

## Food Safety Community Communication

By Felix Amiri

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**The first company to actively draw accurate, objective and consistent feedback from consumers wins.**



### Reason for this Article:

I am a consumer. In addition to that, I am a food safety auditor. I have two-fold benefit if companies understand and work at maintaining a healthy food safety community communication atmosphere. This will boost my consumer confidence. It will no doubt provide a reliable tool for the assessment of actual risks during audits.

As a consumer and an auditor, I take special interest in knowing that companies have good consumer communication programs. Hence I am always looking for evidence that this is the case. The review of a company's consumer communication program records often provides the basis for many assessment conclusions during an audit. For example, if an audit observation appears to indicate that there is a food safety issue, it becomes important to know if consumers have actually provided any related

complaints or positive feedback. Depending on a company's approach to consumer feedback management, the associated records can be very useful or completely useless in assessing whether or not a food safety issue actually exists. A poorly managed system can also generate records that can be very misleading one way or another.

Does your company have a good consumer communication program? Does the program go beyond receiving consumer complaints and the issuing of gift certificates to the complainants? This is the most common approach. It is not only limited, it limits the benefits that the food safety community can derive from a good communication environment.

As any company with a robust program understands, even product complaints that may seem undesirable can be turned into very valuable opportunities. Perhaps the first question that comes to mind is: Who belongs to the food safety community? Other likely questions are: How can consumer complaints be good? If consumer complaints are good, how can the food safety community take advantage of them? Why should a consumer communication program look beyond consumer complaints? How does and can a consumer communication program go beyond consumer complaints? These are reasonable questions. There may be more.

Meanwhile, I will return to the question of what or who constitutes the food safety community. There are four groups. The first group consists of the producers: This group typically includes all parties involved in the making of food products. They are the growers, primary processors and manufacturers. The intermediate players constitute the second group. These are sellers and distributors who are customers to the producers and suppliers to the consumers. The third group consists of the consumers. These are the users of the products. Some members of this group are represented by advocates. Examples include young children, disabled adults who may need help in communicating their interests, pets, institutional users, companies, etc. The fourth group in the consumer communication grid consists of the food safety and quality monitors. These are the regulatory, licensing, certifying and other monitoring bodies that protect customers and consumers. It is of utmost importance for all members of the food safety community to know all of the stakeholders with whom to communicate.

The various groups have their respective responsibilities and obligations. Simply stated, the need to communicate clearly and consistently is the responsibility of all members of the food safety community. The responsibility for ensuring that this communication occurs mostly lies with the producers. Where any intermediate party breaks the

communication link between the producers and the consumers, that intermediate party becomes responsible for ensuring that communication occurs. The producers remain responsible for encouraging healthy communication. The producers are also ultimately responsible for tracking, analyzing and acting on all communication opportunities in a manner that benefits all stakeholders and the entire community.

The consumers and monitors need to ensure that their experiences or findings are communicated accurately and objectively. Some consumers may be tempted to go about this the wrong way or with wrong motives. An “irate consumer” predisposition is not always helpful to the “irate consumer”. It is also not always beneficial for a consumer to fabricate complaints in order to get free gift certificates for the same products, from the same producers, using the same methods, etc. In some instances, such practices can end up costing the complainants and the community. Consumer indifference or being too shy or too nice to complain is also detrimental to the benefits that can be derived from a healthy consumer communication environment.

There is a nobler and highly beneficial approach. It is for the food safety community to work together against the common enemy of “food safety issues”. Societies can become healthier through such collaboration.

The value of consumer complaints is already appreciated by every forward-looking company. At the very least, they provide immediate opportunities for continuous improvement – (Refer to the footnotes). Consumer complaints also constitute one of the barometers for measuring customer satisfaction. After all, that is what most companies are in business for. Alright, companies are in business for profit as well but profit margins are inseparable from customer satisfaction and consumer safety. Hence consumer complaints are good. That is not the end of the story. There is more to customer communication than the lodging of complaints or the issuing of appeasing gift certificates.

