

**PRCA Awards 2005**

**Entered by: Weber Shandwick | FCC**

**Campaign: Crisis Management of Banned Food  
Colourant**

**Category: G. Crisis/Issue Management  
Communication**

## A. The Brief

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), an independent, science-based organisation was established in 1998. It is the State body charged with protecting consumer health and consumer interests in relation to food. Its mission is to ensure that food consumed, distributed, marketed or produced in Ireland meets the highest standards of food safety and hygiene. The FSAI has overall statutory responsibility for the enforcement of food safety legislation. Before its establishment, Ireland had a fragmented and disjointed food safety inspectorate with over 40 State and Semi-State organisations holding various responsibilities in this area. The 2,300 staff of these agencies while still employed by the same agency, now work under a service contract agreement with the FSAI, which specifies enforcement objectives, work targets, timeframes etc, for food safety activities and enforcement. The FSAI Act, 1998 also provides for extensive enforcement powers.

In the absence of advertising budgets the FSAI relies heavily on public relations techniques and direct communication vehicles to inform the wider food industry and the general public on a range of food issues.

A core part of the FSAI's work is to initiate national food alerts for Ireland, oversee product recalls and act as the national contact point for receiving and sending notifications to and from the wider European Community through a Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed. The administration system to handle such notifications is robust and operates on a 24 hour, seven-days-a-week basis. Likewise, the public relations function has the ability to operate 24/7.

On Tuesday, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2005, the FSAI received information from its counterpart in the UK that a banned colourant was found in a number of food products and ready-made-meals in the UK and that the affected products could also be available on the Irish market. The substance, Sudan Red 1, an illegal food colourant was banned for use throughout the EU in 2003. Sudan Red 1 is a synthetically produced red dye normally used for colouring solvents, oils, waxes, petrol and shoe and floor polishes – in this case it was used to enhance the colour of chilli powder. The International Agency for Research on Cancer, rates this dye as a "class three" carcinogen, or cancer causing agent. It has no place in the food chain and was illegally used to enhance the colour of chilli powder to increase its commercial value.

Weber Shandwick FCC is the retained PR consultant to the FSAI and, working closely with its press officer, handles all issue management for the FSAI. Our brief on this occasion was to advise on the best communication strategy to inform consumers, industry and media/influencers of the potential presence of Sudan Red 1 in a list of affected food products. In addition, our communications efforts were to assist the product recall process by encouraging consumers to check if they had those products identified and also to alert smaller food businesses to the product recall. In tandem, our role was to assist consumers put the actual health risk posed by this situation in perspective.

This campaign summary deals with the communications actions during this issue management project.

## B. Statement of Objectives

Weber Shandwick's challenge was to devise an immediate comprehensive communications approach with a number of core objectives. They included:

- Effectively informing the general public and the food industry (a fragmented sector with over 30,000 outlets) of the situation, and initiating a national recall of food products on a scale not previously seen in Ireland.
- Informing the general public of the facts of the issue in a measured way, so that it would not overly worry consumers or cause hysteria. Encouraging media likewise to treat the subject responsibly without overly hyping it.
- Protecting the FSAI's reputation as an effective enforcer of food safety legislation and showing that its actions were correct and effective in quickly addressing this food safety issue, and thereby safeguarding public health.
- Encouraging consumers and the food industry to use the FSAI's website and advice telephone line for updates on products and further information.

## C. Programme Planning & Strategy

### Strategy:

On receiving information that a number of products were identified as containing Sudan Red 1 in the UK, the FSAI immediately set about investigating which if any, of these products could be available on the Irish market. At this point in time, the UK authorities did not know the scale of the problem and there was limited information available. It was only known that a UK company, Premier Foods had used the contaminated chilli powder to produce Crosse & Blackwell Worcester sauce. This sauce, in turn, was sold to almost 200 food businesses which used it as an ingredient in about 470 food products. Contaminated food products were then distributed to at least 15 countries around the world – including Ireland. It was decided that a product recall would need to be swiftly undertaken to remove any products identified from the Irish market.

