

Food Recalls and their Associated Newspaper Coverage: A Content Analysis Pilot Study

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Roughly 48 million Americans become ill from contaminated food each year (CDC, 2013). While some of these illnesses are self-inflicted (i.e. meat undercooked, consumption of expired food, etc.), contamination during the food production process can cause minor stomachaches, hospital admissions, and even deaths. The U.S. government has two agencies tasked with the job of monitoring our nation's food supply: the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The FDA regulates roughly 80% of our nation's domestic and imported food, and the USDA regulates the roughly 20% additional sources of food, mostly meat, poultry and some egg products (White-Cason, 2013). When either the food manufacturer, distributor, FDA or USDA believes a food will or could cause citizens to become ill, a recall can be issued in order to get the affected product off the market and to alert citizens not to consume the product if it is already on their pantry shelves.

Notification of product recalls occurs through one or both of the two public notification routes currently required by the FDA: press releases and written recall notification letters. Given the nature of food sales, manufacturers and producers rarely know who has purchased their product, so the ability to send written notification letters to consumers is mostly impossible. In general, written notifications are only sent to those in the distribution chain of a food product. Thus, the FDA prescribed method of public notification relies upon consumers learning about product recalls through media coverage of company press releases.

With such strong reliance currently upon the media to inform the general public of product recalls, there is a dire need to understand exactly what percentage of recalls receive media coverage following the issuance of a press release. General observation of daily recalls

and media coverage reveals a serious lack of food product recall coverage, but concrete data is needed to prove that a policy change needs to be considered by the FDA to improve public awareness and consequently public safety. In addition to understanding what percentage of recall press releases receive media coverage, it is important to understand what aspects of a food recall attract media attention. Such knowledge has ramifications for the organizations and stakeholders involved in a food recall and further refines the current gap in knowledge. Research under the general heading of news values has sought to explain what elements of a news release enhance its utilization by the news media.

Although future research should exam recall coverage in all types of media, this pilot study sought to identify factors in a food recall that affect printed newspaper coverage of that recall. Based upon extant work on news values and newsworthiness, recall characteristics such as the cause, current severity, potential harm, and extent of distribution of the recalled product were included in the analysis as independent variables. The findings shed light onto which specific characteristics of recalls, if any, garner greater public awareness of food product recalls through newspaper publications.

Through a content analysis, this foundational study seeks to fill a portion of this gap by examining FDA food recalls that receive attention from our oldest media outlet – printed newspaper publications. Six continual months (July 1, 2014 - December 31, 2014) of FDA food product recalls ($n=117$) and their associated coverage in our nation's newspapers ($n=21$) were used to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What percentage of food product recalls between July 1, 2014 and December 31, 2014 received newspaper coverage?

RQ2: Does the cause of the recall have an effect on the newspaper coverage the recall receives?

RQ3: Do reports of people harmed by the recalled product have an effect on the newspaper coverage the recall receives?

RQ4: Does the potential for negative health outcomes have an effect on the newspaper coverage the recall receives?

RQ5: Does the geographic extent of the recall have an effect on the newspaper coverage the recall receives?

References

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2013, March 29). Tracking and reporting foodborne disease outbreaks. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/features/dsfoodborneoutbreaks/>

White-Cason, J. (2013). Understanding food recalls: The recall process explained. *Food Safety News*. Retrieved from <http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2013/08/understanding-food-recalls-the-recall-process-explained/#.VqEh-RgrJ1M>