



Motivating Consumers to Respond Appropriately to Food Recalls

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The Food Policy Institute

- The Food Policy Institute (FPI) was founded in 1999 with the mission of addressing key issues in the production, marketing, distribution, sales, consumption, and regulation of food and other agricultural products.
- As an academic research institute, our role is to provide unbiased information and education that is timely, relevant, and responsive to the needs of government, industry, and the consumer.

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Experiment Station



Food Biosecurity



- Funding: USDA- CSREES (now NIFA)
 - National Integrated Food Safety Initiative
 - How do we help consumers regain confidence in the food supply after an incident of food contamination?
 - Food Recalls are an important tool in responding to contamination incidents
 - There is virtually no academic literature dealing with how consumers respond to food recalls



Focus on Food Recalls

Public Response to the Contaminated Spinach Recall of 2006



Cara L. Cuite, Ph.D.
Sarah C. Condry
Mary L. Nucci, M.S.
William K. Hallman, Ph.D.

Food Policy Institute
February 5, 2007

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OF NEW JERSEY

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www.foodpolicy.rutgers.edu



Two Reports

Public Response to the *Salmonella* Saintpaul Outbreak of 2008



FOOD POLICY INSTITUTE

Cara L. Cuite, Ph.D.
Scott D. Schefske, R.D.
Elizabeth M. Randolph, B.A.
Neal H. Hooker, Ph.D.
Mary L. Nucci, M.S.
William K. Hallman, Ph.D.

January 29, 2009



Consumer Responses to Food Recalls: 2008 National Survey Report

Food Policy Institute

William K. Hallman, Ph.D.

Cara L. Cuite, Ph.D.

Neal H. Hooker, Ph.D.

April 14, 2009



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Today

Food Recalls and the American Public: Improving Communications

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Food Policy Institute
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March 15, 2009



Available free online:
www.foodpolicy.rutgers.edu



The Realities



Global Market for Food

- Increasing globalization of both supply and demand for agricultural products
- Consolidation of processing, distribution, retail



Global Market for Food

- Implications:
 - Increasing competition to supply commodities at lowest prices
 - Increasing competition to provide year-round supplies
 - Increasing complexity in supply chains
 - Potentially increased anonymity in the system
 - Differing standards for quality and safety among cultures, countries, and regions



Better Surveillance

- Increasing ability to identify patterns of foodborne illness outbreaks through epidemiological surveillance systems
 - New statistical systems monitoring spikes in illness, leading to quicker identification of outbreaks
 - 12 of 20 recent major outbreaks identified by the CDC's PulseNet system **involved previously unknown food vehicles**
 - Increasing ability to identify the “DNA Fingerprint” of particular strains of pathogens in an outbreak
 - Advanced capability to measure contaminants in trace amounts



- Implications:
 - Increasing public and regulatory attention on the quality and safety of food
 - The likelihood of an increasing number of food recalls



We Must Get Better at Communicating About Food Recalls



Getting it Right

- Need to alert the public
- Motivate them to take appropriate actions
- Get them to *stop* taking those actions after the problem has been resolved
- Not cause people to be unnecessarily frightened or have them lose confidence in the food supply in the process



Getting it Wrong

- People unnecessarily get sick or die
- People unnecessarily avoid healthy nutritious foods
- Companies go bankrupt
- Consumers lose confidence in the food system



Current Efforts are Ineffective

- Americans think food recalls are important, but they don't take actions themselves:
 - Most Americans (84%) say they pay close attention to news reports about food recalls
 - 81% say that when they hear about a food recall, they tell others about it.
 - Yet, fewer than 60% of Americans say they have *ever* checked their home for a recalled food item



Motivating People to Action

- Getting people to take action requires they:
 - Are aware of the recall
 - Believe it applies to them
 - Believe that the consequences are serious enough to warrant action
 - Can identify the affected products
 - Believe that discarding (or returning) the product is both necessary and sufficient to resolve the problem
- Bottom line:
 - **Communications must emphasize each**



Restoring Confidence

- Once the problem that led to the recall has been properly resolved, consumers must also receive the message that the products are again safe to eat



Improve Awareness



Market Segmentation

- No such thing as “*The Public*”
- Marketers have become sophisticated in identifying and reaching specific market segments
 - They target and deliver messages that make sense to, and meet the needs of particular audiences.
- Bottom line:
 - Relying on a single message or approach is not an effective way to *sell* or *recall* products



Susceptible Populations

- The presence of undeclared allergens is a frequent cause for food product recalls
- In such cases, reaching out to the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN), (www.foodallergy.org), would be an effective way to reach audiences who could benefit most from the information



FAAN

THE FOOD ALLERGY &
ANAPHYLAXIS NETWORK



Television is Still Important

Where did you *first* hear about:

