

Crisis simulation

Meadow Mushrooms



The brief

Meadow Mushrooms, New Zealand's largest grower of mushrooms, takes its responsibilities as a food producer extremely seriously. Mushrooms are the country's fourth largest-selling vegetable by expenditure. It's a big business – everyday around 180 tonnes of mushrooms leave Meadow Mushrooms' farm in Christchurch for national distribution. That's a lot of mushrooms, given the weight of an average mushroom, consumed each week.

In the past, Wright Communications has assisted Meadow Mushrooms with crisis communications planning and with media support. Meadow Mushrooms wanted to take that planning further with a simulation of a food safety issue.

The intention would be to not only test communications management but also stress-test the company's operational and technical employees through a real-as-possible product recall.

Simulating a crisis

To cook up a realistic crisis simulation, a successful recipe requires plausible ingredients, an element of surprise and the gradual turning up of heat until the plot boils.

In this case, Wright Communications created an exercise that involved a food-borne illness, a rare but not wholly unlikely scenario. Wright prepared the scenario so that it would be revealed in phases, ramping up the pressure on the executive team as the crisis simulation day evolved.

The exercise took around five hours to play out. There were two main elements – preparing for and responding to media enquiries and managing the operational issues of a food safety crisis and product recall.

To make the operational part more realistic, Wright enlisted the support of the Food Compliance Team at the Ministry of Primary Industries. The Ministry was encouraging of the simulation day and was more than happy to play its role in a food product recall.

The exercise had a number of benefits to Meadow Mushrooms. It highlighted the need for each manager to have clarity of their responsibilities and stakeholder relationships during a crisis. It also highlighted the importance of media training.

Media relations in particular during the early stages of a crisis when all the facts are not known, requires care and skill. Rehearsing media interviews and building up skilled responses creates confidence. By the final mock press conference of the day, the Chief Executive of Meadow Mushrooms was able to deliver assured and empathetic messages.

Client satisfaction

Meadow Mushrooms Chief Executive John Barnes said the exercise was a useful reminder of how preparation is critical in managing a crisis.

"We were confident with both our communications and operational planning. But nothing beats a test that puts the heat on the decision-makers and tests all your systems and processes. Wright Communications pushed us hard to respond in a timely and professional manner. We came out with some excellent learnings from the day."

John Barnes – Chief Executive, Meadow Mushrooms