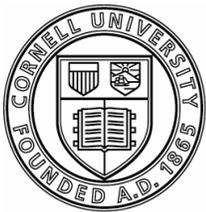
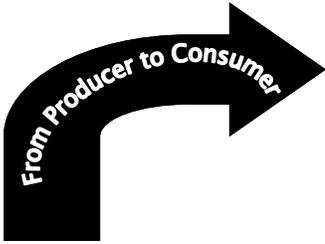


CRISIS COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Jefferson County





CRISIS COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

Any organization that interacts with the community should have a public relations plan in place, and designated individuals to carry out the plan. Without a public relations plan, the image of your farmstand, CSA, or market is at risk of being shaped by other individuals, news media, and other organizations. This document was developed to outline basic public relation strategies and tactics so that your organization can manage your image efficiently and effectively. **A public relations plan is essential should your marketing activities and must include a crisis communications plan should your organization be faced with responding to a food safety outbreak or any other crisis.**

This document will cover basic tactics for communicating in four situations:

- A crisis at your market, farmstand, or CSA
- A crisis somewhere else, but related to a product you sell
- Following a crisis
- What you can do NOW (preventative maintenance)

SITUATION #1: A Crisis at Your Market, Farm, or CSA

***BEFORE SPEAKING TO THE PUBLIC/MEDIA:** In the event of a food safety crisis *at your organization*, contact your local Health Department and New York State Ag and Markets. In many instances, these entities will request that your organization NOT interface with the public or media. This is for your protection, as saying the wrong thing could open your organization up to legal recourse. However, if you have contacted both the Health Department and Ag & Markets, and have not been asked to refrain from communicating with the public/media, you can follow this document's guidelines. Before communicating with the public/media, the following three individuals should be contacted, in this order: a legal professional, your insurance company, and if possible, an outside public relations expert. Finally, before a crisis occurs, prepare a document that requests your staff or members of your organization to follow protocol in the event of a crisis, ask them to refrain from talking to the public/media regarding the situation and designate an individual to handle all public/media requests. Ask your staff and organization members to sign this document, stating that they understand proper procedures in the event of a crisis. If you are ready to begin interfacing with the public/media, the following information may help.



Once you are ready to begin communicating with the public/media, you must determine who will do this. Your organization or business should have a Crisis Communications Committee which can prepare guidelines to follow at the appropriate time. The Committee should designate a spokesperson, delineate who will handle what and make certain that EVERYONE in your organization knows WHO is responsible for responding to such inquiries. Your Crisis Communications Team should consist of the farm's owner, CSA manager, or market manager (i.e., the "person at the top"), other key staff members, and a communications professional, or at least an individual who can interface with the media in an organized, strategic manner. (See the conclusion of this document for resources to help with public relations training).

The first, and by far the most essential, action is to take the time to formulate your response or message. This must be prepared in writing and shared with anyone who is expected to deliver that message. This allows you to be PROACTIVE, because it's your chance to shape the message that will go out to the public about the crisis. However, the media (and now consumers, through social media), will put their own "spin" on the issue, but you have control over how you REACT. You can shift the message back to the most relevant and positive elements you can. Finally, there is an opportunity to take PREVENTATIVE communicative measures before a crisis occurs, that will lessen the negative impact of a food safety crisis (see SITUATION #4).

Proactive

If a food safety crisis does occur in connection with your organization, your first instinct may be to hope it goes away – quickly. You may make excuses as to why you don't need to address the situation with the public, but here are a few reasons why you must take a proactive approach!

You have an opportunity to control the message. Give a thorough explanation of what happened, when, and where – *and what you're doing to fix it*. Get all parties involved to participate in responding and make certain that everyone gets your message at the same time and directly from you. Would you rather have an irate customer or a headline-hungry journalist describe the situation?

Your organization is building its public image as responsible and customer-focused. By sharing complete, truthful information with the public/media, you are showing that you're a serious organization that cares about its customers and public wellbeing.

Wouldn't YOU want to know? If you purchased greens from the same farmer each week, wouldn't you want to know that last week's produce may have been contaminated? That way, you could dispose of any remaining product. Be ethical and responsible: *That's at the core of effective crisis communications.*

The Three Golden Rules of Crisis Communication

1. Respond Swiftly – In today’s world, communications occur in real-time thanks to social media (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). The longer you wait, the more of a chance for someone else to tell the story.
2. Know the Facts - Do not respond to hearsay or rumor. Provide a complete, clear picture of exactly what happened – no matter how uncomfortable that may be. If you are confronted with information you had not heard or cannot verify, explain that you will respond to a particular issue in your next update.
3. Be Accessible – Ultimately, crisis communications is a conversation. Don’t just blast out a dry “statement.” Customers and the general public may want more information, so be sure that an actual person – not a voice recording – is accessible during normal business hours.

