

teaching note

When a Food Quality Issue Goes Viral: The Case of Stop Bugging Me with the Broccoli!

Introduction/Summary

This case study told the story of how food quality and training issues could impact contract foodservice operations and lead to a rather immediate social media campaign that could have ended a multi-million dollar contract. Fleet Inc. was a multi-building manufacturing facility whose employees had the benefit of on-site cafeterias provided by a large contract foodservice company, Cater-Fresh Inc. The broccoli (food safety) incident took place at a building within a larger corporate campus employing union workers across a total of three shifts. During a recent evening shift, the Cater-Fresh production team underestimated the number of broccoli portions to prepare, causing customers to wait while more was cooked. The broccoli was a side item served along with prime rib, one of the top selling menu items. Events quickly spiraled out of control when a staff member (Rick) took shortcuts and failed to follow standard food preparation procedures. This led to a customer (Mike) discovering his undercooked broccoli crawling with small insects, which he then addressed in one of the most modern and impactful ways possible, by kicking off his own social media campaign.

Target Audience

This case study will resonate with most students at the undergraduate level with relevance for hospitality, business, communications, and marketing majors. The case also provides application for graduate level students given the broader complexity of the issue at hand, and at the instructor's choosing can be examined more in-depth focusing on future impact. The variety and difficulty of the learning activities are adjustable to match the students' experience level/s, with the undergraduate level addressing the various questions included in the case and with the graduate level examining more complex implications stemming from negative publicity that goes beyond impacting the experience of a single customer and puts an entire contract at risk.

Learning Outcomes & Objectives

Students must thoroughly read and understand the case study in order to develop meaningful conclusions with regards to the situation faced by all parties involved. The case study includes nine key questions that are designed to assist students in validating their comprehension of the situation as well as practical methods for developing solutions and identifying ways to mitigate the cause. These same key questions will be revisited as part of a class lesson in order to connect the broader case with fundamental business management considerations. Graduate level students should also complete the additional reading recommendations.

Students will benefit from the case study by having a line of sight into operating challenges faced by foodservice providers and the im-

portance of sustaining robust response programs for mitigating risk. After reading the case study, the additional materials, and completing the lesson, students should:

- Describe some of the immense challenges faced in contract foodservice situations.
- Higher-level (upper-level or graduate): Differentiate the difference between foodservice settings in restaurants (more common knowledge) to the environment presented in the case (large manufacturing facility and contract foodservice).

A comprehensive understanding of the operating structure between large manufacturing facilities and the contract foodservice industry, as well as the importance of this workplace benefit to the employee, has been presented. Unless a student has worked in a similar environment or has exposure to the uniquenesses within this industry, visibility to these operations is often not common to the general public. Thus, this study provides valuable insight on how these facilities operate and some of the challenges that can be unique to these operational environments.

- Understand how quality assurance and training impacts operational outcomes in contract foodservice.
- Higher-level (upper-level or graduate): Evaluate what may have caused the specific issues presented in the case and establish a plan for prevention in the future.

The absence of robust quality assurance and training can expose businesses to a variety of safety issues. This case is focused on how a quality assurance issue turned into a large-scale problem as a result of a social media campaign. Students should be able to recognize the variables involved within the foodservice industry that can make it difficult to deliver consistent product quality and customer service. As this case highlights, when process gaps develop, so does the immediate risk of a mistake. Students will be better able to identify how critical it is that accountability is maintained via robust systems and processes regardless of the operation size or scope.

- Explain current (presented) and new threats to contract foodservice from social media.
- Higher-level (upper-level or graduate): Construct a social media control plan to reduce risks to the company in the event of disaster (man-made or natural)

Students should be able to explain the need for contract foodservice businesses to proactively examine and identify new risks to their reputation and operating profits with the evolution of social media and other communication technologies. Although not traditionally a focus, this case study exemplifies a threat to reputation and profits;

this threat must not be ignored.

- Understand how facility condition can influence perceptions and profitability within contract foodservice.
- Higher-level (upper-level or graduate): Compare and contrast an older food service facility with a newer facility, specifically differentiating the challenges they could pose to food safety and food service.

The state of the physical environment affects patrons' perceptions of quality and must be considered as an important factor in the overall profitability and success of the operation. This is a critical element to understand, as a modern and well-kept infrastructure can mediate the idea of quality in the minds of customers.

