

Barriers to communication – Bernard Matthews

Bernard Matthews rears over seven million turkeys every year. 13 million UK households buy a Bernard Matthews Farms branded product each year. The company operates in a competitive and fast-changing environment. Chance events can have a significant impact on a food business. For example, Jamie Oliver's high-profile campaign in 2005 to improve the quality of school meals singled out foods such as Bernard Matthews' Turkey Twizzlers as being unhealthy. In 2007, there was an outbreak of bird flu at a Bernard Matthews farm in Suffolk. At this time, the media also discovered that the company imported some of its turkey from abroad. The press published stories that this could have been directly related to the outbreak, a theory that was never proved. Initially, Bernard Matthews did not speak up and defend its product range, which offered affordable, tasty and convenient food for everyday working mums. This resulted in adverse press coverage and the company lost credibility with the media. When bird flu hit, relations with the media were at an all-time low. The company's immediate reaction to the crisis was to focus on eliminating the disease, which it did successfully. Communications came low on the list of priorities. This meant that the resulting information 'vacuum' was soon filled with damaging and often inaccurate news reports.

Anything that affects the smooth flow of information is known as 'noise'. This might be, for example, the language used, an inappropriate use of technology or the different levels of skill and knowledge of the sender and receiver. For example, every day in the press and on TV, consumers are bombarded with often confusing or contradictory information about the health benefits or risks associated with different foods. Consumers may not have enough understanding or information to judge between conflicting messages. It is therefore not surprising that many people do not hear these messages and 'switch off'. Bernard Matthews had to overcome a considerable amount of direct 'noise' caused by the earlier negative press articles. By not responding to these immediately or correcting with facts, consumers were confused and the company lost credibility with the press and the public. To achieve its vision and encourage consumers to eat turkey all year round, Bernard Matthews needed to give people more information in a way they could easily understand. It has therefore chosen to highlight key facts about turkey meat as the foundation for many of its messages. These include the facts that turkey is tasty and versatile, high in protein, vitamins and minerals and that turkey breast has the lowest saturated fat levels of mainstream meats. It is also an efficient and sustainable product to produce.



Questions

1. What is meant by a barrier to communication?

2. Give examples of barriers to communication.

3. Explain why customers may “switch off” to information about the health benefits of different types of food.

4. Analyse why Bernard Matthews’ loss of credibility with the press and public acted as a barrier to communication.

Task

Develop a plan of action that firms could use to ensure they overcome the following barriers to communication:

- Use of jargon
- Problems caused by multinational organisations that operate over different time zones.

What have you learned?

Create a summary circle of the main learning points from the session on barriers to communication:

- List the main learning points
- Divide a circle in the same number of segments as learning points
- Add the points to the segments, along with colours or images that will help you to remember them.