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Crisis Manager University

It's Not Just Peanuts

How Rapid Customer Response Can Protect Your Brand

By Rob Duncan, COO, Alpine Access

Peanuts. Who would have thought that the negligence of one peanut manufacturer would result in the deadliest food contamination outbreak in the past 20 years? The Food and Drug Administration considered peanut butter a low-risk food. Yet, to date, 683 people in 43 states have become ill from salmonella after eating contaminated peanut products, and nine have died. This salmonella outbreak, which was traced back to the Peanut Corporation of America in September 2008, has affected hundreds of companies, led to the recall of more than 3,200 products and could ultimately cost the U.S. peanut industry billions of dollars (Reuters, 3/12/09).

Companies in the industry raced to protect themselves as peanut butter and peanut product sales dropped 25 percent. Many companies used independent third-party tests to prove salmonella didn't exist in their products. Still, people weren't satisfied. With the public demanding accountability, the only shield most companies had was their brands.

J.M. Smucker Company, makers of JIF peanut butter, ran an ad campaign reinforcing their focus on safety. Others issued press releases or posted notices on their websites. However, the majority of companies had to rely on quick, efficient communication to defend their reputations, strengthen customer loyalty and restore consumer confidence. But with just days to prepare, how could they possibly find enough experienced people to handle the unavoidable onslaught of customer calls?

The Peanut Recall: How Rapid Response Customer Care Preserved One Company's Reputation and Brand

Forward Foods, LLC, produces and markets high protein energy and snack bars. Its line of Detour Activity Bars has won numerous quality awards and leads the industry in terms of convenience and taste. Unfortunately, a few flavors of the company's energy bars contained roasted peanuts manufactured by Peanut Corporation of America (PCA). Although all Detour

Bars were thoroughly tested by an independent third-party and verified to be safe for consumption, Forward Foods voluntarily recalled all products containing peanuts from PCA.

Costco was a significant distributor for a few of the identified products. Therefore, part of the recall process involved sending a letter to Costco's membership base with a phone number to call for information on product disposal and refunds. Two days before the letter was to be received by consumers, Forward Foods realized their internal customer service department would be unable to handle the expected increase in call volume. At 3 p.m. on Monday, February 2, 2009 Forward Foods called Alpine Access, a company that provides highly-skilled, home-based customer service professionals to handle in-bound calls of all kinds including tech-support, sales, customer support and collections. Two hours later they were a new client. Alpine Access immediately tapped into its large pool of available employees and within one day created a team of skilled Customer Care Professionals (CCPs) to handle the expected call volume. By 9a.m. on Wednesday, February 4th, the Alpine Access employees were trained and on the phones answering questions from Forward Foods' customers.

Over the next few days, CCPs talked to over 1,100 customers and company executives received real-time updates that helped them stay on top of the crisis. Forward Foods was amazed with how quickly a virtual contact center could respond to such an immediate need. The director of marketing was thankful to have partnered with a home-based customer care center saying, "Alpine Access was highly professional and responsive to our needs for a quick call center set up. They made my job a lot easier."

Customer Service and Crisis Planning

The recent peanut crisis should make all companies take a hard look at their current crisis plans or lack thereof. In addition to business continuity planning, have you thought about how to take care of your customers? They are, after all, your biggest asset. In times of crisis, home-based contact centers can help you respond quickly and deliver quality customer service that will reinforce the reasons consumers trusted your brand in the first place. With a little planning and the right partner, your company can not only survive an unforeseen event, but emerge with a stronger brand and more loyal customers.

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