

Enterprise should implement watertight crisis management strategy or else it is history!

By  Bonnie Ramaila

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Stating the obvious, Enterprise Foods is really facing a reputation nightmare. Not only are people up in arms demanding their money back, there is the danger of a lingering brand reputation damage, bordering on being a permanent taint on the image of the brand.



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From my observation and experience having handled FMCG brands in an agency, what is startling though is that most consumers are those of the lower income group - mainly black - (don't worry, I am not starting a racial issue with this saga), considering my previous knowledge of its target audience.

Enterprise Foods is a premium brand of Tiger Brands in the ready-to-eat meat category and Bokkie was more of a cheaper product, for the lower income group. Things change and products do evolve indeed.



Listeriosis outbreak traced to Enterprise Foods factory in Limpopo

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Crisis strategy

Nevertheless, I can imagine how the company is beside itself, trying to water down the fire that has suddenly erupted. Hard at work, it's implementing a crisis strategy to handle this nightmare, and at the same time in pursuit of the culprit caught napping. Someone is supping champagne from their 'last chance bar' as we speak. Heads are going to roll.

Whilst the company is busy with their internal processes and conducting their own tests on the foods affected since this 'listeria outbreak' was traced back to the Enterprise Foods products –the company really needs to ascertain these claims, remain calm and have a blitzkrieg of ongoing communicate to its consumers and partners.

I must commend their swift response on recalling all the products from the shelves from all the retailers. This morning I woke up to empty shelves of Enterprise and Bokkie products in my nearby supermarket in the cold meat section. It is indeed remarkable. But then again I thought – if it is still so – the company also prepares ready-to-eat meats for other retailers under the no-name brand. This ripple effect on other no-name brands of certain retailers is worrying. Is this the beginning of the end or the end of the beginning? Are they still preparing processed foods for other retailers from the same stash? Let's hope not, or it could be cataclysmically nightmarish.

Futuristic approach

So, Enterprise Foods has many ways to look at this situation. In my opinion, the approach to this crisis is a simple one. Their crisis management strategy needs to put emphasis on its futuristic approach. The situation faced now is that a serious crisis has erupted, consumers are disappointed and demanding their money back, there is a serious health scare which got the health Minister involved, it is alleged that listeriosis has claimed a number of people's lives and something needs to be done.



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The noblest thing to do is for the brand to humble itself in the face of their consumers. To change the mindset of the consumer in how the brand is viewed presently and in future, will depend on how well the company informs the consumer and uses the different platforms to communicate and most crucially, **how** it communicates. Acting upon the promises to consumers and not merely pulling a PR stunt by just talking, will be a determining factor for the brand's reputation.

In my view the company is lucky that this issue is somehow regionally concentrated, i.e. it is in Limpopo, Free State and Gauteng provinces, obviously overspilling to other provinces wherein there's a small footprint of distribution. I noticed that reactions from consumers of the different provinces differ. Thus, this warrants an implementation plan that is niched.

One size fits all approach won't do

Communiqué to the various consumers in the different provinces, in a tone that speaks to the social structures and cultural values, should be key and considered. In essence, humility in the brands communiqué will make or break the brand. A one size fits all approach is out of the question. The company is faced with pockets of various audiences to target and communicate to, viz; employees, consumers, government and partners in the health and food industry boards. A *onesie* won't do!

Unless, if they come up with a plan of maintaining profits for the products, things aren't looking good. The company should look into reimbursing all the consumers with no questions asked, issue consumers with vouchers or 50% discounted voucher for a month, demonstrate to consumers step by step process of how the 'new batch of product' is made through public education to guarantee that the product is safe – as a tactic to win back consumer trust.

It would also be prudent and they'd gain credibility with consumers if the company would assist in settling the account of all those patients admitted or treated for this 'listeriosis' – this act of kindness would go a very long way. Remember, the image of the brand is at stake. Don't compromise, be enterprising!

Profits declining

The company should also avoid putting emphasis on products affected, and which aren't. It sounds defensive. They should know better how the consumer thinks. Any product with Enterprise name on it right now is not good to eat. Period. Even if it had Enterprise juice and it wasn't affected, the consumer would shun it. Deal with the crisis at hand.

Enterprise Foods will witness profits declining sharply for ready-to-eat meat category products, and unavoidably, lack of trust in the product (and brand) and a possible great trek of its loyal consumers to competitors products. Also, it's not only about circumventing the now, but dealing with the reputation of the brand and winning back consumer trust.

Remember, we worried about the future now, thus, **trust** is a pertinent issue with consumers in this situation, if the brand wants to retain its glory as a premium brand going forward. Once the dust has settled it's not going to be about the product, but the reputation of the brand.

They'll forgive but they won't forget

Loyal Enterprise customers would care to be enlightened on what and how this mishap occurred. Communicating findings of test results in terms of what went wrong would be necessary as part of building the trust, as much as the communication of this 'outbreak' has played itself in the media. I suppose this is going to be a grave test.

Ongoing communication for the next two months will be crucial and could circumvent the brand's image if things are handled well in these early stages and a well-greased plan is implemented.

People forgive, they don't forget. If consumers have to forgive, it would depend on how they are treated in times of this crisis – you treat them with respect and humility, they will forget, but if there's an air of arrogance in how the matter is handled, forget about the keeping brand, let alone making profit margins.

Don't forget to manage those DJ's and presenters' comments in the mainstream mediums (and social mediums) on the issue, they are influential.

If all else fails, there's still an option... change the brand's name and start afresh!

Let's hope the competitor will not capitalise on this tragedy to score consumer points by coming up with pull strategies!

ABOUT BONNIE RAMAILA

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