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Navigating a Food Safety Crisis: Building Credibility Through Transparency

KANSAS CITY, Mo – Mon., Sept 6, 2016 – No one is immune from a food safety crisis and its ripple effects on consumers, stakeholders and hard-earned reputations. In fact, crisis is never too far away, said crisis and risk communications expert and author [Dr. Matthew Seeger](#), professor and dean of the College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

“You’re always one or two events away,” he said. “It’s a very cyclical process. Every time one crisis is over, there’s an opportunity for another one to begin. For those of us who study this, we’re a little surprised there aren’t more negative events.”

With this in mind, the food system needs to think about how it can be prepared, said Dr. Seeger, whose work includes the study of food safety and recalls. “What can we do to ensure we have capacity to respond to events and build resilience through our learning process?”

Successfully navigating a food safety crisis includes establishing trust long before crisis strikes so consumers know you as reputable and ethical, according to Donna Moenning with The Center for Food Integrity (CFI). Trust allows you to more successfully weather the storm and rebuild, she said. The latest CFI research shows that transparency is the key to building trust.

“Transparency is no longer optional, it’s a basic consumer expectation,” said Moenning. Consumers don’t trust ‘Big food,’ in part, because when a food safety crisis strikes, its ripple effects are felt far and wide. Transparency helps overcome this “big is bad” bias.

The research shows that when it comes to transparency, what matters most to consumers is seeing a company’s practices – demonstrating through videos, blogs, advertising and promotion how you ensure food safety and sustainability, and care for your employees and community, for example.

Why are practices important? Because practices are an illustration of a company’s values in action – and values build trust, said Moenning.

Consumers also want the ability to engage, be heard and acknowledged, and get their questions answered promptly and in easy-to-understand language, according to the CFI study.

“If it applies, feature third-party verification or audit information in your outreach,” said Moenning. “This verifies that you’re actually following through with your practices.” The research shows the consumers feel a higher level of comfort knowing that a credible, objective third-party confirms your practices – especially when it comes to the issues of food safety and animal well-being.

Dr. Seeger sees this growing need for information.

“Overtime we have seen increased concern over food safety even though we know our food systems have never been safer,” said Dr. Seeger. “Our expectations regarding food safety are growing and our informational expectations are growing quite significantly. We expect to have all the information we want at our fingertips or on our phone the moment we want it.”

His advice when it comes to communicating in a food safety crisis includes tailoring your response so it takes into account the emotional response to an event instead of dismissing consumers as unformed and uneducated about the issues. “That’s a great way to undermine your credibility,” he said.

Provide information to empower consumers to make informed decisions and reduce their vulnerability to consequences of the crisis, and encourage a constructive response to the crisis or danger. “It’s a myth that people panic during a crisis. Typically, they respond in relatively rational and orderly ways based on the information they have access to,” said Dr. Seeger.

Ultimately, he said crisis can lead to opportunities.

“If we think about it broadly, a crisis has richer possibilities that can provide a positive and needed point of transition and change for a company,” he said. “As the old adage goes, never let a good crisis go to waste.”

Learn more about consumer attitudes about the food system and engaging with transparency in the CFI research report, “[A Clear View of Transparency and How It Builds Trust](#),” at www.foodintegrity.org. Access the webinar, “Navigating a Food Safety Crisis,” featuring Dr. Seeger and Donna Moenning, under the Education tab.

The Center for Food Integrity is a not-for-profit organization with members that represent every segment of the food system. CFI does not lobby or advocate for individual food companies or brands. Participating organizations represent the diversity of the food system, from farmers and ranchers to universities, NGOs, restaurants, food companies, retailers and food processors.