

Don't bury your head in the sand

With the horsemeat scandal engulfing two of the UK's largest food businesses – and hints at more revelations to come – experts say now is the time for the whole food industry to be checking it has a crisis management plan in place. Samantha Lyster reports.

With the horsemeat jokes showing no sign of running out of steam on Twitter and other social media sites, if Tesco and Findus were praying for a quick conclusion to the scandal then those prayers are not being answered.



Each day new details emerge of the extent to which supposedly beef-based products were tainted with horsemeat. The various responses from officials and the companies themselves have differed, with conflicting advice from the government and diverse PR responses from the retailers involved.

According to Jonathan Hemus, director of leading crisis and reputation management firm Insignia Communications, this is the perfect time for the fresh produce sector to be putting its own house in order.

“Inevitably, at some point there will be a crisis and it's not a matter of if, but when it takes place,” he advises. “Typically, it is not the actual crisis that can damage an organisation but the response to it.”

Hemus suggests that fresh produce businesses take note of the way the horsemeat saga has unfolded and how the players involved have dealt with it. While Tesco had a rapid response, Findus appears to have been slower at reacting – its website was still proudly boasting the public could trust its food, illustrated with a picture of the offending beef lasagne – days after the revelations.

“Right now is a good time for companies to gather management together and go through every potential scenario where a problem could occur. Then take the top three to five most likely situations and plan what the response would be,” he suggests.

“Far too many companies prefer to think it will not happen to them, and if it does they will somehow muddle through. But that's the wrong attitude. Today, with social media and online news, the time that a company has to respond is very tight.

“While this is happening in the meat industry, it's a vulnerable time for all food production because the topic is on the radar and the media is looking for further examples.”

In recent years, the fresh produce industry has been hit by several situations including an outbreak of E. coli from 2010 to 2011 linked to first cucumbers and later Egyptian seeds.

At the time of the initial announcement, fresh produce groups slammed the health authorities' response, saying it did not engage with the industry quickly enough and had not identified a definitive source, leaving them with a potential PR disaster.

Hemus says that whether it's an individual business or an entire industry, everyone should be prepared to face the public with a detailed strategy and at least two if not three media-trained spokespeople. CEO of public relations firm Liquid, Elisabeth Lewis-Jones, says that her advice is always to stick to the crisis management mantra of “tell it all, tell it fast and tell the truth”.

“There must be consistency in its messaging. Once you've lost control of the debate, you may never be able to get it back,” she explains.

“Take a leaf out of Johnson & Johnson’s book. The way the firm handled a crisis when its pain relief product, Tylenol, was connected with customer deaths is now legendary and is often cited as an effective crisis management case study.

“In 1982 it was discovered that someone had placed capsules in boxes contaminated with cyanide,” she added. “Seven people in Chicago were reported to have died after purchasing tampered boxes and taking the medication.

“The incident could have finished Johnson & Johnson. But the company’s swift action, which put its customers first, actually led to it increasing its market share. It recalled all its Tylenol packets, announced an immediate investigation and kept communicating with its customers throughout the process. It worked with the US authorities to produce the first ever tamper-proof pillbox, which is still used today across the world.

“Fresh produce growers can learn from this, using both conventional media and social media to get messages across to their key stakeholders. For the sake of long-term reputation they must get their priorities right: people, environment, company. No matter what the lawyers are saying about admission or denial of guilt, spokespeople can express sympathy and reassurance without admitting to negligence.”

Lewis-Jones adds that 30 years on from Johnson & Johnson, organisations today have the additional complication of the internet and social media to deal with. “Once something is posted on the web, it’s often automatically perceived as ‘fact’, whether true or not,” she adds.

“There are no rules on the internet. It’s unstructured and can complicate a crisis or upend even the strongest crisis management strategy. It is unforgiving – and if you try to hide the facts or deny something that’s true you’re likely to be caught and the crisis will worsen.

“The rules regarding honesty and transparency remain the same but the speed and global reach of the web means organisations have to ensure all communication bases are covered.”

Dr Helmut Tschiersky-Schoneburg, president of the Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety in Germany, says that from a practical point of view, all growers and suppliers should have any documents relating to their supply chain in digital form and be ready to share those files with the respective authorities as soon as possible in order for a food crisis to be swiftly investigated and resolved.

Speaking at Fruit Logistica in Berlin, Tschiersky-Schoneburg says one would expect this already, but as they found while dealing with the E. coli outbreak, many firms still have a lot of paperwork that takes hours to sort through, losing valuable investigation time.

Britta Fey, a partner in German communications company Engel & Zimmermann, reiterates the point about being aware of not just social media, but the internet in general. “There are many sites now dedicated to giving consumers information on food quality and food safety,” she says.

“Consumers are actively seeking these out and discussing on forums the information gathered. Many companies will hope that something will just go away, but with the internet, that’s not going to happen.” —

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