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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- PROVIDE CLARITY
- MOVE QUICKLY
- SHARE MESSAGES WIDELY
- PUSH FOR SWIFT ACTION
- PREPARE FOR RECOVERY

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COMMUNICATION

WHAT HAPPENED?

On 6 June, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), along with agencies in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, provided details of their investigation into the Shiga toxin-producing E coli cases. The impact of the bug can cause serious complications and at that point there were 113 people were affected. In an average year around 1,500 reported cases would be expected.

It was believed the issues was linked to contaminated food. But the authorities were not able to identify the source, beyond saying it was linked to a nationally nationally-distributed item. The focus of the information provided was on encouraging people to practice practise good hygiene. People were left to try and guess what food stuffs were affected.

By the 14 June there were a further 98 cases had been identified, with 42 per cent of people requiring hospital treatment. There was a precautionary move to recall a number of items, including sandwiches, salads and wraps provided by Greencore Group and Samworth Brothers and This!. In total, 60 products were recalled.

Authorities said that food tracing had taken some time. A further 45 cases were reported by 18 June, with links to lettuce in pre-packaged sandwiches.

Some affected people told the media they were considering taking legal action in relation to what had happened. As this edition of *Testing Times* was being finalised details of one person's death believed to be in connection to the situation was reported.

What was the communication response and what could it have been?

There was a clear challenge from the start, as communicating a warning message about an unknown risk led to concerns and limited positive action that could be taken. The focus was only on actions in relation to good hygiene but, as it was a potential food contamination, that was where people's concerns were. There wereIt was a number of days before there was some any further - albeit limited - information was released. Rumour and speculation were able to grow as people waited for more clarity. On social media people were concerned about the lack of information.

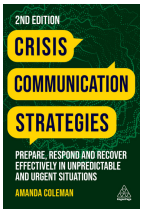
A significant amount of media coverage was shared throughout the weeks the incident was live and it raised wider concerns about food safety and the challenges of managing supply chains. It included a feature on the Radio 4 Food Programme.

The levels of trust and confidence in authority figures continue to be under pressure following the Covid-19 pandemic and there is a level of scepticism regarding the information that is provided. Where there is a gap in information, people will find a way to fill it themselves - either through looking at what influencers and significant commentators are saying or by making their own connections.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Provide actionable information - if you are going to have to raise concerns about a situation, product or issue, then ensure there is practical information that people can act on.
- Move quickly to provide clarity - don't wait for others to share information or speculate. and w Work quickly to give regular and frequent updates.
- Recognise the concerns and use them to drive your communication strategy - be aware of what people need to know about the situation, not just what you want to tell them. The requirements of those who may be affected should drive your communication.
- Consider how processes can be sped up - ask whether the processes related to the incident can be sped up and fast-tracked. If there is no way of increasing the speed of the clarification and information gathering, then be clear about why and explain when more will be known.
- Don't rely on media to share information - surveys are showing more people turning away from mainstream news channels, so don't rely on them to share your urgent information. Use social media and other channels in an attempt to share the key messages.
- Consider the approach to customers - if you are a business that faces a product recall, then review the communication to customers and ensure openness that recognises the situation and explains what is being done to address it. Ensure there are no pre-planned communications, PR and advertising activity that could be compromised by the situation.
- Recalls require recovery - whether the products are found to be contaminated or not, there will be a reputational impact linked to how you responded and the fact that the product was involved in the recall.

For advice on issues management get a copy of Everyday Communication Strategies



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