

# Could you cope if a major crisis hit your company?

Whether we like it or not, crises will occur in modern poultry production. At the recent Ceva Vector Vaccines Symposium that was held in San Diego, California, USA, Eliot Hoff, of crisis management consultants APCO, shared his views on how poultry companies should respond to the media and other parties in a crisis. Eliot has advised clients in many food sectors and is experienced in handling salmonella crises.

He defined a crisis as any incident or series of incidents, internal or external, that is likely to have a severe negative impact on the company's normal operations, financial results, brands, reputation, associates, consumers, customers or other key stakeholders.

He defined crisis management as the immediate, rapid response and plan information in response to a significant event.

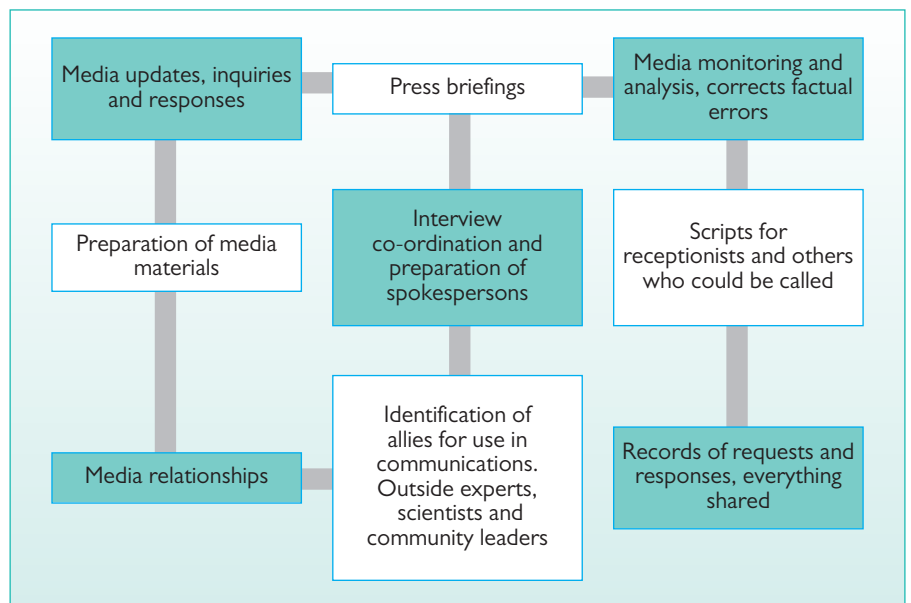
## Importance of preparation

Eliot stressed the importance of preparation in crisis management. This is because mistakes often happen in the heat of the battle as events are happening and decisions have to be made very quickly and the infrastructure may not be in place to manage a threat.

Other issues that often arise are the lack of consensus on how to respond/answer. Even the best plans can not identify/anticipate all scenarios, every move is scrutinised and sometimes blown out of proportion and allies are often reluctant to get involved.

**Table 1. Basic, confirmed facts.**

- What happened?
- What was the cause? (If one has been confirmed).
- Who or what was affected?
- Where were victims taken?
- What actions are being taken to solve the immediate problem?
- What is going to be done to correct a reoccurrence?



**Fig. 1. The working of a Media Information Centre.**

In doing this we need to remember the backcloth of a rapidly changing media landscape. In the last few years the media has gone electronic with 24/7/365 news cycles.

There are some 86 million blogs in existence and there are over a billion camera phones and many people post their views (and photographs) behind the anonymity that the internet can provide.

based on these opinions. Ultimately you normally gain credibility through public engagement.

Eliot cited the recent lowan salmonella in eggs crisis which broke as a story in mid August and until about 27th August up to 800 articles were being published a day about the problem!

These included damning headlines such as



## 228 Million Eggs Recalled Following Salmonella Outbreak

Published August 18, 2010 | Associated Press

So why do we need to communicate? First and foremost, if we do not fill the information vacuum the media certainly will and this will be compounded by the fact that being quiet or secretive is seen to suggest guilt!

Whether we do or do not comment, others certainly will and the views of many of these people or organisations will not necessarily be aligned with your company's best interests.

If we do not communicate the public and government agencies will form their own opinions and may even propose actions

'Timeline of shame', 'Filthy conditions found at egg producers', 'Why eggs became a hazard', 'Faeces and flies found at US egg farms tied to illness' which did no good to the American table egg sector.

Key immediate outcomes in the media that had to be addressed included the following points:

- The role of FDA and USDA in regulation and who was responsible for what in the egg chain.
- The egg company's negative portrayal

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which included past violations, fines and settlements and was negatively labelled in the media.