Spinach, 2006

Television:	71%
Radio:	9%
Other people:	8%
Newspapers:	5%
Other:	7%



Tomatoes, 2008

Television:	66%
Other people:	9%
Restaurants:	6%
Stores:	2%
Other:	17%



Hard to Reach Audiences

- Our research has found that consumers least aware of recalls are:
 - Younger
 - Less educated
 - Unmarried



Social Media

twitter

imvu

facebook

flickr

diigo

 Blogger™


xanga

 friendster®

 **myspace.com**
a place for friends



Notices in English Inadequate

- Most consumer advisories and warnings and notices of voluntary recalls are issued in English, yet:
 - More than 175 languages are spoken in the United States
 - At least 30 others are spoken by large groups of Americans
 - Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) speaks a language other than English at home
 - Spanish is most common secondary language



Written Notices not Enough

- US Department of Education estimates that:
 - More than 30 million adults (14% of the adult population) have “no more than the most *simple* and *concrete* literacy skills”
 - An additional 63 million adults (29% of the adult population) can perform only simple, everyday literacy activities
- Bottom Line:
 - Written warnings, information about products, and instructions about what to do with them are incomprehensible to many





Improve Relevance



Important but not Relevant

- Most Americans (92%) agree that food recalls save lives
 - 78% believe that most recalls are serious enough to warrant public attention

But:

- Only *half* say that food recalls have had *any* impact on their lives
- Relatively few (17%) think it is likely that they have recalled foods in their homes.
- More than a third (38%) believe that *their* food is less likely to be recalled than the food of other Americans



Why Recalls are not Relevant

- Optimistic Bias
 - Most people assume that compared to other people, they are less vulnerable to a wide variety of health and other problems
- Most information communicated is about risks to people *in general*
 - People may ignore risk information, assuming that the messages are aimed at other more vulnerable individuals



Why Recalls are not Relevant

- People underestimate the number of food recalls
 - Median estimate: 10 food recalls in a year
- They underestimate the likelihood that the products *they* buy would be subject to a recall



Why Recalls are not Relevant

- They often do not recognize recalled brands
 - Problem of “co-packs”
 - store brands, private labels, packer labels
- They lack personal experience
 - Only 10% say they have ever found a recalled product
 - People judge future likelihoods based on past experience





Personalized Information

“Some grocery stores provide personalized services that alert consumers if a food product that they had already purchased had been recalled.”

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Would you want your grocery store to offer this service?	80%	19%	1%
Would you be willing to pay for this service?	25%	67%	8%



Convey Consequences



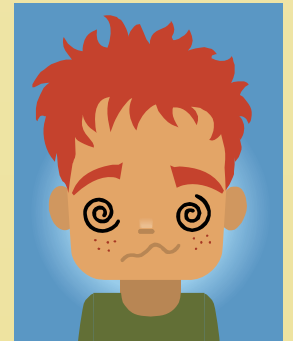
People Ignore Recalls

- 12% of Americans say they have knowingly eaten a food they thought had been recalled.
 - only 9 individuals, out of 1,101 respondents (<1%), thought they had been made ill by a recalled food product
- Doing so, without apparent consequence is likely to weaken confidence in future warnings



Foodborne Illness

- Americans underestimate the incidence of foodborne illness
- Are unable to identify groups of people particularly at risk for foodborne illness
- Cannot identify the symptoms
- Do not recognize foodborne illness when they personally experience it
 - Only 18% of the respondents in our 2008 study reported that they had *ever* been made sick as the result of eating contaminated food





Problem with Language

- *Voluntary* recall
 - If it were *serious*, the government would *make* the company recall its product
- Class I, II, III recall has no inherent meaning
 - Which is more most serious?



Living Foods Inc. Initiates a Voluntary Market Withdrawal of Alfalfa Sprouts Because of Possible Health Risk

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - October 7, 2010 - **Out of an abundance of caution**, Living Foods, Inc. of Ionia, Michigan is recalling bulk and retail-size packages of Alfalfa Sprouts, because it has the potential to be contaminated with Salmonella, an organism which can cause serious and sometimes fatal infections in young children, frail or elderly people, and others with weakened immune systems. Healthy persons infected with Salmonella often experience fever, diarrhea (which may be bloody), nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain. In rare circumstances, infection with Salmonella can result in the organism getting into the bloodstream and producing more severe illnesses such as arterial infections (i.e., infected aneurysms), endocarditis and arthritis.

The alfalfa sprouts were distributed to retail and food service facilities through wholesale produce suppliers in Michigan.

The products subject to this market withdrawal include:

Four (4) 1-pound bags of alfalfa sprouts, packaged in unlabeled 1-pound plastic bags in a box labeled as Living Foods, Inc. ALFALFA SPROUTS, with a SELL BY DATE of 10/2/2010.

Five (5) Pound Bulk Container (bag in a box) of alfalfa sprouts labeled as, Living Foods, Inc. ALFALFA SPROUTS, with a SELL BY DATE of 10/2/2010.

...

No illnesses have been reported to date.

