplace acceptance of a potentially controversial product. A systematic stakeholder-education program ensured that all parties were thoroughly informed and educated about the product, understood the science, and had an opportunity to discuss their concerns as the product was approved and launched. The communications took place as informal one-on-one meetings. Because of the informal dialogue with all key stakeholders, the company was able to build trust and acceptance of the product. It was also able to alleviate concerns about potential food-safety issues as the product was introduced to the marketplace.

PERFORM ANTICIPATORY ISSUES MANAGEMENT

By studying past issues and crises, food-industry members can identify and describe the typical lifecycle of a particular issue, and predict and anticipate certain issues before they turn into crises. When addressing these issues early in their evolution, a company can manage, mitigate and in some cases even prevent a specific issue from becoming a crisis. Companies can also begin developing valuable third-party relationships, messages and materials. If a company fails to address these issues until a crisis evolves, the crisis is often far more difficult to manage.

In anticipatory issues management, the potential and most probable issues and challenges regarding a product, production process or practice are carefully mapped out before the product or practice is submitted to regulatory agencies for approval and introduced into the marketplace. The mapping out of most likely challenges, barriers and issues becomes an integrated part of the strategic marketing and communications-planning process.

Example: In 2003, McDonald's brought together a group of stakeholders including Tyson Foods, Cargill, Elanco Animal Health and the Environmental Defense Fund. The group's mission was to develop a set of principles to support the responsible use of antibiotics in meat production, while preserving the long-term effectiveness of antibiotics in both human and veterinary medicine. The group prepared a policy for antibiotic use in food animals – "Global Policy on Antibiotics Use in Food Animals" – that McDonald's implements in its business. The policy was publicized widely in the media and promoted to all McDonald's suppliers and customers. This initiative demonstrated McDonald's leadership efforts as a responsible corporate citizen, and it helped preserve the continued, responsible use of antibiotics in food animal production.

QUANTIFY THE RISK TO THE CONSUMER

Scientific risk analysis – risk assessment, risk management and risk communications – has become an important tool for enhancing food safety. The World Organization for Animal Health, the FDA and other regulatory agencies actively support and endorse risk assessments for evaluating the safety of products and practices pertaining to animal agriculture and food production. The following two trends in risk analysis have emerged:

- Movement from *qualitative risk assessments* (relying on subjective categorization of high, medium and low risks) to *quantitative risk assessments* (categorizing the risk numerically based on mathematical modeling).
- Expansion in the focus of risk assessments from risk alone to covering both risks and benefits to consumers and other stakeholders.

The food industry has begun to embrace risk analysis. The industry now recognizes that being actively involved in driving risk

assessments is a necessary means to obtaining regulatory approval and maintaining products in the market. The food industry also uses risk analysis to assess whether the risk related to a certain product or practice will be so high that the product or practice should be stopped. By proactively driving risk analysis, the food industry can better ensure that sound scientific principles and methodologies are applied to risk assessments, so that risk assessments are not misused to ban products.

Example: Several risk-assessment studies performed by academic researchers and risk assessors have shown that the probable danger to human health from using antibiotics in food animals is extremely small. One study showed that the risks to consumers of acquiring antibiotic resistance varies from less than 1 in 14 million to less than 1 in 29 billion. A food company compared the risks related to eating meat from animals raised with antibiotics to other daily-life risks. In comparison, the probability of dying from heart disease is 1 in 384 and the probability of dying from a bee sting is 1 in 6 million.

REDEFINE THE DEBATE

A classic strategic approach to issues management is to redefine or reshape an issue or debate – adding new perspectives or new data, or creating a debate with an entirely different approach. This approach can include:

- Involving comments and opinions from stakeholders who have not yet spoken on an issue.
- Demonstrating that a debate is being conducted on insufficient or out-of-date data.
- Shifting focus from the negative to the positive, e.g., the value of a product to consumers rather than the risks.

Example: The global animal health industry has been defending itself on the issue of antibiotic resistance since Denmark, Sweden and the European Union began attacking the use of antibiotic growth promoters in 1996 and 1997. Opponents of animal antibiotics claim that using antibiotics in food animal production leads to the transfer of antibiotic resistance from food animals to humans via the food, thereby compromising the effectiveness of antibiotics in the treatment of infections in humans. For several years, the animal health industry's defense

has demonstrated that the critics are incorrect: There is no direct evidence that there is a human health risk in using antibiotics in farm animal production. Recently, animal-health companies have started to redefine this debate by providing evidence that the use of antibiotics in food animal production not only prevents disease in food animals, but it also reduces the bacterial pathogen load in food. Thus, antibiotics can prevent sick animals and bacteria from entering the food chain.

TAKE THE LEAD ON THE ISSUE

The food industry can also benefit by taking the lead on a certain issue, rather than having the issue defined for them by other stakeholders. Food companies can take this lead by initiating new research, raising a public debate about an issue or implementing new food-safety procedures before other stakeholders create their own debate.

When other stakeholders take the lead, a food company is often put in a defensive position and any response to criticism tends to be perceived as self-serving. If other stakeholders drive the agenda, there is a higher risk that a food company will have to take action based on perceptions and emotions rather than scientific fact.

Example: Infection from E.coli is a serious food-borne illness that sometimes affects consumers and beef producers because of local outbreaks. However, E.coli outbreaks are quite rare and can be reduced through a variety of production and meat-handling practices. In 2003, the beef industry, under the auspices of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), undertook an integrated effort to take the lead on the debate about E.coli. A week-long summit of representatives from every part of the beef-production chain met to discuss and commit to ways to further reduce the incidence of E.coli in the beef supply by implementing a series of industry-wide actions. Teams were identified and chartered to make decisions for change. The result of the summit was the development and launch of new research looking at creative solutions to E.coli. They include the use of feed additives, vaccines and cattle-cleaning systems, and a number of new interventions that will

reduce the incidence of E.coli in beef. By taking the lead on the E.coli issue the NCBA has demonstrated that the beef industry takes E.coli seriously and is implementing steps to protect consumers against this food-borne disease. Please visit www.beef.org for a summary of the approaches developed at the summit.

SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE

Multiple consumer research studies on food safety reveal that consumers prefer that industry, appropriate government agencies and third parties speak with one voice about food-safety issues. However, when a company is faced with a difficult food issue or crisis, it is often challenging to engage third-parties and organizations to support communications activities. These groups are frequently reluctant to become involved in full-blown crisis situations when the gravity of the issue is uncertain and they risk having their own reputation tainted. However, when food-safety issues are addressed before they have evolved into a crisis, food companies can develop broad platforms that engage many parties and enable industry and government agencies to speak with one voice. This can be accomplished by:

- Engaging other stakeholders and third parties early in a dialogue about an issue in order to educate them about a product, production practice or concern.
- Demonstrating willingness to listen to stakeholder and third-party concerns, and responding to questions in an open and constructive manner.
- Building a relationship based on trust that will enable the company to involve third parties if there is a need for seeking their future help and support.

Example: Following the most recent Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis, the U.S. beef industry began working proactively with domestic and international partners and government officials to communicate the safety of U.S. beef. Its goal is to maintain domestic consumer confidence in U.S. beef production and support efforts to reopen more international markets to U.S. beef.

CONCLUSION

By using food-safety communications as an effective platform for boosting consumer confidence, customer satisfaction and company reputation – and not only as defensive measures and crisis-response tools – food companies will be able to take the lead in proactively addressing food-safety concerns. ■

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