Understanding Consumer Responses to Food Recalls

Hallman, W.K., Cuite, C. L., & Hooker, N.H.

Introduction

When food companies discover that a product may contain unacceptable levels of pathogens or other contaminants, they usually voluntarily issue a recall notice to recover any un Consumed products thought to pose a risk. These recall notices are intended to alert retailers to remove unsold products from their shelves and to warn consumers to destroy or return products that they have already purchased. To be effective, food recalls must therefore generate sufficient attention and motivation among consumers that they take appropriate protective actions. Unfortunately, the typically low rates of recovery of recalled food products suggest that this is not happening.

Survey Methods

FPI contracted with a survey research firm to conduct telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,101 Americans selected from all 50 states. Interviews were conducted in English with non-institutionalized adults over the age of 17. Participant households were selected using proportional random-digit dialing, and a Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) system was programmed to select the appropriate proportions of male and female participants. Working non-business numbers were contacted using a 12-callback design. Response rates can be calculated using a range of formulas. For the current study, the response rate using standard industry definitions (American Association for Public Opinion Research) ranged from 25% to 57%. All data presented here have been weighted by gender, age, race, region, and education to approximate United States Census figures, unless noted otherwise.

Results

The results of this national survey indicate that most Americans view food recalls as important and as saving lives. Over 90% of Americans either strongly or somewhat agree that food recalls save lives.

WHAT DO AMERICANS DO WHEN THERE IS A FOOD RECALL?

The belief that recalls save lives has not translated into all Americans following public health advice about what to do when food recalls are announced. Figure 1 illustrates that only 59% say they have ever looked for a recalled food in their home. Some Americans appear to feel invulnerable to foodborne illness as a result of eating recalled foods, as 12% report having eaten a food they thought had been recalled.

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who said yes to EVER having engaged in the following behaviors regarding a recalled food.

We asked respondents about their perceived risk of having a recalled food in their home. Only 17% strongly or somewhat agreed that it was likely that they currently have a recalled food in their home, and 63% strongly disagreed with that statement.

The survey instrument assessed what information the public would like with two questions. The first was an open-ended question which asked respondents what information they would most want to know immediately after hearing about a food recall. The most common responses were identifying information (37%) and where the product was from (21%). The third most common responses was where the product was sold (17%).

A second fixed response survey question asked respondents to rate the importance of information about food recalls that could be included in news reports. Figure 2 indicates Americans believe that the symptoms and the frequency of the illness is most important, with different types of identifying information following.

Figure 2. Mean rating of importance of information to be included in news reports about food recalls.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information to be Included in News Reports</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The illnesses and symptoms caused by eating the recalled product</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether anyone has become ill from eating the product</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The date on the package</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The brands affected</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lot number on the package</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What people should do with the product if they find it</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is being done to fix the problem that led to the recall</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The name of the specific contaminant</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether anything can be done to make the product safe to eat, such as cooking it</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the contamination happened</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Scale from 1 “not at all important” to 100 “extremely important.”

Conclusions

The survey results suggest that consumers conduct a “lay risk assessment” to determine whether it is worth their while to pay attention to the recall or take actions in response. Thus, they appear to highly value information that allows them to judge the potential likelihood and severity of consequences related to a food recall. This is in keeping with many theories of health behavior, such as the Health Belief Model, that identify these features as the most important determinants of health behaviors. Consumers also value identifying information, which would allow them to take action if so motivated.

Retailers are increasingly attempting to reach their consumers directly when a food that they have purchased is recalled in order to increase their customers’ behavioral responses to food recalls. Our data indicate that the public is likely to be very receptive to this. When we asked the respondents whether they would like to receive personalized information when a food they had purchased was recalled, the majority said yes. While the most popular format was on a receipt at the grocery store (73%), the majority of respondents also wanted to receive personalized emails and through the postal service. (65% and 64%, respectively). Far fewer Americans are interested in receiving telephone calls or text messages about food recalls (38% and 16%, respectively). This approach may help to increase the attention paid to food recalls, and also increase the public’s belief that food recalls may be relevant to them.

Acknowledgements

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When we asked the respondents whether they would like to receive personalized information when a food they had purchased was recalled, we found that the public is interested in receiving personalized, tailored information about food that they have purchased in the past. While the most popular format was on a receipt at the grocery store (73%), the majority of respondents also wanted to receive personalized emails and through the postal service (65 and 64%, respectively). Far fewer Americans are interested in receiving telephone calls or text messages about food recalls (38 and 16%, respectively).