

Prevention is better than cure

Sean Dignum, SDA Strategic & Clare Hamilton-Bate

In early October this year, over 50 berry growers, industry stakeholders and supply chain participants gathered at Tweed Heads to examine the issue of reputation protection in the berry industry. This was set against a backdrop of the 2018 needle tampering in fresh strawberries, subsequent copy-cat incidents and the ripple of impacts that have been felt both domestically and internationally.

The day was facilitated by Sean Dignum (SDA Strategic), Clare Hamilton-Bate and Andrea Currie (Coles Supermarkets) and supported the theme that reputation is the core of ongoing success and damage can be hard to recover from; prevention is so much better than cure!

The major topics covered were:

- Food defence – managing threats and identifying vulnerabilities
- The growing relevance of food defence in averting crisis
- Principles of reputation protection for horticulture
- A retailer's perspective of managing a fresh produce incident
- Responding to an issue and managing a crisis
- Simple approaches to media management

In fresh produce, there have been a set of challenges that build a framework around which reputation must be actively managed, namely:

- Because of the complex 'farm to fork' supply chain, logistics and regulatory environment, growers face many reputation risks arising from the sharing of responsibilities and ownership of the product.
- Issues related to food safety or quality, sustainability of supply, employment practices, environmental or social impacts can quickly morph into scandals with disastrous effect.

- It's essential to maintain stakeholder trust by actively managing the risks and being prepared for media or government scrutiny in the event of incident, issue or lobbying by specific interest groups.
- It's essential to showcase growers' commitment and track record for growing and delivering healthy fresh produce to the tables of Australian families



We want to see our produce arrive on customers tables in the same condition it left our farms.

- That domestic messaging also resonates globally when we remind overseas markets that we have an established record of quality and wholesomeness of Australian fresh produce – grown in a clean environment by careful farmers.

Horticulture needs to take a 21st century approach to reputation management and go beyond the traditional focus on known risks like a food safety recall or workplace accident, and be across the emerging issues like agri-terrorism, food tampering as social rebellion, deliberate food fraud and even the flexing public opinions on the notion of social licence to farm.

Horticulture has been buffered by conventional and time-honoured practices of being 'on the land', close to nature and small-scale farming. That is changing rapidly and dramatically, with increasing scale and sophistication of farming operations making horticulture a bigger target.

Now is the time for horticulture to proactively adopt new ways of thinking – and acting – about product and market protection – collaboratively engaging all stakeholders including government and retailers. This means getting well ahead of traceability, early identification of issues and containment strategies.

This means engaging pre-emptively with government and media and leading the narrative. And a key part of that narrative is labelling the issue correctly; contamination and sabotage are not the same.

Differentiation between contamination that occurred on-farm vs. mishandling in the supply chain vs. deliberate consumer tampering is critical.

The workshop highlighted simple terms that can be used by a business to identify issues:

Threat – deliberate act by someone to cause harm or for financial gain (something that can cause loss or harm which arises from the ill-intent of people)

Vulnerability – how exposed the business is to the threat having an impact on the consumer

Food fraud – the deliberate adulteration or misrepresentation of food, food ingredients or raw materials for financial gain

Food sabotage – the deliberate destruction, damage or disruption of food products or processes with the intention of causing reputational damage or financial loss

Food terrorism – “an act or threat of deliberate contamination of food for human consumption with biological, chemical and physical agents or radio nuclear materials for the purpose of causing injury or death to civilian populations and/or disrupting social, economic or political stability”

Along with the types of threat, consideration was given to the types of perpetrator and their motivations. Simple, practical mechanisms were explained to participants that facilitate the development of a food defence plan for an individual business. The relationship of proactive threat and vulnerability management with effective planning to manage a crisis was reiterated throughout the workshop.

In a post-workshop survey of participants, 95% of respondents stated that as a result of attending the workshop, they felt they had an increased knowledge and level of confidence to deal with a crisis situation within their business.

What's next?

- A Fact Sheet with more tips about identifying and managing a crisis within your business will be developed and shared
- Targeted workshops for development of food defence plans for individual business will be delivered
- Development of template documents for individual businesses to be disseminated through industry
- Ongoing communication regarding the principles of crisis management
- A strategy to support the dissemination of key messages

As this work is being funded through a grant from the Department of Agriculture, Minister McKenzie has been provided with a project update and a full copy of the report from this workshop.



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