Reactive

Set up a “Google Alert” at www.google.com, and enter your organizations name. If you’re a market, enter your vendors’ names. This free service will alert you immediately if anything related to food safety occurs on the Web – sending you a link to the posted article, video, image and even a Twitter mention. Also, even if a food safety breach has not occurred, yet a “rumor” is going around in the social media realm, you’ll be AWARE so you can REACT in the right way.

How to React in the Right Way Online

With the rise in popularity of social media, the public is now just as powerful as mainstream media. A negative comment on a Facebook page about your organization can be just as devastating to your business as an article in the newspaper. There are minimal checks and balances in the online world. For example, viewers of a YouTube video can leave comments and add their own personal take on the situation – both positive and negative. *It’s your responsibility to join in the conversation by monitoring where your name appears online – and then responding to user comments (although do ignore blatantly hostile comments).* For example, let’s say a story about a food safety breach at your farm runs in the online edition of your local news and readers begin leaving comments.



Here are a few rules to follow:

- DO ignore overtly hostile comments – these are usually deleted by the media in which they were posted, especially if they contain profanity or slanderous statements.
- DO respond to concerns. If someone wonders what your farm is doing about the situation, identify yourself as a representative of the farm (you do not need to give details as to exactly who you are) and give them a brief overview of what you're doing to correct the situation. You may also refer them to your website if you have more details there.
- DO NOT comment on hypothetical events or events/examples that have nothing to do with your business. If there is a "mad cow disease" in another country, you cannot possibly understand the elements of what may have happened. If pressed, tell anyone that you will respond when all the facts become available and suggest that they may need to follow up with others more familiar with the specific situation.
- DO NOT assume someone's culpability as this may subject you to legal action. For instance, you cannot blame the water supply or the packaging on a food safety situation at your organization unless you are prepared to show proof. You CAN point out there are many factors that need to be assessed and understood, but be clear that you/we/they do not KNOW for certain what is involved.
- DO NOT get into a lengthy back and forth discussion with anyone in an online environment. Suggest that the person contact you to discuss the matter in more detail. Remember, be transparent and give them your phone number or an email address. Office location and hours you are available. If that person does not contact you directly, but continues to post publicly, remind them (and all readers) ONCE that you have invited them in to discuss the issue and then DO NOT respond to them again.

SITUATION #2: When a crisis occurs in regards to a product you offer, or in relation to your organization

When a crisis occurs related to food safety, many reporters in the news media will contact local farms for commentary. It is advisable to refrain from commenting on the exact food safety situation, but you can feel free to share what YOU do at your organization to keep customers safe. For example, farmers from all over the world were contacted for commentary in regards to the E. Coli outbreak that occurred in Germany in the Summer of 2011. News media across New York State were covering this ongoing situation and contacted local farmers for feedback. In fact, when a big news story hits about a food safety outbreak that references a product you sell, create your own "positive" news by sending out a press release that reassures the public that YOUR product is safe, because of the proactive food safety measures in place at your organization.



SITUATION #3: After a Crisis, Gaining Confidence Back

Once a food safety crisis occurs, and the public hears about it, you'll have to work hard to retain existing customers and continue attracting new ones. Below are a few tactics for rebuilding customer confidence in your organization.

Open your doors: Invite the community to literally see for themselves how your farm or market is now not only completely "food safe" for the public, but is a great place to be. Put out a brief sheet on how you've made changes in policy, and offer a tour of your farm or market. Shift focus to the positive elements of your market by having a vendor scavenger hunt where customers can get to know different vendors. If you're a farm, consider giving a brief talk about your farm's history or how you grow your produce. Create a fun, upbeat event with live music or children's games if possible. You're not ignoring what's happened, you're acknowledging it but moving on and celebrating the strength of your organization! Also, be sure to interact with as many people as possible. This reminds your customers that you're human, and mistakes happen – it's easier to forgive a person, harder to forgive an "organization."

Do something new: So the media has put you under a microscope after a food safety crisis or food safety breach? Make the most of it. Use the increased interest in your farm or market to show the community that you're a strong organization. Start a blog for your market: each week interview one of your vendors or launch a Facebook page for your farm, posting photos of your fields as they grow and introducing the farm's staff. Consider an e-mailed or mailed newsletter to share all the good that goes on at your organization. If you are currently engaged in social media or email, try adding a contest, a new feature in your newsletter, a new feature for your farm or business, that will lead to new people to "friend" you or give you their e-mail addresses.

