

**A Sweet Recovery: How Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams Survived Two Listeria Scares**

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COM 60311: Seminar in Crisis Communication

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November 29, 2020

## **A Sweet Recovery: How Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams Survived Two Listeria Scares**

Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams, a company headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, is a beloved brand with local impact and national reach. The company prides itself on its innovative flavors, ethically and locally sourced ingredients, and its culture of community involvement. Despite two listeria scares in 2015 and 2016, Jeni's has managed to retain the trust and loyalty of its stakeholders. This paper will examine the Jeni's listeria crises using situational crisis communication theory to discuss how the company overcame the crises, what they did well, and what could be improved upon in future crisis scenarios.

### **Discussion**

In April 2015, routine testing of a pint of Jeni's ice cream in Lincoln, Nebraska discovered the presence of listeria, a type of bacteria that can be lethal in immunocompromised populations (Everson & Bainbridge, 2018). Not knowing the full extent of the outbreak and hoping to prevent any possible illnesses, Jeni's ceased operations until a source could be identified, closing down scoop shops, recalling all pints, and posting a public statement on their blog directly from founder Jeni Britton Bauer explaining the company's decisions. Luckily, no illnesses were reported as a result of the contamination. The media were generally supportive of the company, praising its transparency and willingness to take a financial hit to protect customers (Everson & Bainbridge, 2018). Customers were also extremely supportive of Jeni's. A comment on Britton Bauer's blog post summarizes the public sentiment:

My hand to God's: I could not love Jeni Britton Bauer any more if I tried. I'm patiently waiting for my Jeni's. And I will patiently wait for as long as it takes because I value the ethics + the commitment to goodness more than I value the 5 pounds I've gained since discovering her ice cream. A beautiful example of grace, passion and quality standards

from which all businesses could take a cue. Thanks for keeping the standards high + the audience engaged. The countdown is on at my house for more Goat Cheese & Cherries! (Barker, 2015)

News of the shutdown was harder to accept at first for Jeni's suppliers and employees. According to an NBC News article by Everson & Bainbridge (2018), the local farmers from whom Jeni's sourced its ingredients and the employees whose incomes relied on ice cream production were extremely nervous about how the shutdown would impact their financial stability. However, Jeni's worked to assuage these fears, remaining in constant contact with their suppliers and employees to update them as the crisis unfolded. According to one fruit farmer, Jeni's "put his concerns to rest within seven days of the scandal," assuring him that they were going to emerge from the crisis stronger than before and that he would remain a valued partner (Everson & Bainbridge, 2018).

The listeria was eventually traced back to a single pint filling machine in Ohio (Tribune Wire Reports, 2015), and new procedures and protocols were implemented "to be certain a listeria outbreak could never happen again" (Everson & Bainbridge, 2018).

However, not even a full year after the initial crisis, an inspection conducted in January and February 2016 by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) once again detected listeria in the Jeni's kitchens. Genome sequencing was able to determine that the newly discovered listeria was, in fact, the same resident strain that had caused the 2015 crisis (Siegener, 2016). The results were sent to the company on August 9, 2016 in the form of a warning letter that was also posted to the FDA website per existing protocol. Jeni's initially kept quiet about the discovery, but the letter was discovered by media outlets the following week. Even though listeria was not found in any ice cream nor near any food surfaces, sensationalized headlines caused a significant

public outcry. This time, no shutdown occurred; the company responded to media inquiries by assuring the public that their products were safe and explained that there was no “outbreak,” but rather that “listeria on non-food contact surfaces is not in any way abnormal in the industry” (Eaton, 2016). The company published a blog post the day after media outlets seized upon the story, further explaining their side of the issue (Kamm et al., 2016). Because the story was first picked up by the media which allowed them to frame the story negatively, Jeni’s customers were initially very disappointed in the company. One tweet by user @TouchOfBasil demonstrates the general sentiment: “@jenisicecreams GET IT TOGETHER Jeni's! I will continue to support you because you're a great company but I gotta feel safe recommending you” (Brookhart, 2016). However, because Jeni’s took such swift and overarching action with the first listeria incident, they were able to cite their previous abundance of caution to combat the appearance of negligence, lending credence to their argument that the rediscovery of the listeria was neither abnormal nor a crisis situation and that there was no chance of food contamination. The company also cited a portion of the FDA letter that complimented them on “the significant work and changes [Jeni’s] made since [they] first learned of a Listeria issue back in April 2015” (Kamm et al., 2016). While Jeni’s may have lost a handful of customers during the second incident who were under the impression due to various headlines that there was a second, separate listeria problem, their tactics were overwhelmingly accepted by the community (Everson & Bainbridge, 2018) and Jeni’s has successfully rebuilt its status as a favored brand in both the Columbus area and nationwide.

