



Asia-Pacific  
Economic Cooperation



# Guideline on Food Industry Food Safety Risk Communication

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## • INTRODUCTION

This guideline complements and reinforces existing food safety risk communication guidelines developed by or for the APEC region’s food industry. It addresses food safety communication needs of the multi-sectoral industry from primary food production to food manufacturing, distribution and services. The focus of this guideline is on an industry ‘strategic food safety risk communication (FSRC) plan’. It is recommended that industry organisations and food business operators throughout the supply chain familiarise themselves with the five other guidelines and the Industry Annex developed under the APEC Food Safety Risk Communication Framework to augment their knowledge in FSRC. It would be ideal for the industry to adopt the other guidelines and the Industry Annex developed under the APEC Food Safety Risk Communication Framework into their individual strategic FSRC plans.



Food business operators and organisations should use a strategic FSRC plan to identify food safety communication needs and assign relevant resources. A plan helps to ensure that the food safety communication activities support the goal to protect public health (Principle 1). Strategic communication planning involves four steps:



Research



Analysis



Communication



Evaluation



### Research

Research helps define food safety risk challenges and assists in understanding the intended audiences and identifying desired behaviour changes. Only then is it possible to develop and deliver effective communication messages that are intended to encourage the desired behaviours and increase food safety knowledge and/or change food safety attitudes (Principle 6). Research helps affirm or dispel assumptions that we make about audiences and their perceptions.

The linkages to the principles in the Framework and other guidelines work only when the guideline is a part of the overall document of “APEC Food Safety Risk Communication and Associated Guidelines”



The most appropriate research methodology depends on the outcome of a baseline self-assessment (see *Guideline for Implementation of the APEC Food Safety Risk Communication Framework*), which assesses the adequacy of the existing communication strategy and practices and identifies areas for further improvement (see *Guideline on Monitoring and Review of Competent Authority's Food Safety Risk Communication System*). While formal research studies are often expensive there are cost-effective ways to answer the typical questions that will inform a strategic FSRC plan. Cost-effective methods for research include monitoring and listening to food safety risk conversations on social media,

analysing publicly available studies or accessing information already gathered by other parts of the company or organisation.

Research helps to identify potential problem areas that require communication campaigns to improve food safety.

This guideline presents a hypothetical example in which an industry email survey to 100 food bank operators and 700 food recipients found that only 30% of food bank recipients knew to refrigerate the supplied shelf stable milk products after opening. A food bank operator in this case is a place where stocks of food items are stored and distributed to people in need. The survey found that only 5 food bank operators provided food recipients with storage and use information about shelf stable milk products. The research also showed that most food recipients were concerned about the safety of shelf stable milk, and 50% of mothers of young children were especially concerned about its nutritional value. In this case research revealed food safety concerns as well as non-food safety concerns, that is, nutritional value. The industry organisation must decide on and prioritise how many concerns can be effectively addressed at the same time and then communicate with openness, flexibility and transparency.



### Analysis (goals, audience-specific objectives and strategies)

Once a problem area has been clearly identified, analysis is required and communication goals need to be established. Goals are long-term, broad statements of desired achievement or statements of future 'being.' Goals may include a conceptual understanding of how an organisation is uniquely distinguished in the minds of target audiences. In the above hypothetical example, goals could include continuing to be a credible source of information on the safety of the organisation's products and increasing

demand for shelf stable milk distribution to food banks. Next, the organisation should select the specific stakeholder groups it wants to target and set the objectives for each one. See Textbox 1.

As explained by the Public Relations Society of America [↗](#), communication objectives are shorter term than goals. Objectives

- 1 define what opinion, attitude or behaviour you want to achieve from specific stakeholder groups
- 2 specify how much change you want to achieve from the targeted audience, and
- 3 tell by when you want to achieve that change (Textbox 1).

### Textbox 1

Objectives should be SMART:

- Specific (both action to be taken and public involved)
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic (or relevant or results-oriented)
- Time-specific

[\(APR Study Guide, page 24\) ↗](#)

### Sample objectives under the hypothetical food bank example

#### 1 Outcome-oriented objective (example):

- 01 increase the number of food banks that distribute storage and use information about shelf stable milk to food recipients (desired increase from 5 to 10 food banks)
- 02 increase the percentage of food recipients who know shelf stable milk products require refrigeration after opening from 30% to 40%.