Teaching approach and strategies

Prior to Class

Students should be required to have read the case study and to develop some thoughts using the fundamental questions captured within the case study. Students should be expected to have a general understanding of the following topics:

- Contract foodservice operations / business to business relationships
- Customer service (good versus bad)
- Influence of facility condition on customer expectations
- Basic food safety practices
- Quality assurance
- Training programs
- Social media / electronic communications

There are numerous ways the material from the case study can be examined as part of the lesson. For both teaching options, the approach is two-fold and involves small group sessions responding to key questions from the case study. This is addressed under the Small Group Discussion subsection and helps ensure that many of the key learnings from the scenario are absorbed. To build upon the initial class discussion, additional follow-up assignments are included that require a more in-depth analysis as part of a writing assignment for both graduate and undergraduate level students. This approach is addressed under the subsection Follow-up Activity.

Lesson Plan 1 (60 Minutes)

Small Group Discussion

The instructor should form four small groups and have each group develop a summary of the case study and key learnings (10 minutes). They should then discuss the following three questions, forming their thoughts to present to the rest of the class for broader discussion and debate. Each group should be given no more than 30 minutes (10 minutes per question). Once the class reconvenes, have each group, provide a 5-minute summary (20 minutes total for all four

groups). Additional contributions should be inserted by the instructor to ensure most facets of what took place leading up to, during, and even after the scenario are discussed and addressed.

1. What are the primary and secondary service failures that occurred throughout this case study that may have exacerbated the situation causing Mike to respond in the way he did?

Insight:

Customer service: There were several customer engagement opportunities or moments of truth that were entirely missed by the Cater-Fresh staff. There was a lack of concern about the customer (Mike) from the start. The staff did not seem to care about the fact that he had to wait. More importantly, Mike was not treated as an individual, and there were very few items that even appealed to him as a vegetarian. There was no awareness regarding whether customers were satisfied following their purchase. Visiting customers and checking on their satisfaction would provide valuable feedback and promote a caring and hospitality focused cafeteria.

Food Safety: Customers consumed food; it must have been safe to eat. Protocols that were created for the preparation and serving of food were designed to ensure wholesomeness and safety. Not following standard processes was risky, and as illustrated in this case, could have damaging results. Before all else, the team should make sure that food was served with safety protocols as a primary obligation.

Misaligned Key Performance Indicators: The Cater-Fresh team was prioritizing speed as their main pursuit. This pursuit was out of balance with the priorities of the customers. While serving food fast was important, it was pursued as more important than safety and variety. Prioritizing options for non-meat eating customers, other than the side item, could have made a valuable impact on the overall satisfaction of the customer. Treating customers as individuals and attending to their needs is critical in maintaining favorable relationships. The customer (Mike) had to wait, yet no one seemed to focus on anything other than taking short cuts to provide him food as soon as possible. There were numerous ways the team could have managed the situation with Mike, including taking precautions with preparing the food, offering him a discount, apologizing or simply paying attention to the food being served. The overall lack of caring was the most damaging event that occurred during this encounter.

2. How could Jeff, and the foodservice team as a whole could, have caught the bug infested food before Mike? Why did this go unnoticed?

Insight:

Had Jeff taken a moment to inspect the product before placing into the servery, he would have likely seen the bugs and caught it before Mike. This was an example where standard food preparation procedures were not followed, creating the subsequent failure to in-

spect the food before serving. Adding in the simple step of the chef tasting the food before serving was a prerequisite that should have been standard practice. Many chefs have disposable sample spoons on hand for this purpose, but commonly they go unused. In this case, the undercooked food passed through all three employees, the person who cooked it, the person who served it, and the person who sold it. This illustrated a systemic issue where the staff was ignoring food quality and was not engaged in the customer experience.

3. Based on what you read in this case study, what does Cater-Fresh need to do to ensure this does not happen again?

Insight:

As part of a broader review, sponsored at the executive level, Cater-Fresh must implement much more rigorous quality assurance, training, and compliance systems. At the unit level, customer service training and development must be a priority along with frequent third party quality control inspections. The team should also revise their production forecasting to ensure accuracy and prioritize customer satisfaction. Running out of food promotes poor service and unfavorable guest relationships.

Follow-up Activity

In order for students to build upon the learnings from the case study, an additional activity is proposed that can be provided to students, requiring them to complete a writing assignment (due at a later time). This writing assignment can build upon the small group lesson work and is focused on social media strategies, intended for both the graduate and undergraduate level with appropriate adjustments in scope and expectations. An additional 3-5 references should be included beyond the case study itself to respond to one of the following:

- Develop a strategic social media plan that can help companies respond to emergency situations such as the issue in this case. Include key stakeholders, timelines, methods for deployment, and associated training.