Consumer communication is something that needs to be actively and consistently sought. It is dangerous for a company to say it does not have consumer complaints or that it has too few complaints to warrant any need for a consumer communication program. In fact, such a stance is close to committing business suicide. It is never true, of course, that a company has no consumer communication program. What is true is that many companies have not taken full advantage of their consumer communication opportunities. I can say this because I have, and continue to conduct food safety audits across the industry. I have seen many reluctant consumer communication programs.

Every company advertises. This is consumer communication. Positive feedback that almost all companies desire is part of consumer communication. Consumers send very strong, but often silent messages when they switch from buying one product brand to another without reporting this decision to the producer. Presumably, the worse kind of consumer communication for a company is when the employees would rather not buy the company’s product for quality or safety reasons. A company needs to devise the means for capitalizing on the opportunities provided by all of the various forms of consumer communication.

#### **A Good Consumer Communication Program:**

From an auditor’s perspective, I will consider a company to be forward-looking if it takes decisive steps to ensure that it has an effective, efficient and active consumer communication program. I expect the companies that I audit to look beyond the negative connotations of complaints. I expect them to understand the broad scope for consumer communication and take advantage of it. To see that companies advantageously track all communication along with implemented corrective actions and quantifiably assess the gains made as a result of such communication is refreshing. Implicit within a good consumer communication program is the knowledge that employees are also consumers. For this to be explicitly addressed within the program is a bonus.



A good consumer communication program also takes an active and sustained initiative to ferret out complaints and positive feedback. The pre-supposition here is that any company can genuinely request suggestions from consumers and customers. This may involve planned interviews with consumers. There can also be the tracking of unreported brand switching decisions by consumers through brand performance analyses. A company is not expected to ever say there are no consumer complaints. There is only one condition that makes this possible. There must absolute certainty of absolute perfection in everything done by everyone with every equipment unit, system and setup consistently performing perfectly to produce only absolutely perfect products. It is immediately

obvious that the “no complaints, ever” claim is unattainable by most companies. Therefore, it is a conclusion that needs to be seriously re-examined.

Companies that reward participating consumers even in complaint situations will always catch the auditors (positive) interest. This is expected to go beyond the issuing of gift certificates. It may include follow-up with complaining consumers some time after the gift certificate has been sent to them. A good consumer communication program is also expected to include means for actively and systematically asking for consumer feedback. As we have noted, this does not stop with the provision of a consumer complaint recording form on file. Positive feedback is also to be sought with the same intensity. This is not to boost the company's pride. Seriously seeking to find out the reasons for positive feedback is helpful.

To have a reliable consumer communication program, a company needs to embark on and maintain a meaningful tracking of all communications. Planned consumer communication trend analyses are invaluable in the identification of trends. Even one-off situations may constitute identifiable trends. All detected trends and isolated situations need to be addressed. In doing so, root causes for undesirable and desirable situations need to be actively determined. Then actions need to be implemented to eliminate the root causes of undesirable situations. On the other hand, root causes of desirable situations need to be encouraged and strengthened. Finally, a company needs to also encourage and reward internal participation in the endeavor and the consumer communication action wheel needs to be kept turning.

So what can we conclude from this? The first company to actively draw accurate, objective and consistent feedback from consumers does not automatically win. There is work involved to take advantage of consumer complaints and positive feedback with decisive implementation of continuous improvement action. This work needs to be actively and consistently done. Otherwise, the food safety community may never win the battle.

Additional Questions and or comments are welcome.

<http://www.afisservices.com>.

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Footnotes:

I also came across an article that expresses the same sentiments about “Capturing the Value of Customer Complaints” by *Fred Van Bennekom, Dr.B.A., Principal Great Brook Consulting*. You will find it here: [http://www.greatbrook.com/value\\_of\\_customer\\_complaints.htm](http://www.greatbrook.com/value_of_customer_complaints.htm)

The links to other Food Safety articles by Felix Amiri are provided below:

**The importance of food safety**

<http://www.helium.com/items/1359218-food-safety>

**Product recalls: Is company profit worth the public's safety?**

<http://www.helium.com/items/1375884-product-recalls>

**The dangers of processed foods**

<http://www.helium.com/items/1361893-the-dangers-of-processed-foods>

**HACCP – achieving the food safety benchmark**

<http://www.nextgenfoodus.com/article/HACCP--achieving-the-food-safety-benchmark/>

