

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 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



Jack in the Box

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.



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Advocacy

- 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 for 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
 - **Kasperson: The Social Amplification of Risk**
 - **Sandman: 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: Kasperson

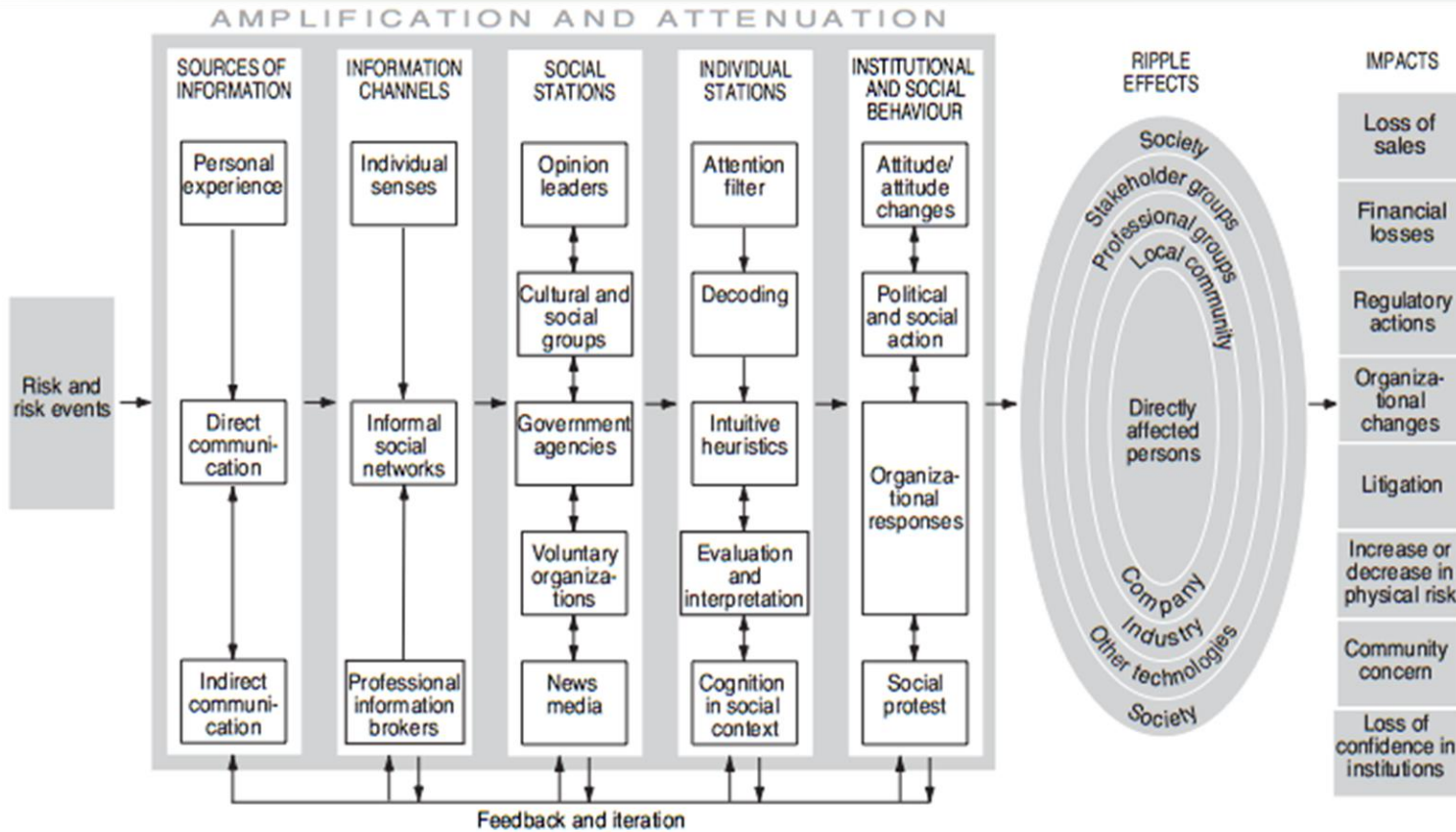
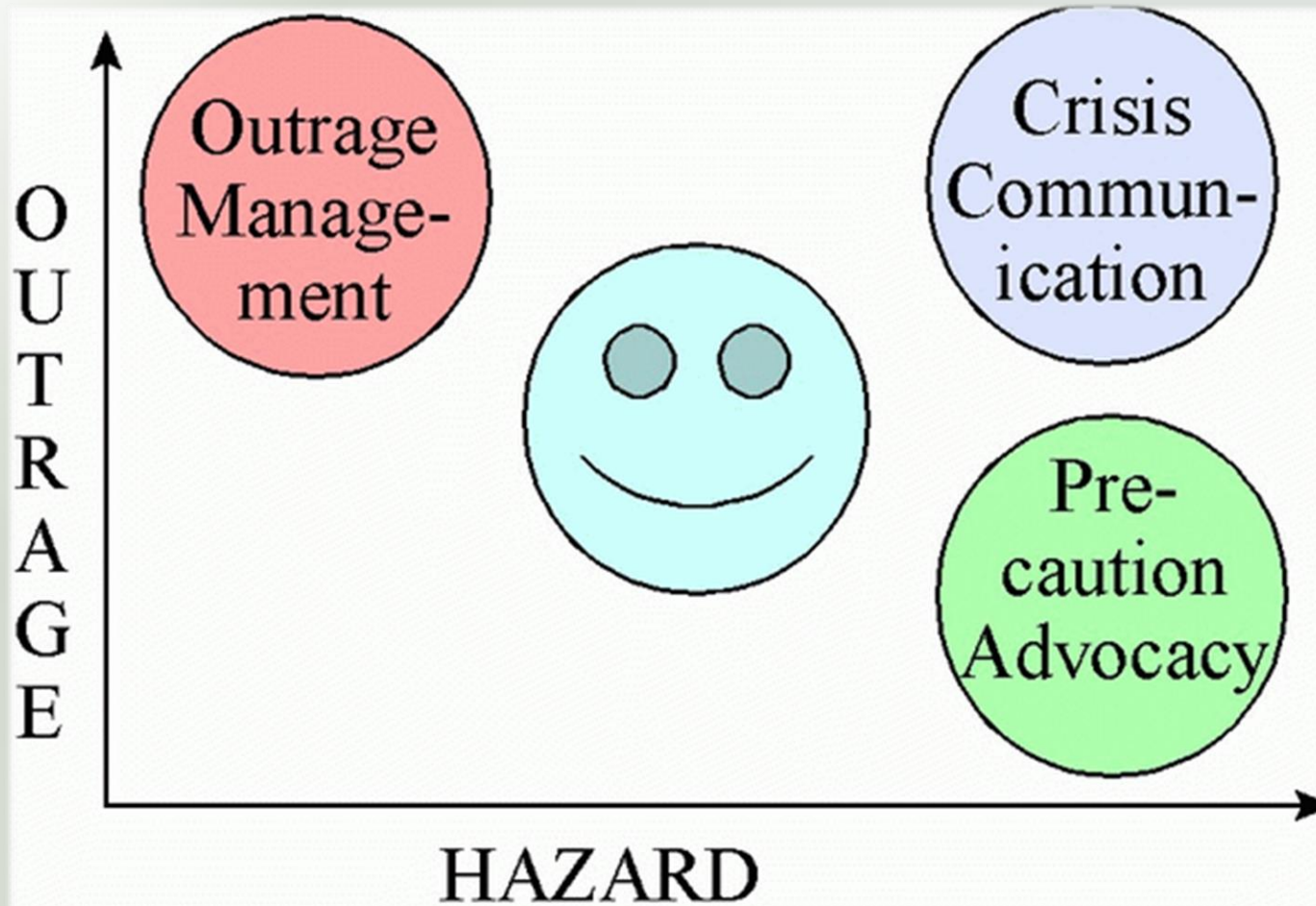


Figure 6.2 Detailed conceptual framework of social amplification of risk

Crisis Communication: Sandman



Sandman: Risk=Hazard + Outrage

- 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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