



From isolated incident to global headlines

Changing the narrative with clear, positive messages

This project is a collaboration between the Queensland Farmers' Federation and the Queensland Government to support Queensland farmers.

Introduction

There have been countless articles, news stories and court papers discussing the strawberry tampering incidents of 2018 in which consumers found sewing needles in their punnets.

The most challenging crisis the industry had ever faced resulted in new approaches to communication, improved response strategies and key learnings for all agri-food businesses.

The Crisis Event

In September 2018, an isolated food tampering incident occurred involving sewing needles inserted into Australian strawberries. The incident was shared on social media and quickly hit mainstream news outlets. What was initially a one-off incident in Queensland rapidly escalated, with multiple tampering events ensuing in strawberries and other fruit across the country.

Queensland Health and the Queensland Police Service (QPS) led the incident investigation and response. State and Territory food regulatory agencies and the Australian Government also responded with a range of measures including removing strawberries from sale, introducing and strengthening penalties for food tampering, and imposing stricter conditions for strawberry exports.

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However, most retailers were impacted by prolonged copycat tampering incidents across all States and Territories, which resulted from the prolonged media coverage. This included non-food items such as nappies.

This crisis, which shutdown markets and resulted in police and legislative action across the country, all stemmed from one person tampering with fewer than eight punnets of strawberries.

Sources

www.foodstandards.gov.au/publications/Strawberry-tampering-incident

Food, fear and social media: It was never really about the berries, presentation by Rachel Mackenzie, Berries Australia

The Crisis Response

Growers and industry were largely unprepared for a criminal food tampering incident on this scale. Although used to responding to small, one-off incidents in conjunction with retailers, the escalation of this event to a national news story resulted in Berries Australia being immediately overwhelmed with inquiries from journalists across Australia and around the world.

As a result, the crisis response went beyond industry alone, and drew in stakeholders as diverse as retailers, consumer groups, police from multiple states, public health officers and State and Federal politicians. Lamentably, dumping of entire strawberry crops was triggered as a result of a public health alert that was delivered without the engagement of industry and affected growers.



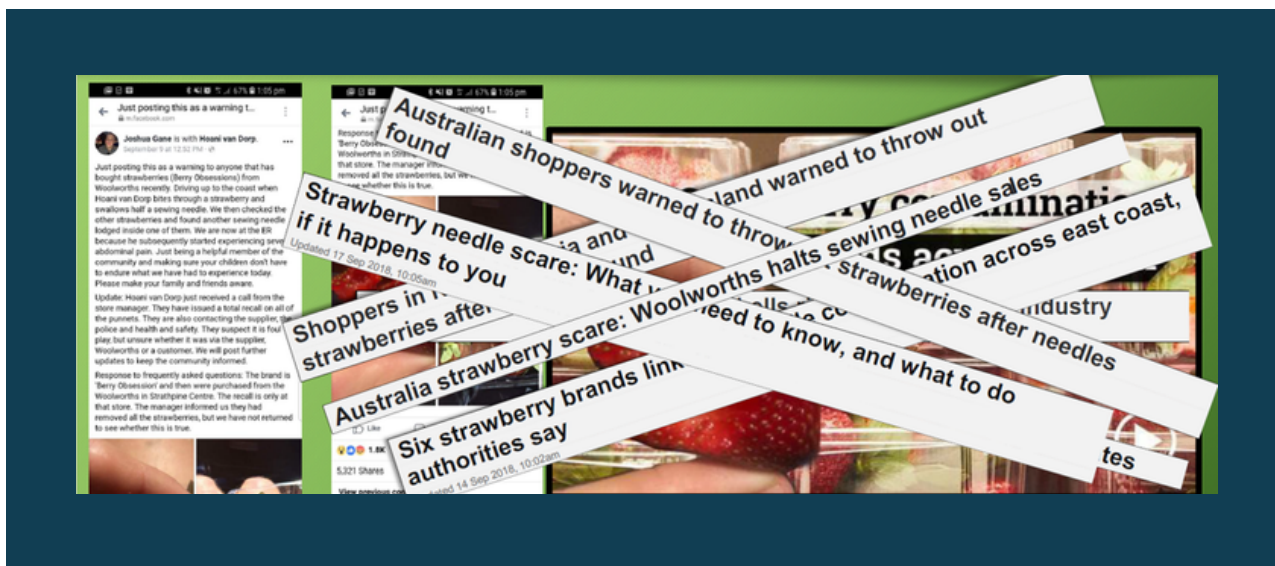
As the crisis escalated in the public arena and moved interstate, there was a steep learning curve in responding to the uncertainty and delivering the messages that managed both public perceptions and grower interests.

