

Maintaining Customers During a ‘Clean’ Food Safety Crisis

January 7, 2016 • By Joanna Schroeder

Chipotle Mexican Grill sells “food with integrity.” Rather than using traditional marketing tactics, the company has built its brand through social channels with special emphasis on Millennials. So what exactly is food with integrity? It’s humanely raised, locally sourced, genetically modified organism (GMO), hormone, pesticide, and antibiotic free—exactly what consumers are saying they want.



Consumers, finds the study, will continue to be more concerned about what’s in food than what’s not. For example, GMOs will remain top-of-mind, even though many are confused as to what GMOs actually are or why they should be concerned. The report also points to consumer concerns with how their food is sourced and produced. Buyers will seek humanely raised animals and avoid antibiotics in meat, for example. They are also expected to spend more time researching brands and production practices.

But what happens to food retailers, such as fast food restaurants, when “clean” foods turn out to be “dirty” foods? For instance, last year there was an E. coli outbreak in several Chipotle locations in California that sickened 52 people and a norovirus outbreak that sickened nearly 140 people at a single Chipotle restaurant in Boston, Mass. The events caused stocks to tumble and customers to defect. In response, Steve Ells, founder, publicly called on his company to do better, and pledged to roll out additional safety programs.

So how can the food industry react to a food safety crisis while retaining the support of shareholders, employees, and customers? By being prepared before the crisis happens.

This is the first step according to Jake Brus, communications advisor for Wixted & Company who works closely with many companies in the food industry. Brus says a company should conduct a risk assessment that includes multiple scenarios that can crop up and affect a brand such as foodborne illnesses. By doing this, companies can have a communication strategy in place with only the need for updates depending upon the situation.

Once the crisis hits, communicate early and often. Brus stresses that although a company might not know all the facts, in fact, most likely it won’t know them all, it must acknowledge awareness and provide updated information at every turn.

“In today’s communication environment, consumers are used to on-demand news. Consistent communication helps to establish trust with key stakeholders,” says Brus. “The company needs to communicate facts with key stakeholders as they become available throughout key channels.”

Next, a company should communicate its path forward. What will be done to ensure that this problem won’t happen again? A key consideration when talking about next steps is fixing the problem. Brus notes that if the company continues to have the same problem, no crisis communication strategy will be able to mitigate damage with the company’s stakeholders and customers.

Brus also says as the crisis plays itself out, a company should review and readjust its current marketing and social media campaigns, if necessary. “A company doesn’t want to launch a product special if the week before that product made people sick,” explains Brus. “All communication during a crisis should be retooled to demonstrate the company is aware of the situation and taking responsible action, ultimately demonstrating trust and protecting reputation.”

Another important action that a company should adopt, says Brus, is the creation of some type of feedback loop for employees, vendors, and customers to engage with the brand.

“Engaging in the conversation will assist a company in identifying current and potential problems and help them assess trends,” Brus says. “Communicating in a vacuum during a crisis puts you at a real disadvantage. A crisis doesn’t have a definitive end point in a consumer’s mind. He or she needs continued and authentic assurances that the situation is being taken seriously and being resolved.”

Implementing these steps during a crisis will help key stakeholders continue to have trust in your brand. While not all customers will be bothered to begin with, and not all of those customers who leave will come back, an effective crisis communications strategy will help ensure a company doesn’t lose as many investors, employees, and customers. “If you take communication as seriously as operational decisions, it’s not as big of a hill to climb,” adds Brus, “to maintain brand loyalty in the wake of an issue.”