

FINEMAN PR CASE STUDY

FOSTER FARMS CALMS AVIAN INFLUENZA FEARS

SITUATION ANALYSIS

As H5N1 Avian Influenza (AI) spread throughout Asia and into Eastern Europe last year, AI became front and center in the nation's media. Coverage often forecasted an imminent pandemic brought on by proximity to poultry and other fowl. That was a devastating message for U.S. poultry producers. However, AI experts knew the disease was not present in the U.S. and that domestic poultry were well-protected in the U.S., unlike in the "open markets" overseas. Though there was a possibility that the H5N1 virus could mutate into a strain that could be transmitted from human to human, American producers knew the trigger for a pandemic would not come from domestic poultry. Privately held Foster Farms, the largest poultry producer on the West Coast, wanted to safeguard its sales and felt it was necessary to fill an evident gap in the dialog about AI with a responsible communications program. Two years earlier, the company had experienced a change in sales due to the Exotic Newcastle Disease issue, and its public relations agency, Fineman PR, counseled the company that it should not allow misleading media reports about AI to stand unchallenged.

RESEARCH

The company's consumer hotline and Web site's consumer e-mail provided a valuable compass to measure the marketplace perception of the rapidly-evolving AI issue. Both the company and the agency benefited from tracking that direct consumer feedback along with scientific reports, industry surveys, and audited news reports.

Research conducted by the poultry industry about consumer attitudes also showed increasing awareness of the AI threat and confusion about poultry consumption. The company's research and its tracking of consumer calls revealed that misinformation was rampant. Secondary research showed that, internationally, poultry sales were declining sharply in countries that found the H5N1 AI virus among their flocks, as were sales in neighboring countries.

Industry research pinpointed specific areas of consumer confusion. Misleading stories begat such misinformed impressions as: 1) AI had already been found in the U.S., 45% of those polled believed this to be true; 2) AI could be transmitted through poultry consumption (47%); and 3) Americans were in serious and imminent danger of being exposed to a deadly strain of AI (48%). In summary, research indicated and reinforced the critical need for Foster Farms to communicate why its poultry was protected from AI, how its biosecurity program worked, and to demonstrate the company's sensitivity to consumer concern.

PLANNING

Fineman PR's program operated off a \$50,000 budget. Though initial planning centered on collaboration with industry associations and spokespersons, intensified coverage and Foster Farms' brand recognition on the West Coast mandated a more brand-specific response about the company's own practices and preparedness. Objectives were to:

- Correct misinformation perpetuated by misleading media coverage, and help consumers understand the facts regarding AI.
- Prevent a sales decline.
- Instill consumer confidence in Foster Farms product safety.

Based on research findings, key messages for the program were clear:

- The H5N1 strain of AI has never existed in the U.S.
- It is *not* possible to get Avian Influenza from eating properly prepared poultry.
- Foster Farms products are safe to eat and have not been exposed to H5N1 AI.
- Foster Farms flocks are heavily protected from any risk of AI infection.

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To convey these messages and address consumer confusion and misinformation, Fineman PR and Foster Farms agreed on a plan to reach out to consumers directly via its Web site and through a consumer media relations campaign that would encourage ranch tours, media interviews with company experts, by-lined Op-Ed articles and the production and distribution of B-roll. Also, Foster Farms veterinary experts would become visible participants at industry and regulatory agency seminars and conferences.

Internally, for its employees and customers, Foster Farms would conduct informational AI seminars so they could become knowledgeable ambassadors for the company to their friends and family members in their own respective communities. Fineman PR also developed extensive strategies and tactics for scenarios that might arise as AI spread.

EXECUTION

The agency began its campaign by referring any media with general questions about AI to poultry industry associations and to disease experts at the University of Calif., Davis. The agency also crafted statements responding to company-specific questions outlining the company's stringent biosecurity practices. As the issue intensified, a pro-active media relations campaign was implemented to correct misimpressions and accurately communicate the extensive measures the company was already taking to prevent the introduction of AI to its flocks. With increasing media interest in how the region's major poultry producer was responding to the AI threat, the agency began by securing feature coverage in the "hometown" papers, then expanding the program's reach to the entire West Coast and beyond.