A single package of Living Foods, Inc. ALFALFA SPROUTS tested positive for Salmonella spp. The company is working closely with the FDA and the State of Michigan to determine the cause of the problem.

Consumers who have purchased these products should discard them.

Wholesalers and retailers in possession of this product should remove the product from sale and cease distribution.

Consumers with questions may contact Living Foods, Inc. at the number listed above.

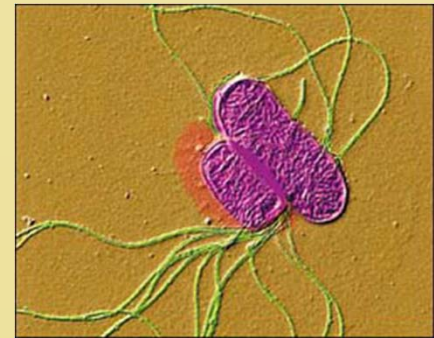
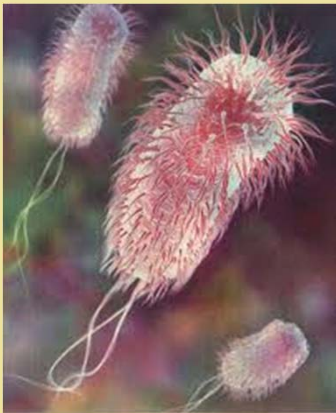


Accentuating Identifying Information



Problem of Invisibility

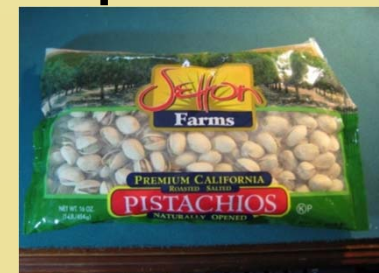
- The pathogens that lead to foodborne illness and recalls are invisible





Problem of Invisibility

- We rely on other cues to know what is safe and what is not
 - Often these are visual or olfactory
 - Spoilage bacteria (responsible for bad tastes and odors) are not a reliable indicator of Pathogenic Bacteria (responsible for foodborne illness)
 - The “sniff-test” is inadequate
- Without those cues, it is easy for people to ignore or to amplify the real risks





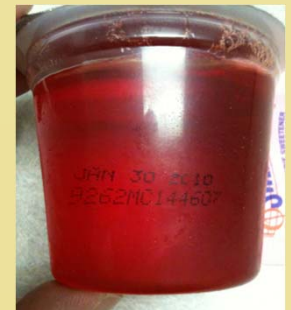
Problem of Invisibility

- People often have a difficult time distinguishing which products are part of recalls and which are not
 - Only 13% of Americans who have looked for a recalled food say they used specific information to tell whether the food was recalled.
 - All used lot or batch numbers; a few used “sell by dates”



Problem of Invisibility

- Not all products carry readily interpretable information





Problem of Invisibility

- Some people adopt a “better safe than sorry” strategy
 - 28% of Americans say they have simply thrown out food as the result of a recall
 - Some avoid or discard products that are similar to those that have been recalled, or made by the same company
 - In doing so they may be unnecessarily avoiding or wasting healthy, nutritious foods



Making the Invisible Visible

- Point-of-purchase materials can be effective
- We need a searchable database of recalled food products that includes pictures, UPC codes, and other identifying information
 - Current FDA and USDA databases are organized by recall, not by product



Compelling Appropriate Actions



People Ignore Recalls

- 11% of Americans say they knowingly ate tomatoes that were part of the *Salmonella* Saintpaul advisory



Reasons for eating “recalled” tomatoes

Statement	% citing
I thought they wouldn't hurt me	41%
I distrust the government and/or media	13%
It must be safe if it is being sold	13%
I made it safe (e.g., washed it, cooked it)	12%
Other	20%



Provide Specific Advice

- People *want* this information
- It appears to be *motivating* to consumers
 - Comparative ranking of 10 messages intended to motivate consumers to check their homes for a recalled food.
 - Top 5:
 - 1) A large number of people across the country have reportedly become ill from eating this food
 - 2) The recalled product should be thrown in the garbage
 - 3) One person in your town has reportedly become ill from eating this food
 - 4) The recalled products can be returned for a full refund
 - 5) Washing will not make the food safe



Media Coverage of Recalls

- During both the spinach recall and the tomato/pepper warnings, TV and newspaper coverage focused on:
 - The number of deaths and illnesses related to the outbreaks
 - The progress of the investigation



Media Coverage of Recalls

- It *did not* focus on:
 - What products were safe to eat
 - Details concerning what was unsafe
 - Symptoms of the foodborne illness
 - Groups of people particularly at risk
 - Providing practical information to consumers about how they could avoid becoming ill themselves.
- Consumers were unlikely to read or hear “what to do”



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•The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect official positions or policies of GMA, USDA, the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, or of the Food Policy Institute, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.