

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

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Introduction:

During the 2007 melamine pet food outbreak, 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. They also provided press conferences and releases, facts, health threats, reassuring messages as well as weekly enforcement reports on actions taken, concerning the outbreak. 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. The pet owners also expressed their anger and disappointment following the pet food melamine outbreak in almost all media outlets. In addition, there has been widespread public outrage and calls for US government's better regulation of pet foods that was previously self-regulated. 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.

Literature:



Crisis Communication

According to Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007) when faced with a crisis outbreak caused by accidental or intentional actions (such as that caused by the 2007 melamine pet food outbreak), 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.

Method:

This case study uses a rhetorical analysis of news releases and media coverage of the 2007 melamine crisis. Specifically, we examined three sets of news releases available from ChemNutra, Menu Foods, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) during the period of February 20, 2007 through May 17, 2007, the period of crisis and post crisis. The releases were analyzed for comment on the threat of contamination to the human food supply.

In addition to the news release examination, we analyzed articles from *The New York Times* during the same period to review reports by agencies of the threat of melamine entering the human food supply as well as attention to the 10 Best Practices in Risk Communication implemented by the agencies.

Project Timeline: Menu Foods ChemNutra FDA New York Times Coverage

- February 27, 2007: Menu Foods starts testing reported tainted food on cats and dogs
- March 8, 2007 ChemNutra learns that wheat gluten imported from China is among suspect ingredient, quarantines inventory.
- March 12, 2007 Menu learns that nine cats in trials have died; verifies they ate Menu's foods.
- March 16, 2007 Menu recalls more than 60 million cans and pouches of wet food, manufactured between December 3 and March 6.
- March 17, 2007 First report of tainted wheat gluten being identified as possible source of pet food contamination
- March 20, 2007 FDA confirms 14 dead pets.
- March 23, 2007 New York state lab says it found aminopterin, a rat poison, in samples of cat food from Menu.
- March 26, 2007 FDA tells Cornell that another lab found melamine, Cornell confirms finding
- March 30, 2007 FDA issues 'import alert' and announces melamine is leading suspect; restricts wheat gluten from China's Xuzhou Anying Biologic Technology Development. Hill's Pet Nutrition, Nestlé Purina PetCare and Del Monte Pet Products announce small recalls
- March 31, 2007 FDA changes contaminant source from aminopterin to melamine. Reported they believed melamine had not entered human food supply.
- April 2, 2007 Chinese exporter (Xuzhou Anying Biologic) and U.S. Distributor (ChemNutra) of tainted wheat gluten revealed.
- ChemNutra recalls wheat gluten from 3 pet-food makers and 1 distributor, says no Xuzhou gluten went to human food production.
- FDA stops imports from Xuzhou
- ChemNutra stated that it shipped the 791 metric tons of gluten to pet food facilities, no human food facilities
- April 5, 2007: FDA acknowledged that the wheat Gluten contamination could be intentional

April 6, 2007 - Michael Rogers, director of the Division of Field Investigations from FDA state the contaminated gluten did not enter the human food supply.

- April 9, 2007 A suspect container of possibly contaminated wheat gluten (700 bags) arrived at the LA/LB Seaport
- April 10, 2007: Chinese government reported 1 dead and 202 people ill after consuming a breakfast cereal laced with rat poison
- April 13, 2007 - FDA is criticized after reporting tainted pet food is still on some shelves, almost one month from the original announcement of the contamination.
- April 18, 2007 Pet food recall expanded to include Natural Balance products (Pacoma, CA) containing rice protein laced with melamine
- April 19, 2007 Royal Canin and Hill's pet foods recalled in South Africa due to the potential of melamine in the wheat gluten ingredients.
- April 19, 2007 Wilbur-Ellis (grain importer) recalls Chinese sourced, contaminated rice protein (Binzhou Futian) that was shipped to 5 pet-food firms
- April 19, 2007 U.S. officials investigating reports that Binzhou Futian rice protein had been used in hog feed, but declined to specify where
- The California Department of Food and Agriculture placed American Hog Farm in Ceres, California under quarantine, after melamine was found in the urine of the hogs on the farm

April 20, 2007 - FDA is criticized for not adequately screening imported food and additives.

