

Silence in the Turmoil of Crisis

Peanut Corporation of America's Response to Its Sweeping Saimoneiia Outbreak

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This case explores how organizations should engage in crisis communication, seeking to balance open communication with the public and self-interest. It addresses the ethical dilemma between a desire for open disclosure and the realistic threat of legal repercussions to such disclosure. Finally, it also considers the degree to which different interest groups—the company, the industry, consumer advocacy groups, and government regulators, among others—are responsible for identifying problems and alerting the public.

^Organizational crisis communication literature consistently calls for prompt, open, and honest responses by organizations facing crises (Seeger, 2006). In direct contrast, organizations' legal counsels frequently recommend limited responses, fearing detailed communication will work against the organization in legal battles stemming from the crisis. Hearit (1995) explained, "Corporate rhetors that admit responsibility virtually invite lawsuits" (p. 13). Organizations connected with public crises struggle with the tension between open communication and self-protection. Indeed, many debates arise inside corporate headquarters as leaders prepare their crises responses (Coombs, 2007). Thus, the tension between a desire for open disclosure and the realistic threat of legal repercussions to such disclosure creates an ethical dilemma for organizations. Peanut Corporation of America (PCA) leaders faced this communication dilemma when they found themselves at the heart of a salmonella outbreak the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) referred to as "one of the largest food safety recalls ever in the United States" (Wittenberger & Dohlman, 2010, p. 1).

Salmonella is a common cause of food poisoning. In fact, salmonella is America's leading source of food poisoning (Brumback & Alonso-Zaldivar, 2009). Salmonella is spread when humans consume foods contaminated with animal feces (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2009). Frequently salmonella-contaminated foods are of animal origin, but any food product can become tainted with salmonella, as was the case

in Blakely, Georgia. Also, Severson (2009) reported that salmonella bacteria can survive for an extended period of time in peanut butter products.

As is often the case with food poisoning, those who suffer the most in cases of salmonellosis are the very young and the very old. The CDC (2009) explained the following:

Salmonellosis is an infection with bacteria called *Salmonella*. Most persons infected with *Salmonella* develop diarrhea, fever, and abdominal cramps 12 to 72 hours after infection. The illness usually lasts 4 to 7 days, and most persons recover without treatment. . . . The elderly, infants, and those with impaired immune systems are more likely to have a severe illness, (para. 1)

Though reports of salmonella illnesses began in the fall of 2008, PCA did not make its first public recall announcement until early 2009. PCA neglected to communicate remorse, explanation, or informational updates to stakeholders *throughout* the crisis, despite increasing reports of salmonellosis (Millner, Veil, & Sellnow, 2011). The company's refusal to publicly accept responsibility limited consumers' understanding of the unfolding crisis. Nilsen (1966) argued that humans are free to the degree that they are able to act independently and think for themselves; an assault against free will and informed decision making is an infringement on significant choice. In other words, when individuals aren't provided with enough accurate information to make an informed decision, then the ethic of significant choice has been violated.

PCA is a peanut manufacturer responsible for processing approximately 2% of the industry's peanuts and peanut by-products (Chapman & Newkirk, 2009). PCA "produced blanched, split, granulated, and roasted peanuts. Peanut meal, peanut butter, and peanut paste were also produced" (Wittenberger & Dohlman, 2010, p. 17). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) investigators reported that, in 2009, PCA's salmonella-tainted peanut products were unwittingly used in more than 3,900 other food items (Wittenberger & Dohlman, 2010), leading to 714 salmonellosis cases and nine deaths in 43 states (CDC, 2009). In addition, the FDA released nearly a dozen different Georgia state and federal inspection reports citing PCA's Blakely plant for unclean premises and food manufacturing protocol violations. PCA's Plainview, Texas, location was also tested for salmonella on the premises and in manufactured products; final reports explained that the Plainview plant tests were "99 % positive for salmonella [but] in *this* case the tainted products did *not* make it to consumers" (Stark & Banner, 2009). Ultimately, the Blakely plant was identified as the primary manufacturing location for one of the largest food recalls the world has ever seen (Odom, 2009).

In this case, we outline the unusual aspects of the PCA salmonella contamination and explain how these factors escalated the outbreak's intensity. First, the case is overviewed with a timeline narrative highlighting the key points contributing to the case's burgeoning impact. Second, we address effective organizational communication's importance as it relates to PCA's sanitation practices, the nature of the contaminated by-products, and communication reticence. These factors created compounding problems for PCA, an array of other organizations in the food industry, and several government agencies. We conclude with closing observations and questions for discussion.