## **Analysis**

This paper will examine Jeni’s’ crisis response by primarily applying situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). Developed by W. Timothy Coombs, SCCT “provides an

evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by postcrisis communication” (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). SCCT posits that there is a series of steps that all practitioners should take when communicating about a crisis. According to SCCT, a practitioner’s first responsibility is to protect the public from harm by providing instructing information, which “tells stakeholders what they must do to protect themselves from the *physical* threat of a crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 165). In 2015, Jeni’s was quick to offer such instructing information by issuing a voluntary recall of all ice cream and shutting down their shops, thereby relaying the message to customers that they should not consume the potentially contaminated products. In the 2016 situation, Jeni’s provided a different type of instructing information by informing the public that their products were, in fact, safe to consume and that there was no physical threat to avoid (Eaton, 2016).

The next step in SCCT is the provision of adjusting information, or information intended to help audiences cope psychologically with a crisis (Coombs, 2015). According to Coombs (2007), customers need to be provided with information about what caused the crisis to reduce psychological stress. Jeni’s provided a wealth of information to the public by way of Britton Bauer’s (2015) blog post and media interviews (Everson & Bainbridge, 2018), providing full transparency about the crisis. In the 2015 incident, Jeni’s also provided adjusting information in the form of corrective action, i.e. the assurance of stakeholders that steps are being taken to ensure they will be protected from harm in the future (Coombs, 2007). In Britton Bauer’s (2015) blog post, the company provided a full account of the actions they were undertaking to ensure that listeria would never again contaminate their products, including enhanced cleaning procedures and routine testing for bacteria. During the 2016 incident, adjusting information was provided via the company’s assurance that no listeria was found in any ice cream nor on any

food preparation surfaces in their kitchens, and that all Jeni's products remained safe to consume (Kamm et al., 2016).

The final step of SCCT urges organizations to address the damage caused by a crisis to their reputations (Coombs, 2007). According to SCCT, a reputational threat can be calculated based on the organization's perceived level of responsibility for a crisis, and varying strategies should be applied based on this level of responsibility (Coombs, 2007). SCCT offers various clusters by which to categorize crises. Both the 2015 and 2016 incidences at Jeni's fall under SCCT's "accidental" cluster due to the unintentional nature of the listeria contamination. Within this cluster, the 2015 incident falls under the incident type "*technical-error product harm*," meaning that an internal process caused a product to become unsafe, leading to a recall (Coombs, 2007). Because the 2016 incident did not cause any product harm, it falls under the "*challenges*" type, in which "stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner" (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). Both of these types, under the accidental cluster, indicate that the organization has some form of responsibility for the crisis. It could also be argued from a stakeholder perspective that as the company initially withheld information about the 2016 FDA findings, the second crisis could be placed into the "preventable" cluster under the "*organizational misdeed with no injuries*" type, whereby "stakeholders are deceived without injury" (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). Crises in the "preventable" cluster require different reputational management tactics than those in the "accidental" cluster. Once the perceived level of responsibility has been determined, SCCT provides several primary response strategies that can be utilized: deny, diminish, and rebuild (Coombs, 2017). Organizations may also use bolstering or redress as secondary strategies (Coombs, 2015).