The timeframe for both these objectives is 12 months after the launch of the communication plan and the desired changes will be determined by research findings.

#### 2 Output-oriented objective (example):

Place feature stories about shelf stable milk storage and safe use in 10 food bank e-newsletters within 12 months after the launch of the communication plan. Note that output objectives can monitor program execution but cannot measure the effectiveness of the communication message.

Once communication objectives and desired outcomes have been identified, strategies to achieve these objectives need to be identified and developed. Communication strategies need to be audience focused.

## Sample strategies under the above hypothetical food bank example

Effective strategies to achieve the desired objectives could include:

- 01 training food bank operators to provide information to food recipients and answer questions about shelf stable milk
- 02 enlisting community social workers to help deliver our food safety messages to food bank recipients.



### Communication (messages, tactics and activities)



Salient food safety risk messages need to be developed based on research about the intended audience and the desired communication objectives. Credible messages should be communicated in a timely manner (Principle 2), based on science and evidence (Principle 4), and audience-oriented (Principle 6).

Examples of communication messages with the hypothetical example could include:

- 'Shelf stable milk is safe and nutritious, and it does not need to be refrigerated until it is opened.'
- 'Shelf stable milk contains the same essential nutrients as pasteurised milk but costs less and does not need to be kept cold until opened. The difference between fresh and shelf stable milk is the method of processing. Shelf stable milk is made safe by heating the milk to high temperatures to kill bad bacteria. This process is safe and approved by regulatory authorities. This safe, nutritious product is a good way for children and families to benefit from milk's essential nutrients.'



The specific delivery channels and tools used are known as 'tactics.' Tactics can include meetings, publications, community events, news releases, social media posts and live events.

Examples of tactics for this hypothetical example could include:

- food safety training videos posted on an industry YouTube Channel
- shelf-signs that explain how to safely store and consume shelf stable milk
- educational webinars for food bank operators
- web resources, including frequently asked questions, that address at-home handling procedures, nutritional benefits and questions and answers about the safety of shelf stable milk
- emailed communications to social workers and other stakeholders in relevant areas.

It is important to include delivery channels that allow for two-way communications with the audiences (Principle 3). Details of using social media channels to communicate are provided in the *Guideline on Using Social Media Engagement for Food Safety Risk Communication*.

The details that underlie the tactics are known as ‘activities’ and these include quantitative specifics regarding production numbers and creative design. An example for the hypothetical food bank example could include the production requirements of 1,000, 20 cm square, four-colour shelf-signs; two videos and six video conference webinars. Activity specifications should also include parameters such as timelines, responsibilities and any other factors of influence, such as expected attendance for live video conferences.



## Evaluation

It is a best practice to monitor and measure the effectiveness of a communication strategy against the stated objectives. Details on the processes involved in the monitoring and review can be found in the *Guideline on Monitoring and Review of Competent Authority’s Food Safety Risk Communication System*. Industry can conduct research to evaluate whether a communication campaign met the stated objectives. For example, in the hypothetical case described earlier, the same survey that was conducted before the communication campaign can be carried out again to measure improvement against the stated objectives. Evaluation is part of the iterative process that ensures continuous improvement of food safety risk communication (Principle 8).

Table 1 illustrates the strategic communication planning steps.

**Table 1: Example strategic communication planning steps**

## Strategic Communication Plan Format

### Research findings:

Only 30% of food recipients know shelf stable milk requires refrigeration after opening. Only 5 of 100 food bank operators provide food recipients with storage and use information about shelf stable milk products. While most food recipients were concerned about the safety of shelf stable milk, 50% of mothers of young children were concerned about its nutritional value. (Note: Although 'nutrition value' does not pertain directly to food safety, messages may address multiple concerns identified in the research)

Problem to solve in this example: Educate food recipients that shelf stable milk products must be refrigerated after opening and that they are nutritious and safe when handled and consumed as advised. (Note: the research revealed that mothers of young children have a misperception about the nutrition of shelf stable milk, so relevant messages will be included in the general campaign that addresses all food recipients at food banks)

Goal(s): to increase distribution of shelf stable milk to food recipients via food banks

