

“I Just Want My Blue Bell”: A Qualitative Examination of Customers’ Brand Loyalty during the 2015 Food Safety Event

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Introduction/need for research: Creating and sustaining brand loyalty is a top priority for agricultural companies across the globe as brand loyalty is considered to be a primary determinant of the relationship and level of identification consumers have with a brand. Achieving brand loyalty increases a company’s sales, profits, and market share, ensuring continued growth and a secure competitive position in the marketplace (Belch & Belch, 2015; Pride & Ferrell, 2012; Telg & Irani, 2011). For companies that sell consumable products, a food safety event resulting in a product recall can change consumers’ quality and safety perceptions, which can have detrimental effects on the brand and consumers’ brand loyalty.

However, when Brenham, Texas-based Blue Bell Creameries was forced by the FDA to recall ice cream products contaminated by *Listeria monocytogenes*, contamination that resulted in 10 hospitalizations and three deaths, loyal Blue Bell consumers rallied around the 110-year-old company (Elkind, 2015; Barrett & Hynes, 2016). Although an investigation uncovered information indicating *Listeria monocytogenes* were present in Blue Bell products as early as 2010 (Centers, 2016; FDA, 2015), Blue Bell customers remained steadfast in their brand loyalty (Elkind, 2015; Barrett & Hynes, 2016). The loyalty and support consumers demonstrated during the Blue Bell recall raises the question: Why do customers remain loyal to brands during a food safety event?

Answering this question addresses the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) National Research Agenda research priority seven: Addressing Complex Problems. The market is driven by public perception, yet it is the inaccurate depiction of agricultural practices in the media that receive attention, which in turn influences the public’s perception of the agricultural industry as a whole (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). Similarly, public perception also influences the ways consumers experience a brand (Belch & Belch, 2015), making studies of brand loyalty related to food safety events important.

Social exchange theory posits that behavior (e.g. intention to purchase) is the result of an exchange process whereby consumers seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs (Emerson, 1976). When the risk outweighs the cost, consumers’ brand loyalty may diminish. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify why Blue Bell customers remained loyal to the Blue Bell brand during the 2015 food safety event and product recall.

Method: We used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 18 study participants; however, data saturation occurred after 10 interviews. We asked participants a series of semi-structured interview questions, which they received in advance of the study. Semi-structured interviewing was beneficial because it gave us the freedom to follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the interview guide, which resulted in reliable, comparable qualitative data (Bryman, 2016). We conducted the 45- to 60-minute interviews between October 28, 2015, and November 22, 2015. We transcribed eight of the 10 interviews immediately after the interview concluded and two interviews within 48 hours of completion because immediate transcription was not possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We documented direct quotes, and the remaining content was paraphrased from our notes. We achieved trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results: Notably, none of the participants indicated the recall changed their minds about purchasing Blue Bell in the future, saying, “these things happen,” “Blue Bell made an honest mistake,” “I’m a very forgiving consumer,” and “I believe in second chances—even third ones if the ice cream is as good as Blue Bell.” Some participants did not purchase other brands of ice cream during the recall period because those brands “just wouldn’t measure up” in comparison to Blue Bell in taste and quality. Another participant said he did not buy ice cream at all during the recall because it was too risky—it might not be as good as Blue Bell, so why spend the money? Although most participants missed Blue Bell during the recall, they also felt let down by the company. One participant said she could not believe Blue Bell had “lost control” of quality, while another articulated she was angry at the company for continuing to produce ice cream in “dirty” conditions. Although some participants were disappointed in the company, two participants said they would have continued to purchase and consume Blue Bell ice cream knowing it might be contaminated. Furthermore, two participants suggested Blue Bell should have kept producing but just put a warning label on the package. Another participant echoed “I don’t give a [expletive] if it has *Listeria*. I just want my Blue Bell.”

Additionally, Texan’s loyalty to Texas-based brands was a reoccurring theme. One participant said, “True Texans are true to Texas brands.” Every person in the sample said loyalty to Blue Bell could only be understood in terms of being from Texas. For example, “it’s a Texas thing,” and the kind of fierce loyalty paid to Blue Bell during the recall could “only happen in Texas.” Yet, one participant seemed apologetic when she said, “Blue Bell is the best ice cream on the planet, but I’m not sure if that’s really true or it’s because I live in Texas.” Similarly, loyalty to Blue Bell contributed to the participants’ lack of knowledge about *Listeria*. When asked the question “What is *Listeria*,” the participants responses varied from it is “basically food poisoning” to it is “salmonella in ice cream.” One participant believed *Listeria* to be either a mold or a fungus, while another admitted she didn’t know anything about *Listeria*, and that she wished she had “Googled it” before the interview. Several participants said *Listeria* only affects pregnant women, the elderly, children, and people who are “sick already.”

Conclusions and Recommendations: Although participants were disappointed in Blue Bell, their disappointment in the brand did not supersede their loyalty. Participants’ perceptions of Blue Bell’s better taste and quality were more important than the risk of contracting a food-borne illness. Providing better food safety education to consumers is recommended to increase awareness of the seriousness of food-borne illness, and this education could start in agricultural education classrooms. Further studies of much larger samples of Blue Bell consumers should include those consumers living near Blue Bell production facilities in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, and Sylacauga, Alabama, to ascertain if brand loyalty correlates with proximity to production facilities. Additionally, Blue Bell has experienced additional food safety issues since this study (Robinson-Jacobs, 2016). Therefore, it would be advantageous to speak with the study participants again, and others, to see if the additional food safety events have affected brand loyalty. Finally, ice cream lacks nutritional value, unlike vegetables, milk, or meat. Therefore, studies could also investigate consumers’ brand loyalty to products considered staples of good nutrition to products considered a “sweet treat.”

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