In the 2015 incident, Jeni's chose to use diminish and rebuild strategies. Using the diminish strategy, Jeni's applied tactics of excuse and justification. Jeni's employed an excuse tactic by "denying intent to do harm" (Coombs, 2007) and employed justification, or "minimiz[ing] the perceived damage caused by the crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 170), by informing the public that due to their swift recall, no illnesses were caused by their products (Britton Bauer, 2015). They also used the rebuild strategy via an apology tactic, taking full responsibility for the crisis and asking the public for forgiveness (Britton Bauer, 2015). During this time, Jeni's also engaged in what is known as a discourse of renewal. According to Reiersen et al. (2009), "a discourse of renewal extends beyond image restoration by emphasizing the potential for organizations to innovate and adapt during the postcrisis period" (p. 115). Reiersen et al. (2009) state that successful cases of renewal demonstrate several key elements, "including (a) commitment to stakeholders, (b) commitment to move beyond the crisis, (c) commitment to messages that focused on rebuilding the organization, (d) commitment to correcting the problem, and (e) commitment to well-established values" (p. 116). All of these elements were clearly articulated in Britton Bauer's (2015) blog post, thereby framing the crisis as an opportunity to improve and grow as an organization rather than as a negative event.

During the 2016 incident, Jeni's chose instead to primarily employ deny response strategies. Jeni's used the denial tactic by asserting that the FDA findings were well within the realm of normalcy and that there was, in fact, no crisis (Eaton, 2016). Jeni's also briefly acknowledged the fact that they had not come forward with the findings immediately, providing the rationale that the findings would have in no way affected customers and thus notification of the public was unnecessary (Kamm et al., 2016). The company also used the scapegoat tactic to assert that listeria likely entered the facilities by way of their suppliers (Kamm et al., 2016).

In both instances, the company also utilized bolstering strategies by continually reminding the public of their commitment to the community and unique passion for their industry (Britton Bauer, 2015 and Kamm et al., 2016).

### **Evaluation**

Jeni's managed to weather both instances by properly following the steps outlined by SCCT. By swiftly issuing their recall, Jeni's efficiently provided instructing information to the public, avoiding the potential of any consumer harm. The company then provided adjusting information with complete transparency and honesty, fully detailing the cause of the crisis, the steps they were taking to prevent future crises, and how they would continue to work with suppliers to ensure their livelihoods were not disrupted (Everson & Bainbridge, 2018).

According to an article by Kim and Sung (2013), this transparency was critical, because "when a company is being transparent with its publics during a crisis, the public will think the company is being honest by sharing both positive and negative information" (p. 76), thus making its messages more credible. Only after instructing and adjusting information were provided did they address their reputation using appropriate strategies outlined by SCCT. The use of bolstering was particularly effective for Jeni's, as they successfully reminded the public of the company's love for its customers and community. These emotional appeals were wise; according to an article by Kim and Cameron (2011), "the proper use of emotional appeals can help enhance organizational reputations and reduce criticism against the organization" (p. 836).

Jeni's' success in the 2015 incident may also be partially attributed to their very positive existing reputation. According to an article by Sojung Kim (2013), "consumers [perceive] a product defect differently depending on a corporation's reputation" (p. 300). Due to their significant community involvement before the crisis, their ingenuity in creating new and exciting



products, and their commitment to locally and ethically sourced ingredients, Jeni's primed the public to have a favorable view of the company, therefore making them more likely to listen to its crisis messaging.

In 2016, Jeni's once again employed SCCT strategies to combat an emerging crisis. Realizing that the perceived responsibility type had changed and acknowledging a significant difference in circumstances between the current situation and the initial crisis, Jeni's chose to use a different set of reputational repair tactics. By adjusting their strategy to the situation, Jeni's appeared far more competent than they would have had they attempted to follow the same previous path. Their response strategy was also effective partially in part due to Jeni's' response to the 2015 crisis, during which Jeni's took full responsibility and communicated with transparency, therefore rebuilding a sense of trust.