Additionally, on November 14, 2005, Foster Farms' AI FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) site was launched specifically for consumers, customers and media awareness. The Spanish-language AI FAQ page was launched soon after. News releases announcing the availability of the information were distributed and materials were produced for Foster Farms' retail and foodservice customers.

Ranch tours and interviews with the company's veterinary experts were initiated and scheduled with local Central Valley newspapers, with the *Los Angeles Times* and the national media, including CNN and *USA Today*. Front page stories began appearing almost immediately in the regional dailies. At this point, no other producer had come out to communicate about AI as forthrightly as Foster Farms.

Perhaps the most effective tactic and result was the agency's *USA Today* cover-story placement which was the most definitive article about the poultry industry's preparedness. The story portrayed Foster Farms as the industry's poster child for AI preparedness and included visual images of the company's bio-security measures in addition to detailed text and interviews. That story significantly changed the nature of subsequent coverage nationwide, and it branded Foster Farms as a consumer market leader.

EVALUATION

The program was judged a major success, measured by 1) a 0% decline in sales and an increase in total volume sold; 2) a dramatic spike in Web site visits accompanied by a steadily decreasing number of calls to the consumer hotline; and 3) positive messaging in extensive feature coverage.

Activity at the Foster Farms Web site was closely monitored. In October, a fairly typical month, the Foster Farms Web site had 10,511 visitors. In November, the same month during which much of the coverage took place, the Web site had 20,911 visitors, an increase of 99% from the previous month. Notably, over 2000 new people signed up for the Foster Farms newsletter between November 14 and 15, the days of and following the *USA Today* and *Los Angeles Times* coverage and the launch of the AI FAQ Web page.

Media coverage of the bio-security tours focused on the stringent measures routinely taking place at the company's facilities. The following media outlets were granted tours and/or interviews with Dr. Charles Corsiglia: *Merced Sun-Star* (coverage on 10/15), *USA Today* (coverage on 11/14), *Los Angeles Times* (coverage on 11/14), *Modesto Bee* (coverage on 11/16), *Fresno Bee* (coverage on 11/20), *Sacramento Bee* (coverage on 11/23), San Francisco Bay Area NBC affiliate (coverage airing on 11/18), and the local ABC Sacramento affiliate (coverage airing on 11/26). CNN National news also attended a facility tour but

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found that the bio-security-themed footage did not match their intended angle, which was to reflect a threatening risk of pandemic. These articles were widely syndicated among local and regional papers, news Web sites and blogs.

A noticeable shift in media perceptions and tone was observed. Armed with the facts from Foster Farms' media outreach, reporters began taking a less catastrophic view of the AI issue. "Poultry farm tactics may thwart bird flu," read the *USA Today*, front page, cover story headline. This coverage lowered the volume and tone from widespread public alarm to more balanced reporting of the issue and recognition that the U.S. poultry industry was doing its job in guarding their flocks and protecting the public welfare. Recent statistics show a change in consumer attitudes. The Harvard School of Public Health found that as of January 25, 2006:

- Only 15% of Americans believed that AI had been found in the U.S. (73% believed AI had not been found in the U.S.)
- Only 15% of Americans were "very concerned" about the spread of AI in the U.S.
- 43% believed that AI spreading among chickens or farm-raised poultry was "not likely"

While the issue and the hysteria that surrounded it has correspondingly diminished, both agency and client have continued monitoring AI events throughout the world. A proprietary Scenario Planning document has been authored by the agency for a multitude of events that can still have an impact on Foster Farms' business. That document is regularly reviewed and updated as new developments arise and as the company makes all efforts to stay in front of this issue.

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