Objectives	Communication Strategies	Messages	Tactics/Tools	Activities		Evaluation Results against Objectives
				Assigned Staff	Other details	
<p><b>Food Recipients at Food Bank</b></p> <p>1 Over the next 12 months, increase the percentage of food recipients who know shelf stable milk products require refrigeration after opening from 30% to 40%.</p>	<p>1 Enlist community social workers in the cities in which shelf stable milk is distributed to food banks to help deliver food safety messages to food recipients.</p> <p>2 Collaborate with third-party experts (competent authorities and academics)</p>	<p>1 Shelf stable milk contains the same essential nutrients as pasteurised milk products.</p> <p>2 Shelf stable milk is ultra-pasteurised at high temperatures; this process is safe and approved by regulatory authorities.</p> <p>3 This safe, nutritious product is a good way for children and families to benefit from milk's essential nutrients.</p>	<p>1 Shelf-signs at food banks</p> <p>2 Video conferencing webinars for community social workers to share webpage and FAQs</p> <p>3 Email flyers to social workers</p> <p>4 Use messaging from competent authorities about the safety of shelf stable milk to build credibility.</p>	<p>'John'</p> <p>'Julie'</p> <p>'Joanne'</p> <p>'Simon'</p>	<p>1,000 copies of 20 cm square 4-colour shelf cards</p> <p>One video conference webinar every other month, first one in March</p> <p>Webpage and FAQs</p> <p>PDF flyers emailed to 250 social workers (obtain email address from xxx)</p>	<p>____% of food bank recipients who know to refrigerate shelf stable milk products after opening them.</p> <p>____ number of food banks provide food recipients with use and storage information about shelf stable milk products.</p>

## ● Adapting the strategic communication planning process to crisis food safety risk communications

Food safety risk communication during a crisis is specifically covered by the *Guideline on Food Safety Risk Communication during a Food Safety Incident, Emergency or Crisis*, which is directed at competent authorities of the APEC region. Although many of the concepts discussed in that Guideline can be applied to industry, there are several unique challenges that can have a profound impact on industry food safety communications. These challenges have to do with credibility, capacity and culpability/liability. This section discusses these challenges and ways industry can work to overcome them.



**Credibility:** Credibility is a component of trust, which is vital to key stakeholder relationships. Research has shown that food companies find the most success when there is a high level of trust between them and their stakeholders. Therefore, it is important that consumers and competent authorities view industry as a credible source of FSRC. However, this can be challenging if these stakeholder groups view industry (either an individual company or an industry as a whole) as being more interested in making a profit than producing safe food.

Liao C, et al. [\(2020\)](#) offered recalling food companies multiple strategies to repair trust with consumers. One is to share information on facts about and solutions to the crisis. Another strategy is to share scientific evidence with consumers in a transparent manner that is not regarded as self-serving. Involving the competent authority or a third party to release the scientific evidence can be used to overcome this obstacle.

Industry's collaborative relationship with competent authorities influences its credibility. Industry's trust in competent authorities can be eroded by conflict with, and distrust in, regulators. On the other hand, a competent authority's trust in industry can be damaged when there is a lack of compliance or a reluctance of industry to work with regulators. Industry and competent authorities can facilitate credibility and trust in one another by sharing information, engaging mutually in food safety education, interacting face to face and communicating with one another frequently (Meyer SB, et al. [2017](#)).





**Capacity:** It is important that personnel involved in risk communications and strategic communication planning are competent and experienced in handling difficult situations, especially when dealing with media and regulatory authorities during emergencies and crises. Capacity building of industry's food safety communication is important to ensure readiness of spokespersons to address any potential issues related to food safety risks identified. Risk assessment findings should be communicated clearly, consistently and comprehensively. This may be challenging for food businesses with little to no capacity (staff, time, experience and financial resources) for FSRC. For example, small to medium-sized businesses that have only one or two staff who oversee primarily marketing communications may not have enough staff to respond quickly to a crisis. Even in large companies, the staff resources and expertise in FSRC can be limited as marketing communication is primarily directed towards business activities. Industry organisations that rely on limited membership dues can also lack the capacity to engage in FSRC.



**Culpability and liability:** Company culpability and personal liability can result in company resources being invested in legal strategies at the expense of communication strategies. Consumers expect that the food they purchase is safe, but there is no such thing as zero risk in food production, transport and distribution processes. Since food companies control the food production process, the public could perceive the food company as the culprit during a food safety incident, emergency or crisis. In some cases, company owners and managers may also face personal liability for an incident.