While Jeni's was overall successful in their crisis communications, issue management opportunities were missed that could have prevented the 2016 crisis. When Jeni's received the FDA warning letter, the company had an opportunity to be the first to break the story instead of letting news outlets discover and spread the story themselves the following week. In this way, Jeni's could have practiced a concept known as "stealing thunder," as "a crisis [will inflict] significantly less reputational and other damage to an organization when the organization is the source of the initial report about the crisis compared to when another party, such as the news media, is the first to release the information" (Coombs, 2015). According to Coombs (2015), "it benefits the organization to release initial information about a crisis occurrence because reputational damage is intensified if another party is instead the first to do so" (p. 144). A better way to have handled the spread of information about the second listeria scare would have been for Jeni's to immediately address the FDA's findings on their blog or through a press release,

thereby controlling the narrative about the situation. By remaining silent on the issue until it was discovered by the media, Jeni's inadvertently created an appearance of secrecy, fostering mistrust among consumers. Considering that there was no possibility of consumer harm from the second scare, Jeni's would have been better served by sharing the FDA's findings themselves, spreading the message that their products were safe and that these findings were in no way abnormal, and renewing its dedication to combating foodborne bacteria in its facilities.

### **Conclusion**

When examined through the lens of SCCT, it is easy to see why NBC News later profiled Jeni's as an excellent example of crisis communication (Everson & Bainbridge, 2018). A zealous dedication to the safety and enjoyment of their customers and a desire to remain a beloved brand led Jeni's to take the important steps of providing instructing information, adjusting information, and reputational rebuilding strategies in both crisis instances. The company's success with open, transparent, and honest communication during the 2015 incident should have led to a similar approach in 2016; unfortunately, only when "caught" in another crisis did Jeni's renew their transparent communication (Kamm et al., 2016). Even so, the company's clear communication with stakeholders and genuine attempts to resolve the issues has resulted in a lasting positive impression of the company and no additional listeria scares since 2016.

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## Sample Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: August 9, 2020

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## **Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams Continues Commitment to Food Safety** *FDA findings indicate improvement in Jeni's kitchens*

COLUMBUS, Ohio – An FDA inspection conducted in January 2016 demonstrated marked improvement in Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams' food safety protocols. A recent letter issued to Jeni's concerning the results of this investigation acknowledges the extensive corrections taken by the company since 2015. The letter also notes that only two of 75 swabs taken during the most recent inspection tested positive for the presence of listeria, neither of which were located anywhere near food products or preparation areas.

“As a result of our sanitation and other food safety procedures, our environmental testing program and our test-and-hold procedures, we can assure everyone that the food we produce is absolutely 100 percent safe,” said John Lowe, President and CEO of Jeni's. “Beyond that, we want to clarify that the periodic detection of listeria on non-food contact surfaces is not in any way abnormal in the industry or indicative of an ‘outbreak’ of listeria.”<sup>1</sup>

Listeria, a type of bacteria that is widespread in natural environments, is routinely found in food production facilities and is often introduced into kitchens via suppliers. By maintaining strict sanitization protocols and by constantly searching for it as Jeni's does, listeria can be prevented from making contact with food products. Since the issuing of the most recent FDA letter, Jeni's has eradicated the bacteria in the two locations that tested positive.

“Since last year, we have continuously followed our protocols to do what a strong environmental program does: prevent the spread of bacteria to food contact surfaces. Our program and protocols have done exactly what they are supposed to do,” said Lowe. “We believe our product testing to be the most thorough in the nation; we test every batch of every product we prepare in our facility and hold the product until the tests confirm that there is no Listeria present—and only then do we release it. We instituted this test-and-hold procedure when we reopened a year ago and we have not had a single batch test positive for Listeria. Our products remain safe to enjoy, and we will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that our customers are safe. We thank the FDA for their acknowledgment of our significant work in this area.”<sup>2</sup>

### **About Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams and Jeni Britton Bauer**

Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams is a modern American ice cream company devoted to making the finest ice creams the world has ever known. Founded in Columbus, Ohio in 2002 by James Beard Award-winning cookbook author Jeni Britton Bauer, Jeni's has emerged over the past 17

years as the new standard by which all other ice creams (and ice cream companies) are judged. With Jeni in charge of all creative output—from the ice cream itself to all of the supporting details that enhance the experience of eating it—Jeni's continues to make one-of-a-kind flavors with Direct and Fair-Trade ingredients and super fresh milk from family dairy farms. Today, Jeni's is a Certified B Corporation known for its social, environmental, and business leadership with 42 scoop shops, an online shop at [jenis.com](http://jenis.com), and distribution in top grocery stores across the country.<sup>3</sup>

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