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## Chipotle Did The Right Thing With Latest Restaurant Closing, But Takes A Big PR Hit



*This is a photo of an apparent potential customer looking at a closed Chipotle last month, at a time when the restaurant was having a nationwide safety meeting. (Photo credit should read PAUL J. RICHARDS/AFP/Getty Images)*

What sounded like bad news at first may be actually good news.

[Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc.](#), shut down a restaurant in Billerica, Massachusetts, Tuesday and Wednesday, after four employees came down with the norovirus, which can cause a lot of vomiting and diarrhea. The sick staffers stayed home, and the restaurant cleaned the restaurant.

It sounds bad, as if the restaurant is having [a repeat performance of their problems last year](#) when they had E.coli outbreaks associated with some of their restaurants as well as having the norovirus sickening more than 350 customers. But the restaurant has had people applauding the restaurant's move. After all, maybe it isn't fun to



hear that a restaurant has closed due to the norovirus, but better that than workers being sick on the job and feeding the public.

As [Dr. Monya De](#), a Los Angeles-based internist and medical journalist, told me, “Food service providers have an absolute duty to remove sick workers from handling food. Food poisoning can be fatal.”

Still, this isn’t going to help my cause with my oldest daughter, who is 14. Every time we’re deciding where to eat out, I’ll rattle off a handful of restaurants, and I generally always include Chipotle, and while she used to perk up, and we’d often go get their burritos, now she looks at me as if I’m crazy. I keep maintaining that with Chipotle being hyper-aware of food safety, it’s probably one of the safer restaurants to eat at. But so far, she isn’t buying my argument.

In any case, will this latest norovirus near-miss hurt Chipotle with the public? Some of what the PR crowd, and one restaurant industry person, are saying, boils down to the following:

**Chipotle did the right thing.** Eden Gillott Bowe, president of [Gillott Communications](#) with offices in New York City and Los Angeles, thinks the restaurant won’t be hurt by this latest news story. She says that customers only care about two things:

“Does this affect me? And, will this happen again?”

Because the restaurant closed, obviously the answers are no, and, well, hopefully not.

Bowe adds, “Even if an outbreak or contamination occurs years later, people will remember the company’s past problems and wonder whether if it really learned its lessons. It looks like Chipotle has.”

**But this didn’t help.** It is great that nobody got sick (other than four Chipotle employees, of course), but having to close the restaurant is another reminder of the burrito chain’s troubles.

“The closure in Boston is definitely going to hurt Chipotle,” says Robert Edell, CEO of [Servy](#), a mystery dining and analytics platform for the restaurant industry. “While a segment of the public will applaud them for closing the store

before the virus potentially impacted customers, the vast majority of people will only see the Chipotle-Norovirus headline and interpret it as another major food safety issue.”

**Even if viewed well by the public, it’ll take awhile before the bad publicity fades.**

Meghan Gardner, based out of Boston and a managing partner at the PR practice, [Proper Villains](#), thinks the company still has a lot of goodwill, but don’t be surprised if you suggest Chipotle for lunch or dinner and friends or family members don’t jump at the chance to go.

“I think it will be a long time before Chipotle’s able to get past this,” Gardner says. “And I think the way they’ve embraced transparency will win them credit in the long term. It’s just a question of whether the business can wait that long to rebound.”

But there is precedence for this sort of negativity swirling around a business and the ability to make a comeback, Gardner says.

“Remember when JetBlue went through the ringer a few years ago when people were stranded on the tarmac with broken toilets for hours, and reports came in even weeks after the big incidents at JFK?” Gardner asks. “The company rebounded because it got real, went transparent, and delivered on its promise to improve.”

Janey Bishoff, CEO of [Bishoff Communications](#) and who has taught corporate crisis [management](#) at [Boston University College of Communication](#) for the last three years, agrees that Chipotle won’t rebound overnight.

In fact, she says she thinks that Chipotle “faces a long, hard road to gain back full customer and investor trust – generally because they were slow to react to the multiple crises that impacted the company.”

**The bad publicity could have been a lot worse.** However bad it looks, in another news cycle or two, we’ll have forgotten about this (probably). Charles Lindsey, associate professor of marketing at the [University at Buffalo School of Management](#), asks us to imagine how things would have gone if they hadn’t closed and customers had become sick.

“Quickly closing the store yesterday before any customers got sick was the correct move, both in terms of customer and community welfare and from an image standpoint. Does this latest incident add to their existing PR problems and concerns – yes,” Lindsey says. “However, one can argue that the PR damage may very well have been worse and the stock price hit greater had they not quickly and voluntarily closed the store. In fact, the market trajectory of Chipotle’s stock price on Wednesday initially fell 5 percent but closed at 3.4 percent down. All food in the store was thrown away, the store was sanitized, health inspectors revisited on Wednesday, and the inspectors found the store to be clean.”

Lindsey thinks in the long run, Chipotle’s reputation can make a full recovery.

**Chipotle’s PR problems are going to help other restaurants.** I don’t mean that other competitors’ sales are benefiting when Chipotle loses sales, [although that may well be](#), but if Edell is right, it may become more safe to eat out (at least at some places).

“Everyone in the industry can see the pain Chipotle is going through right now, and thus, a lot of operators have already started to increase their focus on food safety,” Edell says.

But don’t get too excited.

Edell adds: “On the other hand, there will always be audacious operators that ignore these issues. Many believe that the opportunity cost for proactively shutting down or putting more strict food safety practices in place is too high.”

As for Chipotle’s problems, it isn’t as if customers have abandoned the restaurant in droves. As Alexandra Golaszewska, who has her own publicity firm in Philadelphia, [Alexandra Go. LLC](#), told me, “On my way to lunch today, I heard a group of women next to me talking about Chipotle. They were discussing going somewhere else instead – because they thought Chipotle would be too crowded.”

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