Insight:

Having a trusted process for the customer to follow when something does not go right, reduces the risk of someone using their own method to communicate the issue. A customer focused staff, an emergency hotline, or a responsive online grievance system could all provide solutions for customers. Mike did not have any of these options to consider. When he decided to extend a social media campaign, the situation took on critical mass. Software systems to monitor online chatter and trends are widely available and provide opportunities for companies to identify issues as they occur, providing valuable time to get in front of the issue and attempt resolution.

Lesson Plan 2 (90+ minutes)

Small Group Discussion

Lesson plan 2 expands upon the first option with additional questions and more in-depth discussion on the possible solutions. The instructor should form four small groups, and assign two of the following questions to each group. Each group should be provided 30 minutes to formulate a summary of their answers to each in preparation for open discussion. Once the class reconvenes, each group will share their thoughts and solutions to each of the questions assigned. For each response, the instructor will guide the discussion to keep it on topic and to ensure that most facets of what took place leading up to, during, and even after the scenario are discussed.

4. How could Jeff have better prepared his staff to respond to the broccoli shortage during service?

Insight:

Response provided above in Lesson 1 information

5. What is an appropriate best practice for responding to negative social media incidents?

Insight:

Contract foodservice companies, such as Cater-Fresh, often have established procedures for escalating any form of public relations emergency. This is usually handled by the Vice President of Communications or a similarly senior role. There are also tools and systems widely available for monitoring events of critical mass, allowing communication experts an opportunity to manage the situation as it is occurring. The first step is to activate this escalation and allow the experts to take the lead. In addition to this, executives from the operations team must also be engaged in order to notify the client and any other parties involved. An investigation team must be formed, and a thorough cause analysis must be completed.

6. How could a more engaging customer service approach have averted Mike from wanting to take a retaliatory response?

Insight:

Had a relationship been formed with the customer (Mike) before the incident, it is more likely he would have notified a Cater-Fresh employee in the cafeteria once he discovered the food issue. The absence of any customer service relationships created a situation where Mike was able to seek retribution via social media without an emotional connection to the foodservice team. Customer advocacy is a term used to describe engagement and relationship building between representatives from Cater-Fresh and Fleet Inc. that takes place outside of the foodservice area. The objective is to use qualitative data gathering for the purpose of identifying what is important to customers. This type of outreach both identifies areas for the foodservice team to focus on while fostering relationships. They are particularly useful when used to pursue

research on areas of minority interest such as vegetarianism or cultural meal preferences. Mike and others could have easily been included in these focus groups, which would have established a relationship.

7. How had Jeff and Karen failed to recognize and respond to the underlying customer concerns that led to Mike feeling the way he did? What could have they done differently?

Insight:

One of the primary challenges associated with operating a small foodservice location is to ensure a wide variety of items, including those that appeal to customers with specific dietary preferences or restrictions. Establishing protocols and minimum daily assortments removes ambiguity from both the Cater-Fresh team and Fleet. These minimum commitments should be shared with customers and advertised in a way that promotes their availability. For instance, at a minimum, ensuring at least one complete vegetarian offering per day, based on a four-week menu rotation helps provide variety and enforces the commitment to the Cater-Fresh team and potential Fleet Inc. customers. Cater-Fresh will also find that this approach helps increase daily participation and sales, therefore providing benefit for the effort involved.

8. Do you think other concerns such as the feelings towards a poor environment contributed to the case issues? How can a team overcome an environment that has not been updated since the 1960's? Is this even possible?

Insight:

Yes, it is certainly possible to have contributed to the negative feelings of some employees. Although the dining experience may be negatively impacted by a dated physical environment, they can overcome this through outstanding customer service and consistently good food. Even though Cater-Fresh is generally not responsible for renovation for facilities, there could have been some better dialogue with the Fleet about the need to update this cafeteria facility. Despite this, Cater-Fresh employees could probably have added some simple décor items (pictures on the walls or table decorations) in an attempt to provide a more pleasing environment.

9. What is the best way to respond to Fleet's CEO to instill confidence that Cater-Fresh is still the best suited to operate the foodservice program, despite the recent incident?

Insight:

Cater-Fresh must engage their most senior leadership to communicate directly with Fleet's CEO and make a commitment to positive change. The purpose of the meeting is to begin the process of rebuilding trust and delivering high-level commitments such as increasing the variety to appeal to all populations, improving the quality assurance program resulting in a world class solution, and enhancing customer service to ensure an individualized approach. Collectively, these commitments will become the cornerstones of the improvements to the program.