By Thursday evening 17<sup>th</sup> February 2005, it had been assessed that some 350 products on the UK market were affected with 39 of those available in Ireland. However, it was considered that this list was not exhaustive and more products could be found following further investigations.

Weber Shandwick's recommendation to the FSAI at that time was it should be highly proactive in communicating its findings and to put as much information as possible into the public domain as quickly as possible. Further updates as new affected products emerged could be provided, but swift action to inform consumers should be taken at the initial stage. Weber Shandwick advised that public announcements should not be made on suspected products – consumers need lists of actual products otherwise a substantial number of foods would be in question and consumer anxiety and confusion would ensue.

Weber Shandwick began preparing for an announcement the following day Friday 18<sup>th</sup> February. But in the meantime, with the small amount of UK information it had, the FSAI acted immediately to make direct contact with all the major retailers to notify them of this recall in relation to products from Premier Foods UK. It sought their agreement on identifying affected products and removing them from sale. In addition, manufacturers based in Ireland were also contacted. A tremendous level of internal work was carried out by the FSAI to pinpoint accurately which affected products were without doubt available here.

It was apparent that this story had all the elements of 'sensational' if not handled professionally and effectively, and could result in sensationalised media coverage which could mis-communicate important messages to concerned consumers. It required strategic management of media contact and press release placement, as well as consistent messaging for all audiences through all communication vehicles.

Our plan was to be fluid to allow for adaptation to reflect new information coming from the UK, from the FSAI's investigative findings and to take cognisance that hundreds of products could possibly be involved.

A number of planning and information initiatives were undertaken immediately:

### **Planning:**

A crisis team was immediately established with FSAI executives and Weber Shandwick consultants. This team discussed, planned and agreed all actions to manage the issue. The Authority's key personnel and its public relations consultants were ready for potential intense media relations from Friday 18th.

**Ongoing Briefing Meetings:** The team met initially as soon as information on the issue was received. We urged that the FSAI use media updates, its website and advice line as key mediums to communicate with consumers. Daily crisis team meetings were held between the FSAI and Weber Shandwick to provide updates on the situation and to implement actions. This was supplemented with update content phone calls, emails etc.

**Material Developments:** A question and answers document was prepared for response to all media and industry questions for internal usage. A press statement was prepared. Detailed phone logs were to be undertaken to track records of calls and on information provided to all relevant parties including the retailers, trade bodies as well media and interest parties.

**Contact lists:** A number of lists of contact details were prepared. A crisis team list with all key personnel contact numbers and as well as other crucial numbers such as multiples, distributors etc was developed. In addition, Weber Shandwick compiled a core media list of those journalists it would brief on a one to one basis about the story. These were selected on a basis, where possible, of having some previous knowledge of food issues and health/food product recalls.

**Advice Line:** Weber Shandwick advised the FSAI to arrange for its telephone advice line to be manned for potential weekend usage. Arrangements were made for additional personnel to be available to man the lines for an anticipated surge in queries.

**Website:** The FSAI's website developer was also put on alert mode for initiating the website to quickly provide updated information and product lists as required.

**Verbal Scripts:** Weber Shandwick held internal team meetings on an ongoing basis during the week of media activity that followed the press announcement. We shared media reactions, frequently asked questions, best methods of explaining general and specific issues, and probable media outcomes expected.

**Key Message Development:** The FSAI and Weber Shandwick agreed five messages which needed to appear across the media and in other information channels.

- Sudan Red 1, an industrial dye, has been banned as a food colourant throughout Europe since 2003 due to its carcinogenic properties. It has been found in a number of food products on the Irish market. A full list of the implicated products are available from the FSAI, its website and advice line.

