

**The First 48: The Early Crisis Facebook Response to the Fair Oaks Farms Undercover
Animal Activist Video**

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Introduction

On June 4, 2019 at 1:16 p.m. (EST), the animal rights group, Animal Recovery Mission (ARM) released a video they called “Operation Fair Oaks Farms” (Animal Recovery Mission, 2019). The 12 minute, 23 second video depicted the experience an ARM member had during the time they went undercover as an employee at Fair Oaks Farms (FOF) in 2018. FOF is the largest dairy producer in the state of Indiana, and one of the largest dairy farms in the United States (Fair Oaks Farms, 2019). The video depicts animal abuse, primarily focusing on the abuse of calves.

As crisis communications in agricultural-related crises have shown, (Irlbeck, Jennings, Meyers, Gibson, & Chambers, 2013; Opat, Magness, & Irlbeck, 2018; Palmer, Irlbeck, Meyers, & Chambers, 2013) an organization’s messaging, two-way communication with stakeholders, and involvement with the media can be make-or-break during a crisis situation in terms of keeping/continuing not only customer support and loyalty, but profitability as well.

Today, consumers are less trusting of traditional media, and demand quick and timely responses in real-time and they prefer to have them from the organizations themselves, especially within the first 24 - 48 hours (Fulgenzi, 2018). Many times, the social media platform used most frequently to alert consumers of a crisis is Facebook, which has become a huge sounding board for many of those affected by agriculture crises (Opat et al., 2018). Further, Coombs (2015) points out the value social media holds during a crisis as it gives voices to a variety of stakeholders during a crisis. The AAAE National Research Agenda additionally highlights the need for agriculture to effectively communicate about safety, health, and welfare concerns many consumers have regarding agriculture (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

Although many agricultural organizations tend to avoid being proactive with their crisis communication messages (Eyck, 2000), it is imperative for organizations to communicate immediately and constantly throughout a crisis, even if they have no new information or updates (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). Specifically, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014) urges organizations facing a crisis to be strategic and intentional with their messaging within the first 24-48 hours of the crisis, as this timeframe is the most threatening to the organization because of the level of chaos, public interest, and uncertainty.

“Today, the first 48 hours of a crisis are more critical than ever before” (Fulgenzi, 2018, p. 1). Although much literature has cited the importance of having a crisis communication plan prior to a crisis hitting (Irlbeck et al., 2013; Combs, 2015) this narrative focuses on the crucial first 48-hours of an agricultural crisis, which is something current literature lacks.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore public response to Fair Oaks Farms’ crisis communication on Facebook regarding the leaked animal welfare video.

RO1) Describe public engagement of Fair Oaks Farms’ responses to the animal activist video on Facebook within the first 48 hours of the crisis.

RO2) Describe the sentiment of most relevant comments to Fair Oaks Farms' responses within the first 48 hours of the crisis.

Methods

In order to address the research objectives, a quantitative content analysis was conducted. A researcher-developed codebook was developed to determine descriptive data regarding the posts made by the FOF Facebook page within the first 48 hours of the release of the video from ARM. The codebook identified the number of posts made by the account as well as engagement with each of the posts including reactions, shares, and comments. Further, the top-10 "Most Relevant" comments were content analyzed for sentiment and reactions. Opat, Magenss, and Irlbeck (2018) suggested analyzing the top 10 posts on Facebook when comments ranged in the hundreds or thousands. Further, Steede, Meyers, Li, Irlbeck, and Gearhart (2018) indicated human-coded sentiment more commonly represented true sentiment of social media content than computer coded sentiment.

Screenshots of each post were taken on June 13, 2019 after comments on the original, early posts had died down. Coder training was conducted and the researchers independently coded each post and comment. Coders achieved 100% agreement on each variable.

Results

Within the first 48-hours of the release of the undercover video, FOF released two statements on Facebook. The first statement came at 1:50 p.m. on June 5th, just outside of the 24-hour window. The second statement came at 8:05 a.m. on June 6th. The first statement received 17,000 reactions, 19,000 comments, and 30,000 shares. The second statement received 7,300 reactions, 9,300 comments, and 1,300 shares.

Engagement with the posts varied. Sixty percent of the top comments on the first post were positive toward FOF while 40% were negative. However, on the second post, 90% of comments were negative and only 10% were positive. Reactions to the comments on the first statement were primarily "likes," ranging from 297 "likes" to 2,900 "likes." However; "angry," "love," and "haha" received between 13 – 880 reactions. The second statement received considerably less reactions on the comments ranging from only 8 total "wow" reactions to 1,900 "likes."

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Agriculture and natural resource industries tend to shy away from being active with the mass media and on social media, which can be detrimental to the public's perception of the organization, as often times they will begin to look outside of the organization for more information and news, which may lead them to come across inaccurate information (Eyck, 2000).

Crisis communications should be updated and frequent throughout the first 24-48 hours of an emergency to help mitigate confusion, panic, and further losses (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). By understanding how the public is perceiving crisis issues, messages can be better developed to address the concerns of the public. Practitioners should use sentiment via comments and reactions on social media to guide crisis communication on social media within the critical first 48-hours of an agricultural crisis.

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