Follow-up Activity

For students to build upon the learnings from the case study, an additional activity is proposed that can be provided to students in order for them to complete a writing assignment (due at a later time). This writing assignment can build upon the small group lesson work and is focused on quality assurance, intended for both the graduate and undergraduate level with appropriate adjustments in scope and expectations. An additional 3-5 references should be included beyond the case study itself in order to respond to one of the following:

- Develop a training and auditing outline that supports sustainable quality assurance standards. Include possible solutions for conducting, tracking, and verifying audit compliance.

Insight:

There is a systemic issue with customer service and perhaps one with quality assurance. Cater-Fresh should develop an organization-wide protocol based on the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM). This process draws upon the disciplines inherent in process excellence and well-known solutions like Sig Sigma. The core element is continuous improvement and constant evaluation of existing state versus the desired state. The program includes all levels of associates and over time becomes a culture, not only a program.

Additional Learning Activities

- Construct a social media control plan to reduce risks to the company in the event of disaster (man-made or natural)
- Create a retraining plan in regards to food safety for Jeff, Mary, and/or Rick (Cater-Fresh employees), before they are permitted back to work (and or reassigned). A retraining plan for Jeff may also be created based on supervision and other related managerial concepts.

Analysis of Teaching Objectives

Contract Foodservice

Contract foodservice providers are hired by employers to provide on-site dining amenities for their employees with the expectation that they bring with them the expertise to deliver a quality product that is always safe (Society for Hospitality and Foodservice Management, 2015). The Society for Hospitality and Foodservice Management (2015) also noted that the operating models are often scalable, ranging in size from small grab and go kiosks to full-service cafeterias. The larger scale cafeterias tend to model the hours that employees are working, which in the manufacturing environment can involve several shifts. On-site foodservices have always been linked to employee engagement and satisfaction, and although subsidies are less common causing higher market pricing within the cafeterias, modern employers continue to see the value it provides (Rosales, 2014). In turn, employee tastes and food trends have increased the expectations from paying customers.

This case highlights the often challenging position that contract food-service providers face when priorities are not always aligned. Primary food and service quality need to be remembered in each situation and be the focus for hospitality employees (Bufquin et al., 2015). Senior client stakeholders are not always in step with the expectations of their employees, who are ultimately the primary customers in the cafeteria. In the absence of a financial subsidy or satisfactory investment in the infrastructure, disgruntled employees become motivated to seek a voice by whatever means they can. Students should recognize these variables and demonstrate the ability to be creative in finding solutions that deliver the best possible outcome for customers all of the time. It is important for students to understand the general dynamics of the food-service industry given the obscurity it has unless you either work for a provider or an employer who utilizes one.

Quality Assurance & Training

The single most important thing for any foodservice provider is the quality and safety of the food they are putting into customers' bodies (Cotterchio, Gunn, Coffill, Tormey, & Barry, 1998). A majority of reported cases involving customers who get sick from food are traced back to licensed businesses and eating establishments (Cotterchio et al., 1998). Regardless of whether an illness occurs or not, quality assurance must be a primary focus for any foodservice provider because the damage that can ensue from a bad experience can be equally devastating to their reputation. This case is an example of when skipping standard food preparation procedures can have a huge impact, even if no illness is involved. Incorrect or neglectful food handling practices lead to safety and security risks that cause lasting consequences for everyone involved (Cotterchio et al., 1998). Adhering to practical, standardized operating models has a high success rate, and when combined with training, can avert food safety issues associated with food production (Wodi & Mill, 1985). Contract foodservice providers have much at stake and to mitigate the risk of losing a contract must provide their teams with continuous training, requiring them to follow strict processes and prioritize customer safety as their primary concern (Park & Almanza, 2015; Yiannas, 2009).

Social Media

Social media is nothing new in the food industry, whether the establishment is a hole-in-the-wall or a fine dining operation, social media can make or break a business based on their online reputation. The contract foodservice industry is a little different in that social media has not had such an impactful presence, until recently (Lautenschlager, 2006). Before social media existed anywhere; it used to be that one disgruntled customer told about ten people, which seemed dangerous at the time (Goodman & Newman, 2003). Corstjens and Umblijs (2012) explained that today one disgruntled customer could reach thousands, or even millions, in a single keystroke and the damage caused by negative social media sig-

nificantly outweighs any positive contributions. As occurred in this case, the incident not only created a lot of negative publicity, it also put the entire contract at risk. The newfound outlet for the employee in this case study is an important reminder that even in a non-traditional situation like a manufacturing plant, social media can reach far and wide. Reputations and contracts are at stake as consumers' perceptions and comments can blur the lines between libel and slander, leading to serious business sustainability issues (Svantesson, 2009). Svantesson (2009) stated that to survive in the modern age, company owners and managers must develop strategies to understand both the nature of social media and human interest in sharing experiences digitally. Without understanding the trends taking place with social media, it becomes very difficult to mitigate the risks or to use the technology in a positive way.