Support the positive, minimize the negative: There is a lot that happens to assure food safety and quality in everything you do; show that in what you project. "We will continue to promote and advance safety and safe practices at our business and to make certain that our customers and friends get the very best we have to offer."

Be patient: A food safety crisis is serious. But it is a single event, not a defining trait. With consistent, positive, transparent communication, overtime your organization will re-gain its customers' confidence. An example in Syracuse would be the food-borne illness at one of its most beloved restaurants in 2006: Dinosaur Barbeque. Over 600 people became ill after dining there. It took a few months, but customers eventually trickled back in. A year later, business was almost back to normal. Today, the restaurant is opening new locations and has a strong customer following. That's because Dinosaur Barbeque was known for great food and a unique atmosphere, and those positive elements outweighed the one negative event. Focus on regaining customer confidence by doing what you do best, and eventually customers will come back.

SITUATION #4: What You Can Do TODAY (Preventative Maintenance)

As the saying goes: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. By following the guidelines established in the "Food Safety at Direct Marketing Venues" document, your organization will be taking action to reduce the chance of a food safety crisis. However, there are communicative tactics that can be taken NOW to lessen the blow of a crisis in the future, should one ever occur.

- Send a press release to local media announcing your organization's participation in the "Food Safety at Direct Marketing Venues" program, highlight how important it is to your organization to serve your customers with a quality product – that's also safe.
- Create signage to hang at your organization announcing that food safety measures are in place.
- Produce additional signage that encourages safe customer practices: "Four Rules of Food Safety: Clean, Separate, Cook, Chill."
- Consider setting up a food safety table at your market where you can pass out information sheets on safe transport, storage, preparation, and handling of market items. If you're a vendor, consider including an information sheet with each purchase, specific to the product you're offering. At the very least, place a placard with succinct food safety guidelines near your cash register.
- Launch a "Food Safety Awareness" Day/Week/Month that highlights the preventative measures your customers can take to avoid eating unsafe food. Include demonstrations of proper handling and storage.
- If you have a Twitter account, Facebook page, or blog, use these online spaces to stress to the public that you are dedicated to food safety. Invite their comments and perspective and instruct them on proper food handling at your business and once consumers bring products into their own homes.



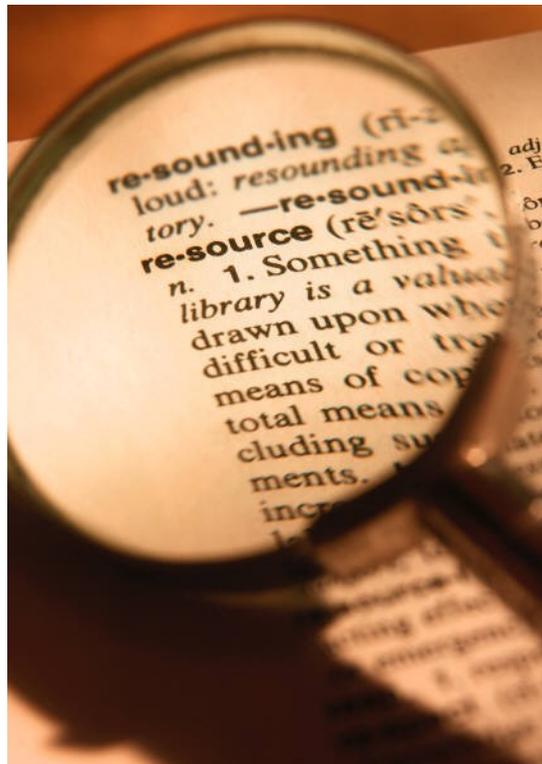
RESOURCES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION AND INFORMATION

Contact your local Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) chapter. Currently, the first year's \$65 initiation fee is being waived. PRSA offers workshops, training, and access to public relations resources for its members. Visit: www.prsa.org

Read the following documents online:

<http://plantsforhumanhealth.ncsu.edu/extension/marketready/pdfs-ppt/NC%20MarketReady%20Crisis%20Communications%20Training%20Guide.pdf>

http://www.foodsafety.ksu.edu/articles/313/crisis_communication_planning_manual.pdf

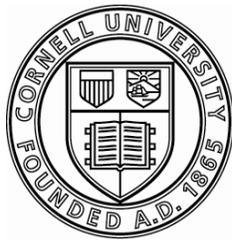


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117 Highbridge St., Suite U3
Fayetteville, NY 13066
Phone: 315-637-4690
FAX:

www.nyfarmersmarket.com



Cornell University Cooperative Extension Jefferson County

203 North Hamilton Street
Watertown, New York 13601
Phone: (315) 788-8450
Fax: (315) 788-8461

www.ccejefferson.org

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