TIMELINE NARRATIVE

Peanut paste is used in everyday foods such as crackers and cookies. Wittenberger and Dohlman (2010) wrote the following:

Recalled products containing [PCA] peanut ingredients include brownies, cakes, pies, many types of candy, cereals, cookies, crackers, donuts, dressings and seasonings, prepared fruit and vegetable products, ice creams, peanut butter and products, pet foods, pre-packaged meals, snack bars, snack mixes, and toppings, (p. 4)

The contamination of commonly consumed food items made this an acute crisis because of its far-reaching impact. This crisis reached catastrophic dimensions, due in large part to PCA's history of unclean plant management. In fact, congressional testimony dates salmonella's presence at PCA's Blakely plant "as far back as 2006" (Alonso-Zaldivar & Blackledge, 2009, para. 6), with repeated Georgia state health code violations from 2006 to 2008 (Boudreau, 2009). Georgia health department records highlight PCA's chronic unhygienic production and allude to unethical business practices.

According to ABC's Hartman and Barrett (2009), the first peanut-related incident occurred in 1990 when the FDA cited a Virginia plant for shipping products with toxins. In 2001, the FDA found the same toxins in peanut products at another plant; the FDA also documented improper compliance and poor equipment (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). On September 4, 2007, inspectors from the Georgia Department of Agriculture examined the Blakely plant and discovered uncovered products, damaged equipment, and unsanitary conditions (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). The Blakely, Georgia, plant experienced regular mandated state inspections. Reports of recurring sanitation citations and unethical manufacturing practices depict PCA as the liable organization following the peanut food crisis. Repeated offenses are meaningful because they illustrate an organization's true colors. Next, the following timeline outlines the major peanut butter-related occurrences of 2008 and 2009.

Peanut Corporation of America Case Facts in 2008

On April 11, 2008, a Canadian-owned distributing company refused a PCA shipment of chopped peanuts because the product contained pieces of metal (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). Two months later, the FDA conducted a weeklong inspection of the Blakely plant, citing it for unsanitary conditions (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). In 2008, "Seven tests performed for the company were positive for salmonella. In each case, after a retest is negative, the product is shipped" (Associated Press, 2009b, para. 4).

By September 2008, the CDC began reporting illnesses (Associated Press, 2009b; Hartman & Barrett, 2009). On October 23, the Blakely plant was again cited for unsanitary premises and improper equipment maintenance (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). Salmonella reports triggered a governmental response on November 25. CDC partnered with state and local officials to assess cases of salmonellosis reported in over a dozen states (Associated Press, 2009b). At the end of December, PCA operators were charged with their first

salmonella-related death (Associated Press, 2009b). Salmonellosis deaths throughout the nation were reported in late 2008 and into early 2009, with allegations that PCA's contaminated peanut paste was the cause. Overall, 2008 marked the beginning of the peanut salmonella crisis, but the process of source identification and mass salmonellosis outbreak accelerated greatly in 2009.

Peanut Corporation of America Case Events in 2009

The FDA is responsible for examining all food crisis cases in an effort to assess the level of neglect or wrongdoing. On January 7, 2009, the FDA launched an institutional food service investigation (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). After several federal inspection visits and FBI raids, PCA ceased production at its Blakely plant (Associated Press, 2009b). Recalls started January 10, beginning with the King Nut label, a company that used PCA as its manufacturer and distributor (Associated Press, 2009b). According to USDA's Wittenberger and Dohlman (2010), "On January 10, an opened 5-pound container of King Nut peanut butter tested positive for the outbreak strain of salmonella" (p. 3). Three days later, PCA recalled all of its products made at the Blakely plant "on or after July 1, 2008, because of possible salmonella contamination" (Associated Press, 2009b, para. 13). Marler Clark, legal expert in food-borne illness cases, filed lawsuits on behalf of salmonella victims as early as January 20, 2009 (Bronstad, 2009). On January 23, the USDA released a statement warning that possibly tainted products had been unknowingly distributed to food and nutrition programs (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service functions to educate school children about healthy eating practices.

Next, federal officials stumbled across interesting news at the end of January. During 2007 and 2008, after finding salmonella in some of its products, PCA sent samples of the same products to another laboratory for testing. The contracted laboratory's secondary tests regularly came back negative for salmonella, at which point PCA sold the products to food manufacturers and distributors (Cohen, 2009; Hartman & Barrett, 2009). In late January, FDA found internal records from the Blakely plant showing a dozen instances in 2007 and 2008 of the company identifying salmonella in its products. FDA also reported cockroaches, mold, and leaks at the plant (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). On January 28, PCA again extended its peanut paste recall, reclaiming products made after January 1, 2007. That same day, CDC reported that over 500 people had contracted salmonellosis to date, eight of whom died (Associated Press, 2009b; Hartman & Barrett, 2009). January concluded with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) promising a criminal investigation (Associated Press, 2009b).