Food safety crisis communication plans are designed to help minimise, or even overcome, challenges pertaining to credibility, capacity and culpability/liability issues and the burden they may cause to the food businesses. The risk is minimised by establishing communication channels with authorities, assessing resources and facilitating quick and effective responses. An effective crisis communication plan is

based on stakeholder relationships that are established in everyday circumstances and uses established communication channels, assessment of resources and facilitation of quick and effective responses.



When an emergency or crisis occurs, industry should be prepared to work with competent authorities and other stakeholders (for example, media, subject matter experts, social media influencers and customers) to communicate food safety risk information to consumers and protect public health. The closer that industry works with competent authorities and other credible stakeholders, the more credible it will appear to the

public. Establishing communication channels with competent authorities and ensuring messages are consistent with those of the competent authorities are critical factors to achieving effective food safety communications by food industries. It is desirable to include local regulators' contact information in the crisis communication plan, and, if the opportunity arises, engage with them in advance of a crisis.

Australia and New Zealand's food standards competent authority, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) administers the Retailers and Manufacturers Liaison Committee (RMLC) which provides an opportunity for ongoing dialogue between FSANZ and industry to improve information sharing on issues of common interest. This type of forum can be used to review, assess, and, if necessary, revise industry protocols used in the event of a food safety emergency. Notably, the FSANZ RMLC is run by the agency's Communication and Stakeholder Engagement Section, thereby sending a clear message to the industry that communication, not regulatory enforcement, is the primary focus of this committee.

A crisis communication plan should make use of available resources and skills, as well as identify and address capacity gaps. It is necessary to compare available resources to those required to respond effectively in a crisis. It is also necessary to determine and prioritise where and how to build capacity and identify outside resources that can assist when necessary. By identifying resource gaps in advance and determining how to fill them, the food business operator or industry organisation will be better prepared to handle an incident, emergency or crisis. They will also be better prepared to effectively collaborate with competent authorities and engage with media and other stakeholders. Capacity building should also include practice of crisis scenario responses (food safety

emergency simulation exercises) and training. In the situation that risk perception by a target audience differs from the actual public health impact of a particular hazard, communicators should also be trained on how to address the underlying reasons for the risk perception gap.



Finally, crisis planning helps industry respond in a timely manner and also make informed decisions, potentially reducing the legal and economic impact of food safety incidents and crises. For example, food recalls are necessary to protect public health, but recalls represent significant financial impact to food industry. In a 2020 study, Gomez and Marks [showed](#) that the median loss in corporate stock value of publicly held companies in the United States due to recalls of 22 low-moisture foods between 2007 and 2016 was US\$243M.

Crisis planning benefits companies and industry organisations, and there are many resources available (some listed at the end of this Guideline) to help develop a crisis communication plan.

## • Conclusion

This guideline outlines the steps involved in developing a strategic food safety risk communication plan and how to adapt the plan to crisis food safety communication. These steps comprise research, analysis, communication and evaluation. Other guidelines and the Industry Annex developed under the Framework, as referenced in this document, can also benefit in developing and evaluating industry FSRC. A key recommendation of this guideline is to encourage industry to work collaboratively with competent authorities in advancing FSRC for both everyday and crisis situations. This is best facilitated through regular communication with competent authorities.

## • Acknowledgment

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## • Further Reading

### *Crisis templates, recall plans and tools*



Food Standards Australia and New Zealand, Food Industry Recall Protocol, May 2014. Section 5.



International Food Information Council, Food Safety, A Communicator's Guide to Improving Understanding.



Ready.gov, Crisis Communications Plan.



U.S. Food & Drug Administration, Hazard Analysis and Risk-Based Preventive Controls for Human Food: Draft Guidance for Industry, Chapter 14, Recall Plan.



World Health Organization and Food & Agriculture Organization, Risk Communication Applied to Food Safety Handbook, pages 87-92,



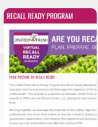
### *Food crisis communication industry workshops, training and information*



Food Protection and Defense Institute.



Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (JIFSAN), *Center for Food Safety and Security Systems*.



United Fresh Produce Association's Recall Ready Program.

