

# ***Life Cycle of An Issue: The Food Safety Story***

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Many diverse and powerful issues have impacted the meat industry over the years, but the past few have brought many issues to the forefront of consumers' minds—and, perhaps, their purchasing decisions. Food safety is one of the critical issues.

To many, the food safety issue began with the January 1993 *E. coli* outbreak in the Pacific Northwest. Regional and national headlines summarized the size and scope of the outbreak, which left over 500 people ill. News stories described the anguish of parents watching their children become desperately sick. Four children would die.

But efforts to deal with the issue had begun years earlier when the meat industry identified a little-known bacteria, *E. coli* O157:H7, and targeted it for research. The "story" part of the cycle—when word circulates among media and consumers—began in late 1991 when a Pulitzer Prize-winning series on problems with the meat inspection system appeared in the *Kansas City Star* and later was carried—or imitated—by publications and broadcast outlets nationwide.

The meat industry, of course, did respond. In addition to more than \$4 million invested directly into food safety research during the '90s, the meat industry has spent many thousands of dollars as well as hundreds of hours dealing with the issue through direct and indirect consumer education efforts.

## ISSUE IMPACT

The purpose of this workshop is not to discuss the science or technology associated with *E. coli* O157:H7. Rather, it is aimed at helping us better understand the impact of food safety media coverage on market share, measured in this case by consumer intentions to reduce consumption of meat products as the direct result of their food safety concerns.

How can we measure such intentions? We can examine nearly five years of consumer attitude information gathered by Gallup Research through a checkoff-funded project called Consumer Pulse. In addition, we can compare con-

sumer attitude changes with media coverage of food safety issues, as recorded through an industry-funded media surveillance tool called CARMA, or Computer Assisted Research/Media Analysis.

## IN PERSPECTIVE

Although attitudes about other issues studied through the research—diet/health, environment, and animal welfare—have remained relatively stable, food safety issue attitudes have evolved over the past several years.

The first of two significant changes in attitude ("significant" in this case is a move, during a single quarter, of three to four percentage points) occurred when the *Star* reported system-wide problems at USDA, where the meat inspection system was termed a "disaster waiting to happen." Media "volume" in this case doubled, from about 30 million potential consumer impressions per quarter to just over 70 million. Stories about inspection system difficulties made up more than half of all coverage tracked; most were overwhelmingly negative. The number of consumers (who research often has found more likely to react to something perceived to threaten them individually) saying they would reduce meat consumption increased from 7% to 11% as a result.

These negative attitudes toward meat stabilized somewhat and then declined, a typical reaction to negative news. Consumer reaction is usually incident-driven: for example, consumers tend to move away from a product or company to which they are loyal when there is negative news. They usually return when there is no news or better news.

## OUR "INCIDENT"

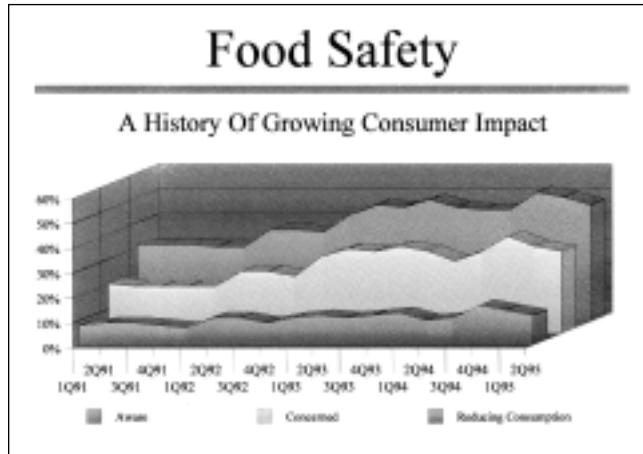
Attitudes turned negative again with the Northwest outbreak, and further eroded over time as media volume increased nearly tenfold as a result of the incident. News during this period, partly as a result of industry efforts to deliver science into the hands of those speaking in the media, was largely neutral or slightly positive. In fact, looking at tracking data associated with the *E. coli* issue, the overall impact of reporting on this topic has helped the industry deliver important food safety and handling messages to consumers.

Still, the number of people who said they would reduce consumption of meat continued to decline as the volume of

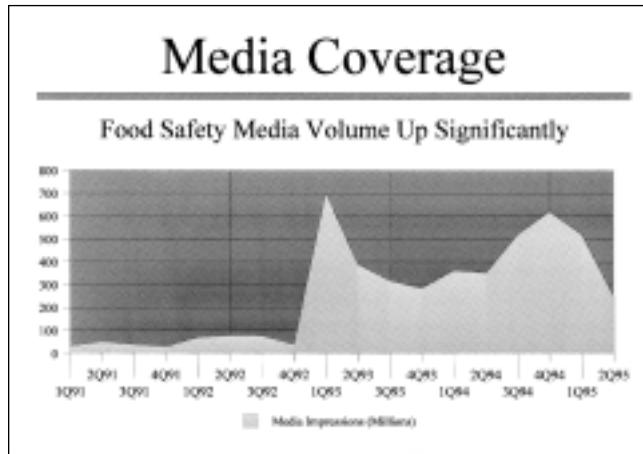
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**FIGURE 1**



**FIGURE 2**



food safety news continued to remain high throughout 1994, despite industry efforts to communicate safe handling information. Why did media coverage remain high? The interest remained mostly because the story had once again shifted back to the question of inspection system adequacy.

Stories also appeared about end-point testing (initiated by USDA to supposedly assure consumers). End-point testing was opposed in court by segments of the industry, and a proposed major overhaul of the inspection system, dubbed the "mega reg," was a political football in the debate over government downsizing and opposed by some industry segments as too costly. These "conflicts" provided substantial material for news copy.

To consumers, this news spotlighted potential problems for them personally, because the system again appeared to be failing. They were getting the messages that meat inspection was inadequate and outmoded, testing for bacteria at the meat case was insufficient and inaccurate, and political haggling was more important than food safety reform.

### CURRENT ATTITUDES IN THE CYCLE

The overall volume of food safety stories declined dramatically during the first two quarters of 1995, with the biggest declines noted in stories about meat inspection and food testing. With this decline came a reduction in the number of consumers who said they were giving up meat.

Still, the issue is not resolved and will be an ongoing one. If the history of this issue offers the industry any advice for the future, it is that industry efforts must be aimed at ensuring that meat products are safe. To deliver this message, it would seem, the industry must demonstrate that it can take a leadership role in finding and implementing solutions that consumers can understand and support.