

**How the Blue Bell Ice Cream Recall was Framed in Newspaper Opinion Pieces**

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## **Introduction/Need for Research**

In 2015, Blue Bell Creameries, based in Brenham, Texas, experienced its first recall in the company's 108-year history due to a *Listeria* outbreak that resulted in a total of 10 hospitalizations and three deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). With this impact, the recall compelled Blue Bell creameries to close its doors at all manufacturing plants from mid-April through the end of August. The recall was a major blow to the company, requiring it to lay off more than one-third of its workforce (Associated Press, 2015) and could cost Blue Bell as much as \$130 million in revenue in 2015 (Halkias, 2015).

During a crisis, communication is vital for effective crisis management, which has the potential to reduce the amount of damage the organization receives due to the crisis, and may even prevent an incident from ever developing (Coombs, 2012). How the media frames a crisis can influence the way consumers feel about the issue and their impressions of the company (Coombs, 2006). One specific area of media coverage, the opinion pages, could have significant influence on the public's discourse (Nikolaev & Porpora, 2007). The op-ed pages offer a unique outlet because they allow a variety of writers – journalists, academics, politicians, others – an opportunity to provide their perspectives on current topics of interest (Nikolaev & Porpora, 2007). The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how the Blue Bell recall was presented in media outlets' opinion pieces, which may provide a barometer of public opinion concerning this issue.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was framing, which are cultural structures that form an understanding of a social situation or event. Framing is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). A frame highlights pieces of information about a topic that is the subject of a communication and elevates them in salience (Entman, 1993). By highlighting certain components over a controversial topic, news frames can influence consumers' perceptions of issues and opinions to conform readers' beliefs and policy preferences (Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000).

## **Purpose and Research Objective**

The purpose of this study was to understand how Texas newspapers discussed the Blue Bell recall through opinion pieces. The primary research objective was to determine the dominant frames used in these articles.

## **Methodology**

This study used a qualitative content analysis research design. Qualitative researchers try to understand a phenomenon by focusing on the whole picture rather than breaking it down into variables (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014). Instead of focusing on counting or coding,

qualitative data analysis is utilized to gain a thorough understanding of the documents under study and how they relate to theoretical or conceptual issues (Altheide, 1996).

Because the Blue Bell Creameries location in Brenham, Texas, is its largest manufacturing facility, the study's sample was limited to Texas newspapers. The study's timeframe was April 20, 2015 (when Blue Bell announced recall) to Jan. 18, 2016 (last phase in Blue Bell's five-phase plan to return ice cream distribution to stores). Articles were collected using Google by searching for the terms "blue bell recall" "opinion pieces" "Texas" and "blue bell ice cream recall" "opinion pieces" "Texas." Accepted opinion pieces could be from online and print newsletters and could be a stand opinion section or part of a blog associated with the newspaper. Articles were excluded if they contained the search terms but were not opinion pieces or were published in journals or magazines. Each article was then printed and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify the dominant frame present.

### **Results/Findings**

Using the article selection guidelines, 16 articles were found: five articles from *The Dallas Morning News*, two articles from *The Eagle*, and one article in each of the following publications: *Houston Chronicle*, *The Huntsville Item*, *My Statesman*, *Denton Record-Chronicle*, *Texarkana Gazette*, *Corsicana Daily News*, *Daily Toreador*, *The Clarendon Enterprise*, and *Harold Democrat*. The first article was published on April 22, 2015 and the last was on Jan. 12, 2016.

The qualitative content analysis of the articles identified two dominant frames: *sympathy* and *contempt*. The sympathy frame was the most common frame and was identified in 12 articles. The tone of the opinion pieces with the *sympathy* frame signified that the author felt sorry for Blue Bell despite the knowledge the writer had about the situation. Terms and phrases that described this frame were: "beloved Blue Bell," "unfortunate outbreak," "we support Blue Bell," "Blue Bell is part of Texas' lore," "fell victim to the Listeria outbreak," and "to demonize a company that is more than 100 years old is ridiculous."

The four remaining articles were framed as *contempt*, where the authors despised Blue Bell for the things that happened. The keywords and phrases in these articles were "lost trust," "its dedication is to its bottom line," and "harmed a community," "mediocre ice cream."

### **Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations**

During a crisis, the media's coverage and framing of the situation can influence consumers' opinions of the company (Coombs, 2006). The majority of newspaper opinion pieces demonstrated support for Blue Bell and lamented about its products disappearing from store shelves. Articles in the sympathy frame supported Blue Bell and categorized this recall as an "unfortunate outbreak." Four opinion pieces criticized Blue Bell's response to this crisis. During a crisis, organizations should monitor how they are being presented in media so they can attempt to protect their reputation. While this study examined the opinion pieces in one state, the recall extended beyond state lines. Future research should examine news coverage in other states as well as online conversations in social networking sites.

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