

Food Recalls in the Digital Age

The recent one-two punch of the peanut and pistachio recalls, and U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) declarations that it will be markedly more assertive, drive home the need for food companies to adopt vastly improved “pre-crisis” response planning.

As the FDA’s Associate Commissioner for foods recently told *The New York Times*, “The food industry needs to be on notice that the FDA is going to be much more proactive and move things far faster We’re going to try to stop people from getting sick

release, traditional media report a nationwide recall.

- Early the next morning, the Teamsugar Blog posts that federal food safety officials warn that “consumers should stop eating all foods containing pistachios” pending the investigation outcome.

- By 11 am, Internet newspaper *The Huffington Post*—which had 2.3 million site visits that day—posts on the issue.

- Several further blogs join in over the next few hours, and the story pops up everywhere.

The company’s reputation was now in the hands of

involved could individually notify each company using its products.

How can companies respond effectively to pressure on an entire food segment like peanuts or pistachios? Are the companies and their trade associations, communicators, and attorneys ready?

Recalls of the past three years—including spinach, tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, meat, and chicken—all point to a food safety regime that is losing the trust of consumers and is subject to intense traditional media, Internet, and government scrutiny.

plans as something nice to have but not essential. The days of such thinking are long past.

Getting the facts out, setting the tone, and projecting a company’s responsible handling of the situation are all crucial elements to successfully managing the first minutes and hours of a recall. Being ready with important product and procedural information, and knowledge of government procedures as well as food safety measures taken by the company and its suppliers, is essential.

That’s because the media

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in the first place, as opposed to waiting until we have illness and death before we take action.”

The strength and breadth of today’s 24-hr news cycle, driven by a hyperactive, irrepressible Internet, seem to still surprise and overwhelm many in the food industry. But that intensive coverage is not going away and must be accommodated in recall communications plans.

The rapid fire pistachio recall timeline is illustrative:

- In a March 30 evening media briefing, the FDA and the California Dept. of Public Health announce their investigation of *Salmonella* contamination in pistachio products sold by Setton Pistachio of Terra Bella Inc., and state that Setton will recall one million lbs of pistachios.

- Even before Setton proceeds with its recall press

the warp speed media echo chamber, with bloggers ready to pile on—often without checking the facts. Any company that used pistachios found itself under enormous pressure, regardless of its understanding about the source and safety of its own products, and apparently without prior knowledge that the FDA would suggest consumers stop eating all pistachios. This all occurred six days after the FDA first learned, from a user company, of the contamination.

Food recall news circulates with lightning speed, and the peanut and pistachio recalls highlight the immense challenges involved when the product is an ingredient in hundreds or even thousands of other products. The news was out that these commodities presented dangers long before the corporations

Reacting to the peanut recall, President Barack Obama said, “No parent should have to worry that their child is going to get sick from their lunch.”

Obama announced the creation of a Food Safety Working Group chaired by the Health and Human Services and Agriculture secretaries to update food safety laws and regulations, saying the group will “advise me on how we can upgrade our food safety laws for the 21st century; foster coordination throughout government; and ensure that we are not just designing laws that will keep the American people safe, but enforcing them.”

A small number of companies apparently believe strong food safety production measures are unnecessary, and a larger number seem to view communications crisis drills and recall contingency

and consumers watch closely, and judge harshly, the manner in which companies handle recalls. Recalls result in the demise of some companies. For the many that do survive, the extent of the reputational damage—a major influence on future economic viability—depends largely on its handling of the recall crisis.

When a recall occurs, there’s too much to do and too much pressure to move quickly to start planning from scratch. Companies that fail to prepare are overrun and engulfed in the overwhelming tide of media, consumer, government, and blogger interest. **FT**

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