

# China's response to the melamine crisis: A case study in actional legitimacy

Elizabeth L. Petrun • Timothy L. Sellnow

College of Communications and Information Studies • University of Kentucky • Lexington, KY 40503

## The Case

In 2008 China experienced an infant formula contamination that would eventually grow into a global crisis. Melamine, an industrial byproduct of plastic products, was discovered in powdered and liquid milk supplies. The chemical was intentionally added to formula to save money, while ensuring the formula would still pass product testing standards. Once the contamination was discovered, the company responsible for the manufacturing of the formula (Sanlu) and the Chinese government were charged with communicating hazards to domestic and international stakeholders.

This case study explicates actional legitimacy efforts enacted by both Sanlu and the Chinese government following the onset of the crisis. Using content analysis, television media in the United States was scrutinized to monitor actions taken by Sanlu and the Chinese government. Using the National Center for Food Protection and Defense's ten best practices, actions taken by both organizations were monitored in U.S. television coverage from September, 2008 through February, 2009.



NCFPD Risk Communication Best Practices

## Rationale

When Sanlu became implicated in the melamine scandal of 2008, it was added to a list of recent failures associated with China's food regulatory system. As another exemplar of China's highly respected and profitable businesses failed, Sanlu immediately prompted the Chinese government to utilize PR efforts to minimize damage to their food safety system's reputation. China's melamine scandal brought into question the ability of the Chinese government to effectively perform its necessary functions. Through case study China's actions during the months after the melamine scandal were scrutinized, with the objective of identifying effective and ineffective response strategies enacted by the government. Further concrete, feasible actions may emerge from the melamine event that would benefit Chinese citizens and bolster future responsible government actions. Studying the melamine contamination creates an opportunity to learn strategies that may be generalizable to future food contaminations, making future recalls less disastrous.

## Research Question

To what extent did China's actions in response to the Sanlu melamine crisis as portrayed in U.S. television media contribute to actional legitimacy?

## Methods & Procedures

In order to complete the media content analysis, the researchers utilized the University of Kentucky television tracking system housed in the Department of Communication. Key words were previously entered into the data monitoring system that in turn isolated half-hour television segments containing the keywords of interest. The keywords selected for this event were melamine, milk, China, and formula. If any one word or a combination of the four words were found in a television segment, the segment was isolated and captured for further analysis. A total of 518 videos were captured during the initial search. Of the 518 videos, 425 were found to be directly related to the Chinese melamine case. A list of omitted videos was maintained, along with a short explanation of why a video was selected for omission.

Stations included in the analysis were CNN, CNNH, CSPAN, CW, CBS, Fox, FNC, NBC, ABC, PBS, and MSNBC. All of the videos were observed and coded by a single individual in consultation with a second coder. The entire coding process required fifty total hours, including both viewing the videos and recording the observations. All notes made about the videos were recorded during or immediately following the conclusion of the video. The code sheets for both the relevant data and omitted videos are available by contacting the University of Kentucky Communication Department.

## Results

For the purpose of the melamine case, five of NCFPD's best practices were monitored in U.S. television media. These included planning ahead for a prompt response, establishing crisis communication networks, accepting uncertainty, being open and honest, and acknowledging public concern. By investigating the implementation or absence of these best practices, it was possible to monitor the Chinese government's success in mitigating the melamine contamination crisis.

### Planning ahead for a prompt response

No instance of pre-event planning was witnessed in the 425 relevant television segments.

### Establishing crisis communication networks

No instance of collaboration or coordination with other credible sources was witnessed in the 425 relevant television segments.

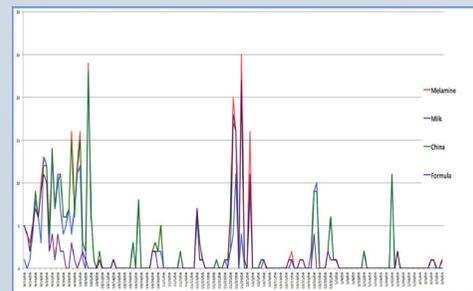


Figure 1. Media Coverage by Keywords, September, 2008 – February, 2009.

### Acknowledging Uncertainty

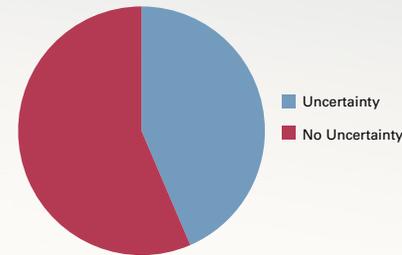


Figure 2. When examining uncertainty in the videos, 185 out of 425 (43%) exhibited this best practice.

### Honesty, Candor, and Openness

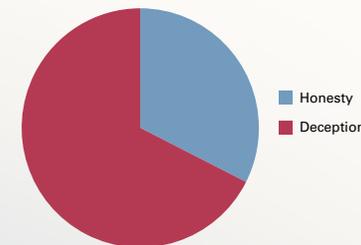


Figure 3. Out of 425 videos, 138 or 32% of the videos contained honesty, candor and openness.

### Listening to the Public's Concern

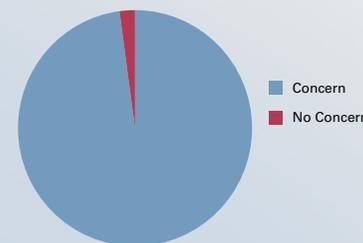


Figure 4. Finally, acknowledging public concern was monitored, and 416 or 97% of the 425 television segments exhibited this best practice.

## Conclusion

When health risks must be communicated internationally, the task of effectively articulating food contaminations becomes even more complex. The following conclusions may be drawn from the 2008 melamine case:

- The complete absence of pre-crisis planning and collaborating with other credible sources illustrates the need for China to improve methods for handling communication following an international recall.
- China's milk manufacturers and the Chinese government's inability to be open and honest demonstrate the purposeful deception and intentionality of both parties during the incident.
- The U.S. and China were both found dispelling uncertainty, yet both countries later became aware of new information that made their previous statements incorrect.
- Finally, acknowledging public concern was seen in the U.S. with the introduction of COOL legislation and the feverous debates over American regulatory agency's effectiveness.

Utilizing the case study approach, it is possible to generate recommendations to improve future recall strategy and effectiveness. While China has generated considerable outrage with lackluster communication efforts, with increased attention to stakeholder groups both Sanlu and China's government may continue to develop communication strategies to enact and increase actional legitimacy.

## Acknowledgements

This project was funded through the National Center for Food Protection and Defense (NCFPD) Center of Excellence by a grant from the Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate, Office of University Programs.

The material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 2007-ST-061-000003. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

## For Further Information

Please contact Elizabeth.Petrun@uky.edu. More information on this and related projects can be obtained at <http://www.ncfpd.umn.edu/> or <http://risk.uky.edu/>.