Facility Condition

One of the most common challenges that contract foodservice providers must navigate is operating in facilities that they neither own nor have the control to change. Often referred to as servicescapes, physical environments can have a significant impact on customers' perceptions of quality (Chua, Othman, Boo, Abkarim, & Ramachandran, 2010). Chua, Othman, Boo, Abkarim, and Ramachandran (2010) explained environments perceived as unfavorable negatively influence customers' psychological state and can trigger a heightened chance of dissatisfaction with the experience overall. When this is taken one step further, and unfavorable servicescapes are combined with the absence of favorable service, something like bug-infested broccoli can become an enormous issue (Chua et al., 2010). This case represents an example where the aging facility conditions, combined with other factors, may well have contributed to the outcome. Customers often become frustrated when their on-site dining experience is dated and dilapidated, leaving them feeling frustrated and undervalued. The foodservice providers are left in the middle when funding to refresh or remodel the space is not available. To help overcome this problem, some contract foodservice providers may offer up investment dollars earmarked for cafeteria updates assuming a return on the investment with increased participation. These investments create win-win situations, improved dining experience and long-term contracts that provide the foodservice provider with stability. Even in light of these considerations, students must recognize that regardless of the facility's condition, had the quality and consistency of the food itself been maintained, the retribution sought by the manufacturing employee would have been significantly reduced or even eliminated.

Additional Instructor Information

Aftermath – Following the Case Ending

The fallout from the string of events that followed the incident was excessive. Following the chaos of the event, Jeff, the cafeteria supervisor, quit without notice and Karen, the General Manager, was reassigned to another location. David, the Vice President, relocated her after further

investigation revealed that systems and processes that should have been routinely followed were not and that there was a high degree of probability that this event was part of a more systemic issue. Two corporate quality assurance auditors, Chad and Patricia, were temporarily assigned to this location and remain in the environment fostering process improvements until permanent hires are made. Organizational changes were adopted, increasing the number of employees at the site by a total of 3 between all shifts. While this was not necessarily a requirement, Cater-Fresh wanted to demonstrate their commitment to continual improvement by bolstering the staffing levels and corporate oversight at their expense. Fleet placed the contractor on a performance improvement plan and considered this incident a material breach of contract. Cater-Fresh continues to make improvements, not just to the location in question, but the entire campus at a cost to the company that will impact the contract profitability for many years. While this situation was isolated, there have been occasional food issues in the past that have not attracted the attention that this one did. Fleet is concerned about their reputation, both with their employees and customers. They believe the actions they are taking are necessary to continue relations with both. Social media was the cornerstone of this situation and illustrates the potential negative impact it can have when things do not go as planned.

Foodservice is a dynamic business requiring people to make correct choices and the right decisions. Training must be ongoing, repetitive, and consistent, reinforcing the importance of food safety, quality, and customer care. Customer concerns must not only be heard but addressed, to ensure service levels meet expectations. Quality and safety must not come at the expense of fast service. This case presents an opportunity to discuss in further details the intricacies of training, overcoming environmental constraints, and most importantly how to respond to social media emergencies.

Management Summary

Cater-Fresh aligned their systems and processes on serving customers fast, adopting this as a key service priority for their Fleet customers. As they quickly discovered, focusing on a single priority can create a system that is out of balance and prone to failure. In retrospect, they found out that there is no substitution for following systems and processes regardless of the situation at hand. Moving forward they must now establish a credible culture of discipline into their work environment, consisting of:

- Ensuring safe and wholesome food
- Creating an exceptional customer focused environment
- Developing a culture of continuous improvement
- Fostering ongoing training and development
- Maintaining rigid systems and processes that guarantee quality and consistency

Senior Cater-Fresh leadership, including onsite management, continue to work to improve service delivery at Fleet, and while this

particular situation has since passed, the perceptions have not. They continue to face an uphill battle to instill a culture of excellence and a commitment to serving safe food and quality service all of the time.

Additional Readings

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