- Consumers should not be overly concerned in relation to their health. Sudan Red 1 has been found to have carcinogenic properties; however, it would have to be consumed over a long period of time in order to pose a significant health risk.
- The FSAI is calling on retailers and manufacturers to remove implicated products from the shelves immediately. It is also reminding industry of its legal obligation to do so.
- Consumers are advised to check if they have these products in their home. If they have them they should not eat them. They should be thrown out or brought back to the retailer.
- The FSAI is and will continue to act swiftly to have affected products removed from the food chain.

**Alert:** An alert notification was issued by the FSAI to retailers, manufacturers and the Environmental Health Officers in the Health Service Executive who have responsibility for inspecting food service premises. This alert notification was published on the FSAI website on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

**Spokespeople:** It was decided that to keep the information and messaging consistent that three key spokespeople would be made available to media. Dr John O'Brien, FSAI, Chief Executive would be the lead spokesperson. He would be supported by two scientific specialists namely Alan Reilly, Deputy Chief Executive and Jeff Moon, Chief Specialist Environmental Health. Weber Shandwick senior consultants would answer as many general queries as possible so as not to overburden the spokespeople.

**Practice Sessions:** Weber Shandwick prepared pre-devised core messages and made these available to the spokespeople. Media practice sessions were held on Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> February with Weber Shandwick consultants to ensure that these individuals were fluent in their answers and consistent in messaging.

### **Management:**

**Friday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2005:** Weber Shandwick drafted a press statement on the evening of Thursday, 17<sup>th</sup> February when the FSAI had confirmation of an initial 30 plus food products containing Sudan Red 1 available on the Irish market. (*See appendix 1*). By comparison, over 350 were found on the UK market initially. A full list of products was compiled and the FSAI's website prepared to carry all information. It was to be released as soon as possible on Friday once all elements were in place.

Weber Shandwick selected high impact national media channels to communicate to the general public on this issue. Special emphasis was placed on securing radio and television coverage where the large numbers of the general public would be informed quickly. A highly intensive level of media relations and media contact was made by Weber Shandwick on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> to ensure the story was aired on as many mediums as possible. Weber Shandwick consultants made pre announcement contact with key selected journalists to verbally brief them on the situation. In particular, RTE TV news was given advance notice of a major statement emanating in the afternoon so that they would have ample time to secure appropriate visual footage in time to make 6pm news.

Weber Shandwick strove to secure as much national media coverage as possible and to ensure that all coverage contained key messages particularly those of allaying fears and putting the risk in perspective for consumers. Weber Shandwick held hourly internal meetings to provide updates on media relations and personnel proactively spoke to each and every journalist (some 20 individuals) to seek their understanding that whilst this was a very serious story, our objective was not to have consumers panicked. We sought their agreement that they would portray the facts without hyping the story. The media acted responsibly in this regard and coverage of the issue was both balanced and fair.

We proactively set up interviews with Dr O'Brien for RTE TV's 6.00pm and 9.00pm TV news, RTE Radio's 5-7 *Live* and Today FM's *The Last Word* to seek to reach as many viewers and listeners as possible. In addition, Sky News Ireland and all local radio stations carried the food warning through interviews and reports. Weber Shandwick arranged one to one interviews with Dr O'Brien for all national newspapers. Many conversations and repeat calls took place during the day and evening with journalists to ensure messaging was correct and information up to date. Weber Shandwick's role was to be not just logging calls, but an integral part of the media briefing team who provided quick speedy detailed information to media, so we were could be the coalface and not just conduits in this crisis. The story was front page news in the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> February with all other national print media covering it in their early pages. The FSAI's key core messages were carried in media placements. (See appendix 4 - sample media coverage).

#### **Post Announcement:**

Media queries were handled throughout the weekend by Weber Shandwick – with media requiring updates. The FSAI staff sought to identify further products in the knowledge that the initial list of 39 would not be exhaustive. By Monday, 21<sup>st</sup> February the list of products had grown to 67 and extensive national broadcast and print interviews were arranged again to seek to impart this new information to the general public. We had consistently briefed media that this would be a moving story, and that additional affected products lists would not portray slow action more as it would portray pro-activity and transparency.