- The issue of poultry salmonella vaccines and their non-use. Their cheap cost was highlighted as was the successful use of salmonella vaccines by the UK industry.
  - Passing the blame. This occurred when the industry suggested that consumers were at fault for not fully cooking eggs.
  - The changing agricultural market where the media highlighted consolidation and the fact that in 1987 95% of USA eggs came from 2,500 producers and that today that number had reduced to 192.
- Eliot highlighted key questions that need to



## Un oeuf is enough

Unsafe eggs are the latest food scare

Sep 2nd 2010 | NEW YORK

be asked when planning a crisis management strategy. These included:

- What are our biggest areas of vulnerability?
- Do we have a plan for managing communications in a crisis?
- Who will lead the response if key managers are not available?
- What are the risks of not preparing?

It was highlighted that to protect the business we need to maintain confidence in our

stakeholders, communicate effectively with government agencies, meet the information needs of the media, be seen as a good corporate citizen and we need to prevent the crisis from taking control of the business. A communication strategy needs to be developed.

When it comes to planning for crisis management you need to:

- Know what needs to be done before a crisis.
  - Establish an infrastructure and a task force.
  - Gather facts quickly.
  - Develop and fine tune key messages.
  - Keep target audiences in focus.
  - Control information flow.
  - Develop third party allies.
  - Constantly monitor.
- Finally, and by no means least:
- Be prepared.

## Organisation is key

How one organises for a crisis will determine one's ability to manage that crisis. This is going to involve things like defining roles and responsibilities, clear contact information, agreeing the general strategy, dynamics and division of roles between head and local offices, identifying sources of support and additional resources, defining external advisers/experts that can be called upon and conducting regular crisis rehearsals to identify any shortfalls.

You should also audit your operations to identify key issues that could become the source(s) of crisis. This involves identifying weaknesses in the supply chain and documentation.

Have a member staff to document and maintain all government compliance records, evaluations and, maintain of document transparency. In so doing, assume all emails, written statements and meeting notes can and may be made public either by the media or official enquiry.

Review with leaders and suppliers all weak areas in the business at least once a year and determine counter measures to minimise risk.

## Maintain your reputation

In a crisis facts are hard to gather and confirm as information is often the first casualty. Issues tend to broaden beyond the facts and can bring the whole reputation of the business into question.

In addition, facts tend to become distorted and/or exaggerated and emotion overtakes fact with the result that objectivity is quickly lost.



## Iowans Scramble to Cope with Egg Catastrophe

By BETSY RUBINER / DES MOINES Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2010

To help counter this Eliot recommended documenting facts and preparing media friendly fact sheets that define products, R&D and manufacturing processes, the company and its leadership and its customers. Key details should be regularly reconfirmed or updated, say, every three months.

In addition, subject matter experts should be identified who can quickly provide verifiable facts and the legal processes for approving information for external distribution. It helps if a draft response is prepared in advance that can be modified quickly should a crisis occur.

This needs to control the message and release of bad news, put information into context, reduce speculation, proactively say how the problem is being corrected and ensure that information is timely and that facts are accurate.

Building allies, including third party, independent experts, before a crisis will ensure

that there will be friends standing by you should a crisis occur. Third parties can provide letters, calls to the authorities, quotes and media interviews and can contact the community and activists.

A key part of this is to develop relationships with the media beforehand!

Once a crisis has occurred the Golden Rule is that the company must be the primary, authoritative source of timely, factual and trustworthy information.

As far as information is concerned you will need to have approved basic facts for distribution (see Table 1) and a Media Information Centre needs to be established (see Fig. 1).

## Conclusion

In concluding, Eliot stressed that how you respond is critical and he gave a list of key Dos and Don'ts (see Table 2). It is important to remember that no information should be released without approval as the story may run for months.

Journalists need material quickly and if they can't get it from you they will get it elsewhere! ■

**Table 2. Key Dos and Don'ts in your response to a crisis.**

### DOs

- Do take control – have a clear process and accountabilities.
- Do express concern, consideration and empathy. Help those affected.
- Do explain what you are doing to bring the crisis under control and to prevent a reoccurrence.
- Do minimise the damage.
- Do work with the media, not against them. Always be honest.
- Do have trained spokespersons available.
- Do concentrate on giving the right message the right way.
- Do match your response to public perception.

### DON'Ts

- Don't give out unconfirmed facts.
- Don't say – 'No comment'.
- Don't assume, ensure that you know.
- Don't let the situation overtake you.
- Don't be bullied by the media or treat them as your enemy.
- Don't use technical language.
- Don't sound offensive.
- Don't forget other audiences – including internal.
- Don't guess or dissemble.