Recognising the crisis response was too big to be handled on its own, Berries Australia collaborated with Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers (formerly Growcom at the time of the incident) and affected growers, with the decision made to engage expert advice from a crisis communications consultant. This enabled a measured and effective strategy to be implemented, including structured collaboration with government stakeholders. The strategy ultimately culminated in a sales and marketing campaign to assist affected growers back on their feet financially.

Crisis Communications

The recruitment of a professional crisis communications consultant was immediately effective in changing the volume and tone of media coverage through timely, precise and considered key messages.

All public commentary was delivered via a single spokesperson for industry, reducing confusion and providing confidence to growers and consumers in the industry's leadership. Rather than responding to any and all inquiries, the industry chose when to speak and when not to speak to the media to ensure the target audiences were receiving the correct message at the right time. This included selective use of social media channels to inform consumers about supply disruptions or copycat incidents.



There was a simple yet powerful shift in language from describing the situation as a "food contamination crisis" to a "food tampering incident". This reduced consumer fears and removed anxiety from the tone of media coverage.

The focus of messaging also shifted to put the affected growers at the centre of the issue, with the industry moving on to the front foot to encourage consumers to get behind embattled strawberry farmers. After obtaining grant funding to rectify public perception of strawberries, the new messaging included the simple and safe methods to continue consuming the berry by cutting it up.

This was highlighted at the Ekka with a campaign promoting the event's famous strawberry sundae as a much-loved and simple way for Ekka-goers to support the industry.



Crisis Comms Lessons Learned

Industry representatives have shared the lessons learned from the crisis communications process. In future, communication planning for managing similar risks should ensure:

- Information delivery is centralised to avoid confused and contradictory messaging
- Nominated spokespeople are properly briefed on the impact of the issues prior to speaking publicly
- Messages are both simple and clear to reduce unnecessary public fear.
- The impact on industry reputation is considered in preparing public messages.
- There is adequate capacity within the response team to analyse and respond quickly to rapidly unfolding events.

Crisis management programs have since been developed by industry and shared with growers.

Find out more here:

<https://ausveg.com.au/crisis-management/>

These programs include recommendations that crisis response strategies should be embedded within business continuity practices and should encourage prompt and timely reporting of incidents. To strengthen these responses scenario exercises should be rehearsed for possible disruptive situations by industry, extension staff and some growers.





QUEENSLAND
FARMERS'
FEDERATION

P 07 3837 4720

E qfarmers@qff.org.au

W www.qff.org.au

Managing Communications During a Crisis

This project is a collaboration between the Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) and the Queensland Government to support Queensland farmers.

QFF is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland, representing the collective interests of peak agriculture industry organisations (both state and national) to build a strong future for Queensland's agriculture sector.

To deliver the skills and training component of the Managing Communications during a Crisis project, QFF has partnered with Blue Hill Agency – an agriculture communications company – to equip farmers with tools to better handle communication during a crisis.

This project provides training sessions for stakeholders and farmers to prepare them to navigate future crises, ensuring a coordinated and responsive communication approach that mitigates risks, enhances decision-making, and maintains the integrity of businesses during disruptive events. The goal is to build a culture of preparedness and resilience through improved communication and crisis management practices.

Scan the QR code to access resources, guides and training materials developed through this project.



Additional Media Resources

- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-17/strawberries-recall-food-tampering-incidents/10254836>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-12/strawberry-investigation-after-sewing-needles-found-inside/10237954>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-19/strawberry-needles-queensland-police-taskforce/10280948>