Our goal was to reiterate the message that the FSAI was doing everything in its power to contain the situation by working with retailers to ensure the products were being removed from shelves as soon as they were identified. The FSAI was also mindful to allay consumer fears by ensuring that the updated list was available on its website and by encouraging media to publish the list, which the main national newspapers did on Tuesday, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2005 (See appendix 4 – sample media coverage). In addition, a decision was taken to reinforce the message to consumers, encouraging them to actively look for and discard affected products in their homes. Further media outreach was undertaken and this consumer message was strongly reflected in print coverage and in broadcast coverage on RTE's 6.00pm and 9.00pm TV news that evening and again on TV3's 5.30pm and 6.30pm news reports. Furthermore, consumer TV programmes such as *The Afternoon Show* (RTE) and *Ireland AM* (TV3) and radio programmes with a large audience among homemakers such as *The Gerry Ryan Show* (2FM) and the *Marian Finucane Show* (RTE Radio One) also ran discussion items on the issue, which served to reinforce the message to consumers.

In the days that followed, just one further product was identified and as the FSAI had successfully recalled all products, the media interest in the issue subsided to a trickle by Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> February. The speed with which the situation was resolved was helped in no small measure by the exposure it received, ensuring that consumers and industry were fully informed at all times. There was never an impression given or taken that any information was being withheld; media knew they were being told as soon as we knew in every ongoing part of the emerging story. Therefore it was a successful, highly visible, focussed message and speedily concluded project.

Within just seven days, the biggest food product recall ever to take place in Ireland was over. The FSAI were publicly commended by the Minister of State, Sean Power T.D., Department of Health and Children for its role in managing and resolving the issue.

## D. THE MEASUREMENT STAGE

- All press coverage contained the core messages the FSAI needed to communicate with limited sensationalism, particularly given that additional products were being identified day by day.
- This was the largest ever product recall and one of the most important food safety issues ever experienced in Ireland. However, effective management of the message and a full and transparent communications machine resulted in a period of activity of less than one week.
- A priority was for newspapers to publish the list of products editorially and this was achieved in key national newspapers with the FSAI website address and advice line also included. Radio and television coverage directed consumers to the FSAI website and advice line for the available list.
- Consumers took the advice of accessing the FSAI's advice line and website for updates as new products emerged. Over 1,200 calls were made by consumers to the FSAI's advice line during the period. The FSAI's website received some 67,000 visits in the seven days directly following the initial announcement. This compares to just under 6,000 for the previous week. Tracking of the website showed visitors viewed the product listings, press release and food alert section relating to Sudan Red 1.
- The target of gaining widespread quality national media coverage was achieved. The Sudan Red 1 food safety incident, the FSAI's position and key messages were communicated to audiences through national newspapers as well national television, radio and local radio. Nine national TV news interviews and reports, 63 radio interviews and news items of which ten were national and 54 were regional were secured between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Feb 2005. In addition, there were 52 newspaper articles as well significant online and trade coverage. *(See appendix 3 & 4 for media matrix and message highlighting).*
- Effective crisis management ensured that the FSAI's role in this issue was seen as transparent, constructive, swift and authoritative, thus preserving its strong image and reputation as the consumer protector. In comparison, the Food Standards Agency in the UK was heavily criticised by the media for its slow reaction to the crisis in their market.
- There were seven Parliamentary Questions in relation to the incident. A Seanad debate on 3<sup>rd</sup> March praised the role of the FSAI in terms of its actions to speedily undertake the recall and manage the issue successfully. *(See appendix 5)*

## E. BUDGET

Over the campaign period, it is estimated that the communications spend on the campaign was in the region of €7,000 including consultancy fees and administration expenses.

## F. Appendices

- Appendix 1 - Press release
- Appendix 2 - Lists of products containing Sudan Red 1  
(Dated and listed with additions as more identified during process).
- Appendix 3 - Media coverage matrix
- Appendix 4 - Sample press coverage & video of sample broadcast coverage
- Appendix 5 - Seanad statement