- April 21, 2007 Detained 700 bags of wheat gluten tested positive for melamine and seized
- April 24, 2007 FDA confirms melamine in feed given to hogs in California, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Utah, Missouri (chicken feed too) and possibly Ohio
- FDA expands melamine testing of imported ingredients/finished products beyond wheat/rice gluten to cornmeal, corn gluten, rice bran & soy protein
- April 24, 2007 - Report of possible melamine entrance into the human food supply through hogs.
- April 26, 2007 Over 6,000 hogs quarantined on farms in California, New York, South Carolina, North Carolina, Utah, Kansas, Oklahoma and Ohio
- USDA announced that the meat of 345 hogs that had eaten contaminated feed entered the U.S. food supply
- April 30, 2007 FDA blocks all food and feed grade ingredients/products from China that are not sampled for contaminants.
- May 1, 2007 Indiana reports that contaminated pet food was added to feed for 30 broiler poultry and 8 breeder poultry farms in Indiana that have already gone into the human food chain. The feed was used in early February, affected breeders on voluntary hold, broilers already processed
- May 9, 2007 FDA/Dept of State investigation finds evidence of melamine at originating company in China
- May 10, 2007 CBP initiates testing of all feed ingredients from Canada, creating feed supply problems in the border states
- May 15, 2007 56,000 swine cleared for processing without being individually tested after FDA/USDA risk assessment suggests "very low" risk to humans
- May 17, 2007 USDA allows 80,000 birds held on farms in Indiana to be released/processed
- February 6, 2008 Three companies (Xuzhou Anying Biologic Technology Development Co.; Suzhou Textiles, Silk, Light Industrial Products, Arts and Crafts I/E Co.; and ChemNutra, Inc.) are indicted for importing contaminated ingredients used in pet food

Results/Implications:

ChemNutra and Menu foods had no mention of contamination threat to the human food supply in the news releases they released. FDA, however, featured no discussion of a threat to the human food supply in its releases until April 22, 2007 when melamine was found in hog urine. Subsequent news releases featured the threat to the human food supply as low. Although the FDA news releases did not feature concrete evidence of overconfidence by the FDA in the news releases, *The New York Times* reported on April 6, 2007 that Michael Rogers, director of the Division of Field Investigations from FDA state the contaminated gluten did not enter the human food supply. In addition to the misspeak by the FDA official as reported in *The New York Times*, FDA officials were inaccurate in issuing the contaminate. Initial FDA reports identified the contaminant as aminopterin then reported the agent as melamine.

FDA, Melamine, and the 10 Best Practices

The 10 best practices for crisis communication provide a basis for evaluating the communication issued by industry and governmental spokespeople in response to the melamine crisis. The best practices of accepting ambiguity and the need for coordinating the communication about a crisis are inherently a part of the misspeak that occurred in this situation.

Industry and governmental sources were ambiguous when discussing the threat to the human food supply. The industry spokespeople did not address the issue and the FDA sought first to deny and then to minimize the threat of melamine entering the food supply. The need for the affected public to get information about the crisis in a timely manner was compromised to some extent by the failure of the industry and governmental spokespeople to discuss the issue of contaminating the human food supply at the onset of the crisis. While these spokespeople may not have had all of the information, their silence on the subject or misspoken denial of contamination resulted in increased levels of public outrage when the facts of the matter were revealed.

The fact that Menu Foods, ChemNutra, and the FDA were not addressing this issue consistently demonstrates the absence of coordination among these agencies regarding the dissemination of information about the effect of the contamination on the human food supply. This best practice suggests that if a crisis is to be managed effectively, the groups and agencies involved should have a relationship that promotes the sharing of information early in the crisis so that when messages are issued, there is a sense of coherence and consistency. The misspeak that occurred regarding the contamination of the human food supply may well be traced to the absence of a pre-existing relationship regarding the sharing and dissemination of information.

Certainly, in addition to these two best practices, the need for honesty, accuracy, timeliness, and compassionate are inherent in the communication about the contamination of the human food supply. When the public learned that melamine had been found in the human food supply, the credibility of the industrial and governmental spokespeople was compromised and the level of outrage among the public increased. Had these best practices been addressed earlier, the level of outrage may have been less and the confidence in existing safeguards to the human food supply may have been greater.



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Acknowledgements:

