

2017 Annual Meat Conference

Questions and Answers – Emerging Issues and Crisis Management

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The listeria wording is standard government wording on all listeria related recalls. How could that be left out?

We recognize the need to follow all regulatory guidelines and recommendations for public notification. We aren't suggesting leaving any of it out, merely analyzing how that language fits within the Image Repair crisis communication model and fits into the larger narrative of a recall's communications.

How do smaller businesses keep track of social media trends especially as it pertains to their business?

Small businesses can do a few things to keep up with social media. First, closely follow both your industry's trade publications and socially driven news sources such as Mashable and Tech Crunch. You can learn a lot about trends from larger businesses, then scale any solutions to which you might want to subscribe to meet your budget, objectives, etc. Second, we recommend using a free or low-cost Twitter tool like HootSuite or TweetDeck to monitor industry-specific topics through hashtag searches such as #foodbusiness.

Can you provide an example of when denial was used appropriately?

Sure thing! In April 2016, Whole Foods' reputation was attacked by, of all people, a church pastor who claimed the bakery of a Whole Foods in Austin, Texas had decorated a cake he had ordered with a phrase derogatory to LGBTQ audiences. After investigating the allegation, the company quickly – within 24 hours of the news breaking -- issued a full-throated denial, then filed a counter-suit against the church pastor to emphasize its position. A less-prepared brand might have immediately issued an apology and vowed to investigate the situation fully. The issuance of an apology, however, is tantamount to an admission of guilt. Whole Foods took quick action though, and working on just* initial information, took a strong stand and owned the high ground. It was one of the best examples of the year on how a smartly prepared communications team, along with high-integrity management, did the right thing for its brand.

*This was an important factor. If Whole Foods had waited for a "full and thorough investigation," they would have lost the news cycle.

It seems like the public wants to hear an immediate apology. Is that why brands do it so quickly?

Our view is that quick apologies are a symptom of inexperienced or incompetent crisis communication staff. First and foremost, communication teams have a responsibility to protect the brands they serve, no matter the circumstance. Having a well-prepared arsenal of image repair-based messaging can easily supersede any knee-jerk apology that might be conjured and conveyed.

In addition, our experience tells us that quick apologies are not a requirement of the public, but instead are demanded by the media in order to short circuit facts and assign blame. Why does the media do this? A study Hahn Public Communications performed just two years ago showed that the average length of a media soundbite today is 8.95 seconds. This conforms, generally, to audience attention-span. A 2015 study conducted by Microsoft found that since the year 2000, the average adult attention span has dropped from 12 seconds to eight seconds — less than that of a goldfish. Assigning quick blame is a

media staple these days. That's what they need to score a scoop and earn ratings points, no matter the truth or facts.

Here's the lesson: When inexperience or incompetency pairs up with short attention-span dynamics, quick apologies are often the product – even when they shouldn't be used.

What is the average percentage of business lost after a food product recall?

It's tough to say how much business is lost after a recall, and how much is temporary or longer-lasting. Many voluntary recalls happen every day with little to no impact to a business, then recalls like Blue Bell cost the company millions. We've seen a [few places](#) say the average cost of a recall is \$10 million. While it seems like recalls are everywhere these days, it's not that we're seeing more contamination, but rather we are getting much better at detecting issues and have so many more communication channels.

What's your take on the Chipotle crisis? How good were they at enduring it and what's your prediction on the future state of the brand?

This is a very good question for our Food Practice leader, Jenny Gregorcyk. She's been tracking Chipotle since they first reported foodborne illness issues. Here's what Jenny had to say: "If I had to give a grade to Chipotle, I would give them a C-. They have survived this crisis – in fact, they are now [America's favorite Mexican chain once again](#) – but their stock price and sales still have a long way to full recovery. The company started off strong with its messaging, but they stumbled along the way with issues like executives going rogue in interviews and blaming the media for making the issue seem worse than it was. They also didn't seem to have a clear strategy to gain back customers. They tried to give away free food in the months following the outbreak, but hadn't done enough to build consumer confidence for anyone to want free food from them."

Jenny has a separate presentation on Chipotle, benchmarking their messaging in the first few months of the crisis, that she can share via phone or web interview.