

# Social media's role in food safety and public information

[Media](#), [Social Media](#)



Over the past 20 years, the way consumers think about food has changed drastically. Consumers are making decisions about their food based on information they learn on the internet and social media - not from their doctors and/or the scientific community. As most of us know, the internet is full of conflicting advice: Gluten is bad, carbs are good, GMOs are okay, GMOs are killing you, etc. It can be difficult to figure out which advice is right and which is wrong. Social media represents an opportunity for the Food Industry to enter the conversation surrounding food safety and engage, educate, and interact with the consumer.

### **Info Wars**

Consumers are innately skeptical of food processing; this is in part because they do not fully understand it. Most Consumers want the safest and least-processed food possible, two things that may not be achieved simultaneously because food technologies that enhance safety often require processing. This conflict arises from a lack of credible information and an abundance of misinformation.

While social media is an incredible tool for communicating and educating consumers, it is also the primary tool for spreading misinformation. The hard truth is that social media makes idiots into experts and often gives priority to the loudest voice in a conversation, not the most credible. Scientists must compete with pseudoscientists, bloggers, and even celebrities, who disseminate false information and hinder trust in scientific authority.

This is problematic because consumers directly impact food safety through their food handling, preparation practices, and voting practices. The United

Nations estimates that between 30-40% of food-borne illness is caused by poor hygienic practices in the home. Unfortunately, consumers are not as educated on food safety as they should be. Social Media gives the food industry a platform to educate and engage with the public in a casual and accessible forum.

Managing misinformation during recalls and outbreaks is especially important. The spread of food-borne illness can be significantly reduced if the public is informed early and thoroughly. Thus, it is crucial that food companies and industry organizations are equipped before a crisis with strategies, educational material, messages and a social media management plan to counter misinformation, and preserve your brand.

The damage of a recall is a devastating blow to consumer confidence in product or company. Consumer confidence can make or break a company. In 2017, United Airlines received extremely negative attention from the media, and the public, for violently dragging a customer off an overbooked flight; a public relations nightmare ensued and the company suffered nearly \$1bn losses as a result. However, if a company can harness social media to get ahead of the issue by being transparent and proactive, they have a much better chance of rebuilding consumer confidence later down the line.

### **The New Frontier**

Social Media is at the forefront of innovative technologies used to combat food-borne illness. Data theorists believe monitoring social data can help teams recognize possible food contamination outbreaks by searching for anomalies in user-generated posts. For example: if ten people post about

feeling sick after checking in to the same restaurant – that is an anomaly and should be examined. If companies, or food safety organizations, could harness this data, they would be able to detect potential outbreaks much faster and with far fewer resources.

### **The Opportunity**

Social Media is an opportunity for action. It is a strong tool for advocacy, communication, and education; and it offers the food industry a direct line of communication to a large, and engaged, audience. The opportunities are limitless. Companies need to lean in and embrace social media because if they don't someone else will – and that person or company will be able to influence consumers and the industry in general as a result.