February began with an announcement by President Obama that the FDA would undergo a comprehensive review as a result of the peanut salmonella outbreak (Associated Press, 2009b). On February 3, 2009, reports surfaced of a Plainview, Texas, PCA manufacturing plant that "operated for years uninspected and unlicensed by government health officials" (Associated Press, 2009b, para. 28). The FDA suspended PCA from doing business with the federal government for at least 1 year (Sylvester, 2009).

February was a tumultuous month for many reasons, including damaging ice storms in Kentucky and Arkansas. Almost 200,000 emergency meal kits were sent to Kentucky and Arkansas in response to their disasters. The meal kits were recalled because they contained

possibly tainted peanut butter (Associated Press, 2009b). By February 5, the CDC had counted 575 cases of salmonellosis in 43 states (Associated Press, 2009b; Schiavoni, 2009). The same day, government officials and a salmonellosis victim's mother testified before a Senate subcommittee about the outbreak (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). This congressional hearing was a particularly significant event because it was the first time investigators, regulatory agencies directors, and PCA salmonellosis victims came together simultaneously to discuss the outbreak.

The FBI raided the Blakely plant on February 9 (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). By February 11, estimates projected that over 1,500 products had been recalled, nearly 600 people had been sickened in 44 states, and 9 had died from the salmonella-tainted peanut by-products (Hartman & Barrett, 2009; Schiavoni, 2009). The Plainview plant announced it had voluntarily suspended operations during the investigation (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). On February 13, PCA declared bankruptcy (Marler Clark, 2009). By mid-March, the CDC had confirmed almost 700 cases of salmonellosis in the United States. These key events uncovered a pattern of unsafe, unprofessional, unpredictable, and unethical business practices. The next section will further delve into PCA's poor organizational management and stakeholder communication throughout the peanut crisis.

KEY MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Three management issues complicated the outbreak crisis for PCA: (1) previous decisions the company made about plant cleanliness, (2) the fact that the company sold an ingredient rather than an end product, and (3) the company's choice to remain largely silent. Each of these intensified the crisis. We discuss each of these compounding factors next.

Compounding "Mistakes" in Plant Cleanliness

The U.S. Public Health Service Act requires that all companies adhere to food safety practices. PCA—disregarding federal requirements, human morality, and financial common sense—failed to follow high ethical standards in its food production processes. The state of Georgia has records citing PCA's Blakely plant for repeated violations in 2006, 2007, and 2008 (Boudreau, 2009). The FDA found Blakely plant internal records showing a dozen instances of unsanitary production and of bacteria in shipped peanut by-products (Schmit, 2009). Though peanut butter is considered a low-risk food product for contracting salmonella bacteria (Associated Press, 2009a), PCA's poor sanitation and upkeep at the Blakely and Plainview plants resulted in a national outbreak of salmonellosis. At least 12 times from 2007 through 2009, PCA "*knowingly* shipped products that initial tests showed were contaminated with salmonella" (Boudreau, 2009). In fact, PCA products were tested for salmonella, and laboratory results regularly came back positive. PCA then had its product retested by an alternate, contracted laboratory. Once the secondary laboratory provided a negative test result, the products were shipped (Cohen, 2009; Hartman & Barrett, 2009). In short, PCA compounded its failure by maintaining unsanitary plant

conditions and by knowingly shipping tainted products. The calculated decision to ship contaminated products illustrates that PCA placed more value on profit than the health and safety of its consumers.

Compounding Impact on the Food Industry

PCA's contamination crisis was *not* the result of one or two tainted products manufactured by a singular company. Rather, PCA's peanut paste was used in a countless number of food products around the world. Estimates declare that somewhere between 3,500 and 4,000 different food products were recalled because of the PCA contamination (Schmit, 2009; Wittenberger & Dohlman, 2010). PCA's peanut paste was also used in a handful of animal foods, leading to sick canines and pet food and feed-grade peanut butter recalls (Marler, 2009). The fact that PCA's peanut paste was an ingredient, not an end product, makes it a unique case. Typical recalls affect single product types such as eggs or ground beef, where only the distribution date is needed to identify and return or discard the product. PCA's peanut paste, however, found its way into hundreds of different products manufactured by dozens of different organizations. Thus, the recall volume swelled as the raw ingredient was found in product after product.

Compounding Communication Issues

PCA offered minimum communication in response to the crisis. For example, PCA offered no public statements about its product recall until January 13, 2009, months after salmonellosis cases had been linked to the company in the fall of 2008. Hallman and Cuite (2010) noted that confusion can arise when consumers have too little information about contaminated products. They explain that if consumers "cannot successfully distinguish affected from unaffected products, they are likely to either under-react by assuming that they do not own any of the recalled products or over-react by discarding or avoiding the purchase of anything that resembles it" (Hallman & Cuite, 2010, p. 4). It should be noted that PCA's reticence was likely prompted by a desire for corporate protection. It is probable, we argue, that PCA executives did not take adequate responsibility (or participate in apologia) because they valued their own right to self-protection over open communication or consumer right to significant choice. Competing values lead to ethical dilemmas, as exemplified by this peanut paste food crisis.

