

# **Overconfidence in Crisis Messaging: A Case Study of Agency Misspeak during the Melamine Pet Crisis of 2007**

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During the 2007 melamine pet food out break, various stakeholders in the US, including the pet food producers, distributors, owners, veterinarians and government groups/spokespeople, sent out different messages targeting different publics. These messages were communicated through the television, print media and internet media (17). They also provided press conferences and releases, facts, health threats, reassuring messages as well as weekly enforcement reports on actions taken, concerning the out break. The pet food producers and distributors on the other hand established call centers and hotlines for consumer, firm press releases and conferences as well as recalls (3). The pet owners also expressed their anger and disappointment following the pet food melamine outbreak in almost all media outlets (19). In addition, there has been widespread public outrage and calls for US government's better regulation of pet foods that was previously self-regulated (11). The economic impact of this outbreak on the pet food market has been extensive, with 'Menu Foods' alone losing at least \$42 million from the recall alone (17).

According to Ulmer et al., (22) when faced with a crisis outbreak caused by accidental or intentional actions (such as that caused by the 2007 melamine pet food out break), the response strategies and crisis messages delivered by the stakeholders should be made effective and consistent so that it may have the potential to inform and instruct others who find themselves in similar crisis situations. The melamine case study presents examples of overconfidence by agency spokespeople about the inherent safety of the human food supply during a pet food contamination.

This study examines the crisis responses of government and pet food producers during the 2007 outbreak of renal failure in dogs and cats associated with melamine in pet food and the impact of overconfident crisis messaging to agency credibility. Implications from this work provide insights for government agencies and food manufacturers in times of crisis communication.