



Tips to help you survive a seafood recall

Crisis PR expert advises what to do before, during and after a product recall.

by IntraFish Media

By Eden Gillott Bowe

It's as if every time you look at the news, there's yet another story about food contamination threatening public safety.

And when it comes to seafood, listeria is often at the center of contamination recalls.

When someone hears about a recall, they instantly think *"Oh no! Does this affect me?"* Then the mysterious symptoms start to pop up. *"You know, I've been feeling a little under the weather since I had that fish the other day."* (Completely ignoring the fact that it might actually be from the all-you-can-eat hot wings happy hour they gorged on the night before.)

Even companies with excellent food-safety policies aren't impervious to public relations crises that can take years from which to recover if handled poorly. The public only cares about one thing: What does this mean for me?

Safeguarding your reputation before a recall

A food-contamination crisis plan that sits unread is nothing more than an expensive paperweight.

You should conduct mock recalls to test your plan and your ability to respond and strengthen it as necessary. You also should update your plan yearly.

If public relations isn't part of your current plan, it needs to be. Established and well-prepared companies have a crisis plan in place *before* they need it because they understand that the first few moments set the tone for everything that follows.

Voluntary vs. mandatory recalls: What the difference means for your company

A voluntary recall is better because it's a choice. You're showing through your actions (not just your words) that customer safety is your highest priority. Because these generally happen earlier in the process, they have a stronger and more positive impact.

By contrast, a mandatory recall is akin to a child being forced to say he's sorry after he got caught. You're only saying sorry because you have to, which doesn't sound sincere (even if it is). It creates the perception you care more about money than your customers' safety.

Top 10 questions you need to be prepared to answer

You're going to receive an onslaught of questions from customers, vendors, investors, and the media. Answering them is the last thing you'll feel like doing. But if you don't communicate effectively, you're putting your company at risk.

What product(s) are affected?

What's wrong with the product, and is it dangerous?

Has anyone gotten sick, and what symptoms should people look out for?

Where were the products distributed?

What should purchasers do?

How did it happen and how long have you known?

Who's at fault?

Have you had similar problems?

What are you doing to ensure it won't happen again?

What are you doing to help the "victims"?

Managing your reputation during the recall.

Customer safety has always been your highest priority. But when word gets out about potential contamination in your seafood, you need to respond quickly to reassure and prove you're doing everything you can to protect them.

If you don't demonstrate that you've got a handle on the situation, customers may bounce to alternative products and may be skittish about returning. If you're a repeat offender, the stakes are even higher.

When and how to inform the public and the media

When there's a lack of information, rumors and speculation magically appear. How do you combat this? Keep your customers informed -- early and often.

If you stay silent and ignore the media, it looks as if you're hiding something. It's viewed as an admission of guilt. Contrary to popular belief (and instinct), saying "No comment" is just as bad as saying nothing (*if not worse*).

Regardless of the forum you use, your messaging needs to address your consumers' two main concerns: "*Does this affect me?*" and "*Will this happen again?*"

Don't lie. You lose credibility. This is the quickest way for what would've been a small issue to balloon into a big one. Aren't you thankful you prepared answers to those Top 10 questions?

Repairing your reputation after the recall

The worst is over, but you're not done yet.

You must continue to keep customers informed. Let them know the result of any investigations or tests, and what you're doing with the information. Strengthen your existing marketing campaign that reinforces your values and reassures the public.

If you haven't already started tightening controls, get cracking. Because even if contamination occurs several years later, people will wonder whether you really learned your lesson.

Eden Gillott Bowe is a damage control expert and a former business professor, and has nearly a decade of Crisis PR expertise. She's been interviewed about brands in crisis by the Wall Street Journal, NPR, the Washington Post, Forbes, and Eater. She's co-author of A Lawyer's Guide to Crisis PR (2013) and A Board Member's Guide to Crisis PR (2016). Follow her on Twitter @CrisisPRGuys

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