

DISSECTING
FOODBORNE ILLNESS
OUTBREAKS:
The Role of Retailers

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THE CALL

- Normally Retailers learn of a potential foodborne illness outbreak through:
 - customer complaints,
 - regulatory agencies, or
 - its customer service center.
- All necessary information is gathered, screened for validity and forwarded to the appropriate company parties (this Core Group generally consists of Customer Service, Food Safety, Procurement and Operations).
- Food Safety generally performs the initial investigation through store visits, lab sampling and customer follow-up.
- Once the facts are gathered, the Core Group generally makes a determination – do the facts validate a foodborne illness outbreak, or not?

The Investigation

- Food Safety performs a store visit and determines, through discussion and auditing, if the potential for an outbreak exists.
- Samples may be collected and submitted to a 3rd party laboratory for analysis.
- If applicable, Food Safety, in conjunction with Customer Service, will talk to the customer to determine product, date of purchase, handling, preparation and possible dietary precautions.
- After an initial investigation and possible subsequent follow-up, various regulatory agencies may be contacted (generally the local, or state agency first, but depending on the circumstance(s), FDA/OCI).

Working with the Local and State Agencies

- Once it is determined that it is a potential outbreak (more than an single person or specific retail location), the local or state agency is called.
- Discussion centers around other complaints or illnesses that may have been reported.
- An on-site visit is made by the agency and the Food Safety team to partner in review and validation of the facts. All gathered information is typically shared at that time.
- If, at that point, it is determined to be a supplier or manufacturer issue, it is generally turned over to the agency for follow-up.

Working with the Supplier/Manufacturer

- While the retailer is performing the initial investigation, the supplier/manufacturer is notified in the very beginning. It is imperative to partner with the supplier community to combine resources.
- The S/M can generally provide us support in the investigation.
- Depending on the scope of the illness, or customer complaint, retailers will generally ask for a root cause analysis and corrective action plan.
- Depending on whether it is a nationally branded product, or corporate/store brand product an on-site audit may be performed by the retailers Food Safety group.
- Throughout the process, communication is at a minimum of daily, but generally more frequently.

Communicating with Customers

- If it is determined that an outbreak has occurred, communicating with our customers is of the utmost importance. Communication is handled in multiple ways:
 - Media notification, TV and radio press releases
 - In-store signage and announcements
 - Website postings
 - E-mail Notification
 - Automated Calling
- E-mail Notification and Automated Calling
 - These are some our newest technologies
 - If the customer uses some type of loyalty card, retailers will pull the data to determine who may have bought the particular product , or shopped in a particular store and send them via email, or phone alerts with instructions or advice.

Customer Testimonial

How a Rewards Card Saved My Life-Stop & Shop Gets CRM Right

By: [Darryl Ohrt](#)

Published: [May 06, 2011](#)

Last week I purchased a bunch of alfalfa sprouts at Stop & Shop. Because I use the self-scanning tool when at the store, I had logged in with my rewards card. And as is customary, all of my purchases were recorded. A few days later, I get a phone call from "unknown." Thinking it was a friend on Skype, I answer, and to my surprise, it's a pre-recorded message from Stop & Shop, alerting me to the fact that my alfalfa sprouts have been recalled due to a risk of e coli. Wow. They specifically targeted me due to my purchase of the actual alfalfa sprouts that were being recalled. And they alerted me to that fact, and promised a full refund when I returned to the store. Plenty of retailers spam their customers with every little announcement, and as customers we've come to ignore most of this, assuming that the majority of these types of messages don't pertain to us. And for most retailers, this is true. But smart retailers like Stop & Shop are thinking differently. They're gathering information from their shoppers and using it to provide value to their customers. This week, the very same grocer launched a mobile app that allows shoppers to scan their groceries using their own phones. No need for the germ ridden handheld scanner at the store. Scan on your phone, and pay from your phone. This is a retailer that's taking a continuous look at its shoppers habits and asked "what can we do to improve their experience?" We could learn a lot from Stop & Shop. It's our role as agencies and marketers to use the information that we gather wisely, and in a way that benefits rather than exploits our customers. It's no wonder that consumers fear privacy, and sharing information on social networks. Not everyone in our industry has treated this data with the care and responsibility that it deserves. Agencies are quick to make sure that their campaigns and promotions meet their strategy deck requirements -- usually getting the product in front of consumers -- but so many marketers forget about what's actually good for the consumer. Or how their campaigns might provide actual value to that consumer. Our industry gathers more information about customers than ever before in retail history. The comfort level at which our customers share this data is directly dependent on how we as marketers use it. It's ironic that one of the nation's oldest retail industries -- an industry that a few years ago some predicted might be replaced by the internet -- is leading the charge in CRM. You can be sure that retailers who follow suit will reap trustworthy, loyal customers. I know that I'll be logging my purchases this weekend...but staying away from the alfalfa sprouts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Darryl Ohrt is a former punk rocker and chief contributor to the greatest blog in all of the land, [BrandFlakesForBreakfast](#). While his official title is president, his business card says he's "Prime Minister of Awesome" at [Humongo](#), a Source Marketing company. Article published in AdAge Agency News

Tying it all Together

- It is paramount that the retailer work with supplier/ manufacturers, regulatory agencies and the customer. We are usually the only connection between all three and generally the first call.
- Retailers must do a thorough job of investigating all customer complaints as one illness to an illness outbreak can destroy our customer loyalty and the integrity of the industry.
- We must continue to find ways to keep our customers updated and share information by using social media and developing new technologies.
- Retailers must continue to evaluate its own brand suppliers and use only those that have proven food safety track records.

Questions

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