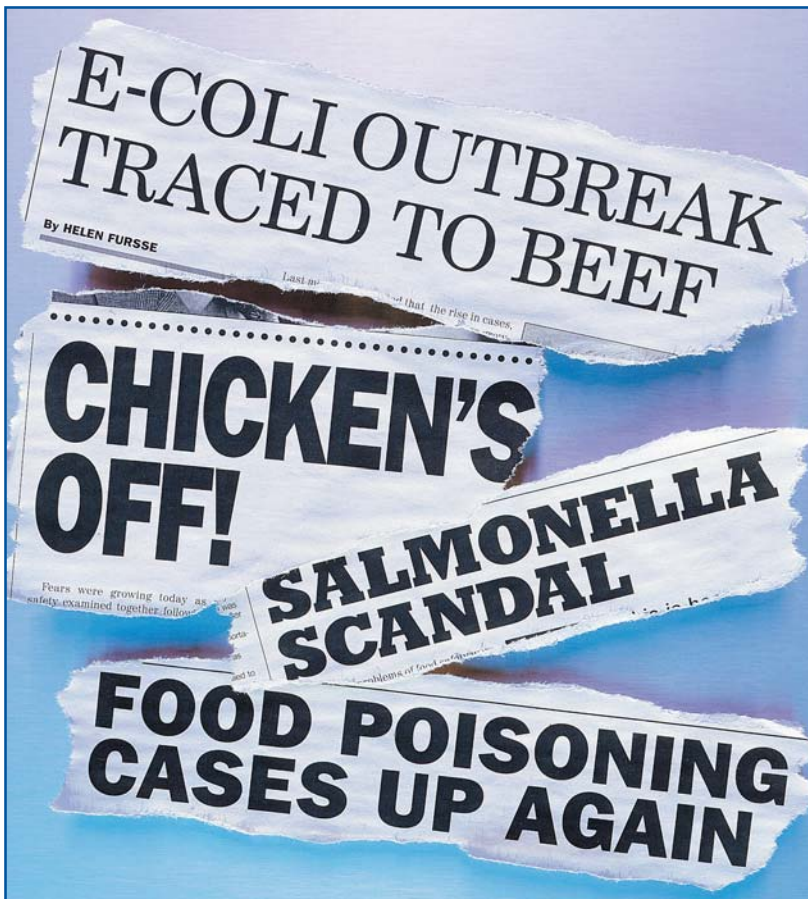


Plan for a

Catering Crisis

How to prepare for and handle a food poisoning scare



Prosecuted for a food safety offence?

It could happen to **you**. So plan for it **now**

Dealing with the press

As the proprietor or manager of a food business which is to be prosecuted you could expect interest from the press. The larger and more established your business, the greater the interest. However, even a small shop, café, hotel or restaurant should expect at least one telephone call from the local newspaper if they are being taken to court for infringing hygiene, health and safety or trading standards regulations.



When speaking to the media about an offence you should bear in mind that you are trying to limit the damage to your business by beginning the process of rebuilding customer confidence.

You are also looking to:

- Start to recover your reputation
- Limit any financial losses

If you are going to speak to the press and other media operators you should not be tempted to speak "off the cuff" but should prepare a statement which, even if it is not delivered in its entirety, will provide you with prepared answers to some of the likely questions. You should consider the following rules whilst preparing your statement.

1. Tell the truth- if the company is being prosecuted, an offence has been committed, do not tell lies and never invent explanations.
2. Admit the mistakes and apologise- explain the situation, do not joke or be flippant or underestimate the intelligence of the audience. Remember, the main audience are your customers.
3. Provide concise information- if necessary, explain technical details briefly and clearly, do not use jargon.

Being interrogated by a reporter may not be pleasant but should be seen as an opportunity. It is perhaps your only chance to explain the lapse to your customers, apologise and be in the process of rebuilding confidence in the business.

If you expect a great deal of interest, you would be wise to rehearse your answers to the questions which may be put to you. It could be time well spent listing a range of questions, the more difficult the better, and constructing answers based upon the prepared statement. A rehearsal with a colleague, where they put the questions to you and you respond out loud, will help give you confidence when finally confronted by the media.

Make sure that where possible, all the reporters are given the same information, preferably by the same person. For this reason, if there is likely to be considerable interest, it would be wise to appoint one person- yourself or another- to be the spokesperson and if possible call a press conference.

Once the offence becomes known do not try to hide, be prepared to devote as much time as is necessary to ensure you are able to answer all the queries. Respond to all enquiries, showing you care and provide accurate information. Ensure that all your staff refer all media enquiries to the appointed spokesperson.

Remember, "no comment" can be very damning.



Plan

to manage a catering crisis

The press usually hear about a food safety offence some considerable time after the proprietor and managers have been told they are to be prosecuted. Even if the time delay is only a few days there is still time to prepare what to say.

However, there are other crises where there will be no warning and therefore no time to prepare. For all such events including prosecutions, even the smallest business should have a crisis management plan which they can bring into action.

All food businesses, no matter how small, e.g. a village shop, café, pub etc. should prepare the outline of a crisis management plan. This will enable the proprietor or manager to react quickly. Many large food businesses are required by their insurance companies to have a crisis management plan in place. Small businesses should be as well prepared. Not having thought through what to do in the event of a major crisis means that the business is very vulnerable. Personnel are likely to make "kneejerk" responses and lose valuable time in beginning the process of recovery.

For a small business the crisis management plan need only be a series of notes outlining the necessary course of action. The information should be kept where it is easy to find and all members of the management team should know where it is kept.

Indeed, once the information is collated, the proprietor and/or manager should go through with all members of staff so that they are familiar with the details.

The plan should cover:

- Who is going to sort the crisis out, i.e. lead the crisis management team. This person must be able and prepared to devote as much time as is necessary to sorting out the crisis and cannot therefore attend to the details of running the business
- Who will run the business and carry on the trading whilst the problems, etc are being resolved
- Who will speak to the media

The plan will also include:

Names and contact numbers of key personnel to assist such as:

- Refrigeration specialists.
- Public analyst.
- Local council offices.
- Environmental Health Practitioner.
- Trading Standards Officer.
- Builders, electricians, plumbers etc.

The proprietor of a small operation may scoff at the idea that they could be the subject of a blackmail or extortion attempt. It is not as far fetched as it may seem.

Whatever the crisis, all proprietors should be confident that if the worse does happen, they have prepared a recovery plan that will at least allow them to react confidently and positively when everyone else is still floundering in shock and confusion.

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Telephone: 020 8547 3333

E-mail: info@croner.co.uk

www.croner.co.uk

Recommended Government & Other Publications:

1. Food Hygiene Regulations 2006
2. The Chilled & Frozen Food Guidelines 1989.
3. Safer Food, Better Business (Hygiene guidelines for all catering outlets): www.food.gov.uk

Contacts:

Food Standards Agency, www.food.gov.uk

For copies of legislation visit, www.tsoshop.co.uk

British Hospitality Association, www.bha.org.uk

Other Foster Blue papers include:

Energy Efficiency
The ECA Scheme
Hydrocarbons in Refrigeration - What caterers need to know
The Climate Change Levy
Food Temperature Laws
Food Safety and E. Coli
Food Hygiene & Staff Training
Handling and Serving Ice
Safe Food Storage
HACCP- Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points
The Safe Way to Blast Chill, Freeze and Thaw
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Oldmedow Road, King's Lynn Norfolk PE30 4JU
Tel: (01553) 691122 Fax: (01553) 691447

Visit us on our website:
<http://www.fosterrefrigerator.co.uk>