Food Safety:

A Risk Approach to Informing the Public

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**Mission:** To communicate science-based information on food safety and nutrition issues to health professionals, journalists, educators and government officials.

Primarily supported by the food, beverage and agricultural industries.
IFIC Foundation’s Food Insight

- 45,000 circulation
- 6% international
- 5,000 media
What, if anything, are you most concerned about when it comes to food safety?

IFIC 2003
The Importance of Context
The risk of poor communications

“There is no single overriding problem and thus no simple way of making risk communication easy…

But even though good risk communication cannot always be expected to improve a situation, poor risk communication will nearly always make it worse.”

Most popular sources of food and nutrition information

- Television 72%
- Magazines 58%
- Newspapers 33%

ADA Trends Survey, 2002
Media Focus on Food Safety

- Foodborne illness
- Acrylamide
- Biotechnology
- Emerging Technologies / Food Irradiation
- Environmental Toxins (I.e. Dioxin, Mercury)
- BSE / Mad Cow Disease
THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY IS DIVIDED.
SOME SAY THIS STUFF IS DANGEROUS, SOME SAY IT ISN’T.
Risk Communication

- Attitudes about food-related risks
- Risk communication for food issues
  - When
  - Why
- Challenges and barriers related to risk communication
- Effective techniques to put risk into perspective
Factors Associated with Increased Public Concern

- Catastrophic potential
- Unfamiliar
- Decision processes not understood
- Lack of personal control
- Involuntary exposure
- Delayed effects
- Children at risk
- Risk to future generations

- Lack of trust in relevant institutions
- Much media attention
- Previous history
- Unclear benefits
- Potentially irreversible effects
- Origins caused by human actions (vs. act of nature)

Risk: “Possibility of suffering harm or loss”.
Involves hazards and values.
Sensitive or controversial situations of high concern coupled with low trust.

– Something of value could be lost:
  
  • health
  • control
  • equity
WHY?

• People in high concern/low trust situations have difficulty processing information.
• Variables unrelated to straight facts take on substantial meaning and importance.
• Applying principles of risk communication help to overcome these barriers.
Responding to Negative Food Safety News

• Provide larger context amidst breaking news
  – Compare prior knowledge of the issue
  – Consider implied risk with previous epidemiology

• Give big picture risk perspective without diminished results of a single study

• Let recognized experts do the driving
Putting the Risk in Context

Each year, for every 1 million people living in the USA ....

• 30 will die from accidental poisoning (drugs/medicines)
• 36 will die from food borne illness
• 160 will die from motor vehicle accidents
• 2,800 will die from heart disease

1997 US Statistical Abstract
Factors that Interfere with Messages Being Heard

- Failure to address underlying concerns
- Credibility of the source
  - Real or perceived advocacy inconsistent with the facts
  - Reputation of bias or misrepresentation
  - Self-serving framing of messages
- Inconsistent and contradictory messages across credible sources
Credibility and Trust

- Know the audience: Respect their concerns
- Understand and use the ladder of credibility for the issue at hand
  - Align with sources higher than you
  - Don’t attack sources higher than you
- Use plain, clear language
- Be acutely aware of non-verbal cues
Effective Messaging

- Develop three key messages around each issue:
  - Brief
  - Clear (no jargon)
  - Positive
- Outline 2-3 proof points for each message
  - Third party validation
  - Statistics
  - Scientific study
- Use repetition to overcome “noise”
- Include relevant or practical actions
- Know words to use and words to lose
## Positive Communication Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message</th>
<th>Communicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Timely</td>
<td>• Responds to emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regular updates</td>
<td>• Admits uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clear and concise</td>
<td>• Personal stake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sensitive to values and fears</td>
<td>• Clear and concise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Organized</td>
<td>• Perceived as “expert”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses metaphors</td>
<td>• Charismatic</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Explicit conclusions</td>
<td>• Objective</td>
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- Hart, 1998
IFIC Consumer Research on Acrylamide
April 2003

- 6 groups: 48 consumers
- Group I-no prior knowledge
- Group II-some knowledge of acrylamide
  - Merriam, KS
  - Cambridge, MA
  - Marina del Rey, CA
- Demographic Mix
Consumer Research on Acrylamide: Goals and Purpose

- Assess consumer attitudes and knowledge about acrylamide in foods
- Review current consumer information/future needs
- Understand how consumers view state of research to date
- Determine what influences a specific dietary change
Overall Impact of Acrylamide in Foods Issue

- Most would not or had not changed their diet
- Skepticism over research funding
- Regardless of level of awareness, most consumers not concerned.
“Messages” that Resonate with Consumers . . .

• “Current information on acrylamide in food reinforces the general advice on healthful eating. People should maintain a balanced diet, rich in variety and include plenty of fruits and vegetables and whole grains while limiting consumption of fried and fatty foods.”

• “Instead of trying to avoid foods that contain acrylamide, people should focus on eating a balanced diet that is rich in high-fiber grains, fruits and vegetables.”

• “People should focus their efforts on reducing consumption of foods with known health risks, such as foods high in saturated fat, rather than on those that have not yet been proven to be harmful.”
Reactions to Current Knowledge about Acrylamide in Foods

• Sensationalization (of this and other food issues)

“Oh my… what now?”
Boston, 04/03

“I don’t let anything I read dominate my thinking.”
Los Angeles, 04/03

“Is this something I really want to worry about?”
Boston, 04/03
In Summary . . .

- While consumer confidence in the food supply is relatively high, history demonstrates the vulnerability of food safety messages and messengers.
- Food-related issues frequently fall into the “high concern/low trust” category.
- Understanding the barriers to “hearing” can be critical to the effectiveness of communication strategies.
- IFIC is available to help with connections to credible spokespersons.