Despite rising consumer anxiety, PCA maintained its silence. During the February 2009 congressional hearing, PCA's owner and the Blakely plant manager both pled the Fifth Amendment, allowing them to legally resist answering any questions. PCA's silence created an information void during the crisis, denying consumers the regular updates they needed in order to make informed decisions about how to protect themselves and their families during the outbreak. News networks sought to fill the information void by providing what Veil and Ojeda (2010) described as adjusting information. They explained, "The media can assist in providing adjusting information and ... can be used to convey instructions to the public" during a crisis (p. 415). During the peanut paste crisis, third-party organizations such as government agencies and peanut industry leaders used media sources to provide critical updates about the growing cascade of recalled products.

Again, PCA's silence and lack of transparency introduced an information vacuum—a void in which consumers knew very little about the evolving recall. During a crisis, absence of information is simply unacceptable. Therefore, throughout the peanut salmonella crisis, government agencies and peanut industry leaders shared messages with consumers about (1) which products were safe, (2) what to do with contaminated products, and (3) where to seek medical help. For example, the FDA repeatedly announced (through local news and global news channels) that jarred peanut butter was safe (Carey, 2009). Similarly, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) instructed ice storm victims and other consumers to throw away emergency meal kits and counseled anyone who had eaten potentially contaminated products to contact a local health official or the CDC (Hensley, 2009).

Government agencies were instrumental in providing stakeholders with crisis information. Peanut industry leaders also shared pertinent information with consumers. For example, Martin and Robbins (2009) of the *New York Times* observed the following:

Many consumers, apparently disregarding the fine print of the Salmonella outbreak and food recall. . . are swearing off all brands of peanut butter, driving down sales by nearly 25 percent. The drop-off is so striking that brands like Jif are taking the unusual step of buying ads to tell shoppers that their products are not affected, (para. 1-2)

Similarly, a CNN broadcast explained how Jif and Peter Pan “started costly ad campaigns to reassure the public” that their peanut products were 100% safe (Phillips, 2009). Clearly, government agencies and peanut industry leaders utilized various media channels in an effort to provide updates about the developing peanut paste contamination. Millner et al. (2011) characterized third-party communication of this nature as proxy communication. Proxy communicators must often speak on behalf of an entire industry in circumstances where organizations afflicted with crisis choose silence. Millner et al. (2011) noted that “proxy communicators actually speak *in place of* the liable organization/crisis event to provide the needed information” (p. 75). In the PCA crisis, organizations like the FDA, FEMA, the CDC, Peter Pan, and Jif communicated messages of self-protection and clarification to consumers in an effort to counter PCA's negligence and silence. For the most part, these messages did not critique PCA. Instead, proxy communicators provided messages designed to clarify the situation and empower consumers to protect themselves. In this case, proxy communicators acted as ethical agents; their efforts enabled the flow of information during a crisis that reinstated the ethic of significant choice.

SUMMARY

The PCA case remains one of the largest and most complex in history. This chapter depicted a case laden with the ethical implications—competing values and goals, unethical decision making and production practices, compounding industry issues and crises, significant choice, organizational accountability, and duty via proxy communicators. For

nearly 2 years, Americans were unsure what to do with peanut butter and peanut by-products, because the surge of contaminated products created considerable uncertainty and alarm for consumers. The complexity of this crisis created a number of communication challenges for PCA and the food industry in general. PCA's lack of communication fostered uncertainty and heightened anxiety throughout the contamination crisis. Also, PCA's decision to remain silent through much of the crisis prompted others to compensate for the vacuity of information. Proxy communicators emerged as the first line of defense for consumers anxious to learn more about the recall and how to avoid illness.

Discussion Questions

1. To what extent did lapses in PCA's manufacturing practices lead to a large scale, organizational communication failure during the crisis?
2. When should large organizations such as PCA take the silent approach or a vocal approach? Why would a organization want to stay silent or voice their side?
3. To what extent were the proxy communications justified in stepping forward to communication during the crisis?
4. Were all of the organizations and agencies described in the case equally justified in assuming the role of proxy communicator?
5. What are the potential complications for proxy communicators in crises?
6. If PC A had decided to communicate during the crisis, what messages of communication would have been most important to stakeholders? What messages would have been most helpful for consumers?
7. If you were the head of a major organization, how would you handle this situation from the top to bottom of your given organization (I.E. employees, media, consumers, etc)?

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