How Consumer Perception Has Changed Since Jack in the Box

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Introduction and Overview

- “Consumers are entitled to information that could affect their health and transparency helps them to make informed choices.”  Sir John Krebs (2003)

- Modern consumers are becoming more conscious of the health risks inherent in food manufacturing.

- Food risks are not perceived in the same manner as other risks due to the much more intimate relationship we all have with food.

- Today, we will be looking at what has changed about consumer perception of food safety since the sentinel Jack in the Box E. coli O157:H7 outbreak happened twenty years ago.
Background

- Every consumer has a unique relationship and attitude towards food and food safety based on their personal life history.

- In attempting to have you understand my perspective towards food safety, I would first like to share with you some of my personal history and why I call myself a consumer-oriented food safety consultant.

- Three phases of my food safety career:
  - Jack in the Box and the consumer food safety movement
  - Advocacy, working with victims and consumers, consulting on cases
  - Recent graduate work in communication
Meet Lauren Rudolph
d. December 28, 1992 (San Diego)

- Only 4 states required reporting of *E. coli* O157:H7 at the time; California was not one of them.
- Subsequently, the contaminated meat went north to Seattle where 3 more children died in early 1993 of hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS).
- Close to 700 people in 4 states were ill in this outbreak from undercooked burgers.
- These deaths and illnesses prompted the birth of the modern consumer food safety movement.
Over the next few years victims of all types of foodborne illness came forward to tell their stories to the press, state and federal government, and industry officials; there was a lot of push-back.

20 years ago the pace of information flow was relatively slow.

Food safety news that used to take an entire day to transmit can now be shared instantly with the push of a button.

All food news is now global news and impacts wide and diverse populations.

Over the past 20 years, I have personally worked with thousands of victims and their families as well as consumers concerned about the safety of the food they feed their families.
Communication

- Why graduate school for communication instead of public health or food microbiology?
  - Importance of words, rhetoric, and demeanor in communicating with consumers

- Media effect on consumer perceptions – print, broadcast, and social media

- Risk Communication Theories and Research
  - Kasper: The Social Amplification of Risk
  - Band: Risk = Hazard + Outrage
  - Lofstedt: How to Make Food Risk Communication Better
  - Short- McKendree et al: Survey on perceptions of food safety, production, & labeling
The Social Amplification of Risk: Kaspersion

Figure 6.2 Detailed conceptual framework of social amplification of risk
Crisis Communication: Sandman
There are several “outrage factors” that are intrinsic parts of what is meant by risk:

- Voluntariness, Control, Fairness, Process, Morality, Familiarity, Memorability, Dread, Diffusion in time and space

“When a risk manager continues to ignore these factors- and continues to be surprised by the public’s response of outrage- it is worth asking just whose behavior is irrational.”

Remember that the correlation is very low between whether a risk is dangerous and whether consumers find it upsetting.
How to Make Food Risk Communication Better

- Lofstedt (UK) talks about the issues of media amplification, rebuilding public trust, and better communicating uncertainty.

- Risk communication is defined as “The flow of information and risk evaluations back and forth between academic experts, regulatory practitioners, interest groups, and the general public (p.870).”

- The Role of Transparency:
  - The public is considerably more competent than what the experts give them credit for.
  - Simplifying risk messages can cause the public to think authorities are lying.
  - Communicating uncertainty will actually increase public trust and help it make informed choices.
  - Honesty can help alleviate the stigmatization of certain commodities after food scares, especially if additional controls will be instituted.

- Media amplification makes all these issues increasingly important.
National Survey, 2011

- The most regular day-to-day communication with consumers about food takes place through labeling.
- There are some misconceptions about giving consumers too much information on labels and/or confusing them.
- A survey of 1000 consumers spotlights interesting information:
  - In detailing how often participants read the information on meat, egg or milk products while making purchase decisions:
    - 21% Always read the information
    - 53% Usually or sometimes read the information
    - 26% Rarely or never read the product information

  When asked whether they felt they were provided with adequate information:
  - 34% said too little information was provided
  - 63% said adequate information was provided
  - Only 3% said too much information was provided
Questions Answered and Lessons Learned

- Has consumer perception of food safety changed over the last 20 years?
- Would consumers faced with information 20 years ago and then given the same information today react in the same manner?
  - Uphill battle with winning and maintaining consumer trust
  - Increased interest in anything green, natural or organic...complicates matters
  - Decreased blind trust in both government regulatory agencies and industry trade groups
  - Increase opportunity for individual companies to develop relationship with consumers through social media
  - Political forces are more important than ever ...5 steps forward and sometimes 10 steps back
    - Food safety legislation is passed and then defunded, modified or not enforced
    - Companies are rarely held accountable for egregious food safety problems
    - Veggie libel laws make consumer extremely uncomfortable

- Consumers’ food safety perceptions have adapted to a changing world in which their actions and pace of decision-making has drastically accelerated.
- Clear, precise, honest and timely communication about food issues is important.
Conclusions

- Things have to change to develop and retain consumer trust.
  - Recommendation 1: Have a consumer social media team in place before a crisis.
  - Pre-emptive; develops trust relationship; consumers’ needs met on more individual and personal basis.

- Senge-The Fifth Discipline: the difference between dialogue and discussion.
  - Recommendation 2: Be very careful with “Consumer Education” rhetoric; dialogue with consumers instead of lecturing them.
  - This type of language is counter-productive with victims and the general public.

- Words, rhetoric and demeanor are key to influencing good consumer food safety perception.
References


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