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Damage Control: Alpine Helps Protein Bar Maker Navigate Peanut Problem

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When a product is being recalled, each player: retailers, manufacturers/processors, and suppliers must work together quickly to handle the crisis to ensure no or no further harm is done to users, buyers, and to the companies involved.

The linchpin is effective and empathetic customer service. Being able to reach with little or no waits contact center agents who can take the brunt of callers' concerns, relay sincere understanding of their situation, and offer useful advice can make the difference for all parties.

Swift coordination by Forward Foods, maker of Detour brand protein bars, its retailers including Costco, and enabled by home agent outsourcer Alpine Access did just that in the wake of the peanut recall earlier this year.

Some of the Detour bars had contained roasted peanuts manufactured by the Peanut Corporation of America (PCA). On Jan. 13, 2009 PCA had voluntarily recalled the peanuts and related products. They had the potential to be contaminated with salmonella, an organism that can cause serious and sometimes fatal infections in young children, frail or elderly people, and others with weakened immune systems. Routine and ongoing testing of Detour products had found them to be safe.

Forward Foods selected Alpine Access following a word-of-mouth referral. One of its executives had a business associate who was aware of the situation they were in with the recall, and who was familiar with Alpine Access' ability to get agents trained and on the phone quickly. They then put the Forward Foods folks in touch with Alpine Access CEO Chris Carrington.

“Alpine Access's technology offered us the flexibility to match the incoming call load with the right number of operators to ensure we could keep hold times down during peak periods, but not break the bank when call volume fell off,” explains Ian Davison, Forward Foods' director of sales and marketing.

Forward Foods had to get the word out and respond to consumers both directly and via distributors quickly. It set up a toll-free consumer hotline. It also wrote and distributed letters to Costco members nationwide that contained the hotline number. While products containing peanuts from PCA were recalled at other stores as well, but Alpine Access employees were only needed for Costco outreach.

All three firms: Costco, Forward Foods, and Alpine Access acted fast. Costco informed Forward Foods that they were voluntarily recalling all products containing ingredients from PCA on Friday Jan.30, followed by a press release regarding the recall from Costco the next day, Saturday Jan.31. At 3pm Monday Feb.2 Forward Foods contacted Alpine Access for assistance answering anticipated inquiry calls. Just three hours later, at 6pm Alpine Access set up account and provided 1-800 # for Detour customer service hot line. By 1pm Tuesday Feb.3 the home agent teleservices firm had located suitable contact center agents for the account and in training.

Alpine had assigned 13 agents to the account. It drew from its pool of experienced agents that have completed customer service skills training and are waiting to be assigned to a client or have requested additional hours. It also pulled staff from a current database of over 200,000 pre-screened agent prospects and an emergency response team that is ready to go a moments' notice.

One of the benefits of using home-based agents in a crisis is that they can be on the phones in minutes, without having to get ready and commute in, which eats up valuable time. Alpine Access relies 100 percent on distance-based learning programs that can train its employees 24/7.

At 9am Wednesday Feb.4 Costco began member notification of recall; Alpine Access agents started handling calls along with Forward Foods staff. At 2pm Alpine staff began calling back all recall-related e-mail inquiries. By 4:30pm the Detour website and voicemail message began directing all calls to Alpine Access.

Over the next few days, the customer care workers spoke to more than 1,100 customers, and company executives received real-time updates that helped them stay on top of the crisis. The hotline program with Alpine Access wound down on Friday Feb.27.

Forward Foods credits Alpine Access' ready pool of highly qualified workers and the company's quick response with helping them execute a flawless customer service campaign that could have been disastrous. It said Alpine Access was highly professional and responsive to its needs for a quick setup.

“Alpine Access became a seamless part of our customer service operation,” says Davison. “Through regular communication and data reporting, Alpine Access kept us directly connected to our consumers so we could take the information we were capturing on the phones and use it to improve our outbound recall communications in real time.”