



BC ASSOCIATION OF
FARMERS' MARKETS

Navigating and Communicating During A Crisis

Is it a Crisis?	4
Why Plan For A Crisis?.....	4
If There Is A Crisis At Your Market	5
Establish Crisis Response Team.....	5
Formulate Response/Message	5
The Four Golden Rules in Communicating Your Response.....	6
The Three Golden Rules of Crisis Communication.....	6
How to React in the Right Way Online	6
Social Media Rules	7
Responding to A Crisis Elsewhere – With A Connection To Your Market.....	7
After a Crisis, Gaining Confidence Back	8
Being Proactive – How to Build Trust Outside of a Crisis.....	9
Decreasing the Likelihood of A Crisis	9
Key Stakeholders	11
Industry Stakeholders	12
Checklist – Provincial/Regional	13
Protocol and Checklist for BC Association of Farmers Markets.....	13
Checklist - Local	15
Protocol and Checklist for Farmers Markets.....	15
Operational Documents.....	17
Appendix A: Issue Management Chain of Contact Log	17
Appendix B: Incident Description Record	18
Appendix C: Industry Stakeholder Contact Log.....	19
Appendix D: Media Communications Log	20
Appendix E: External Communication Log.....	21

Is it a Crisis?

A crisis is any event that threatens to harm, damage or disrupt people, property, business, reputations and revenue.

What you are facing may not yet be a crisis, but it could escalate into one.

“A crisis situation is any situation that has reached a critical phase or an emotionally significant phase that severely disrupts the routine daily operations of the St. Louis Produce Market. It may occur at any time or any place within the market.”¹

Clarence Hughes, St. Louis Produce Market

Why Plan For A Crisis?

“The initial response to a crisis is critical. What occurs during the first hour or two provides the best opportunity for control of the situation and the internal and external perceptions of the market. The success of handling an incident is dependent on the actions taken immediately after the incident occurs. Over-reaction should be favored as the initial response. Implementing plans before the severity of the incident is confirmed may prevent the situation from spiraling out of control.”²

The St. Louis Produce Market Disaster Control Plan

¹ New York Farmers Market Manager Training Manual, page 90
http://www.nyfarmersmarket.com/NYFM_Training_Manual.pdf

² *ibid* page 91

If There Is A Crisis At Your Market

Establish Crisis Response Team

Once you are ready to begin communicating with the public/media, you must determine who will do this. Your organization or business should have a Crisis Response Team which can prepare guidelines to follow at the appropriate time. The committee should designate a spokesperson, delineate who will handle what and make certain that EVERYONE in your organization knows WHO is responsible for responding to such inquiries. Your Crisis Communications Team should consist of the market manager (i.e., the “person at the top”), other key staff members, and a communications professional, or at least an individual who can interface with the media in an organized, strategic manner. (See the conclusion of this document for resources to help with public relations training).

Formulate Response/Message

The first, and by far the most essential, action is to take the time to formulate your response or message. This must be prepared in writing and shared with anyone who is expected to deliver that message. This allows you to be PROACTIVE, because it’s your chance to shape the message that will go out to the public about the crisis.

However, the media (and now consumers, through social media), will put their own “spin” on the issue, but you have control over how you REACT. You can shift the message back to the most relevant and positive elements you can. Finally, there is an opportunity to take PREVENTATIVE communicative measures before a crisis occurs, that will lessen the negative impact of a food safety crisis (see SITUATION #4).

Why Be Proactive?

If a food safety crisis does occur in connection with your farmers market, your first instinct may be to hope it goes away – quickly. You may make excuses as to why you don’t need to address the situation with the public, but here are a few reasons why you must take a proactive approach!

You have an opportunity to control the message. Give a thorough explanation of what happened, when, and where – *and what you’re doing to fix it*. Get all parties involved to participate in responding and make certain that everyone gets your message at the same time and directly from you. Would you rather have an irate customer or a headline-hungry journalist describe the situation?

Your organization is building its public image as responsible and customer-focused. By sharing complete, truthful information with the public/media, you are showing that you’re a serious organization that cares about its customers and public wellbeing.

Wouldn’t YOU want to know? If you purchased greens from the same farmer each week, wouldn’t you want to know that last week’s produce may have been contaminated? That way, you could dispose of any remaining product. Be ethical and responsible: *That’s at the core of effective crisis communications.*

The Four Golden Rules in Communicating Your Response

1. Be consistent
2. Be truthful and transparent
3. Take ownership of the issue
4. Display caring, concern and genuine sympathy

The Three Golden Rules of Crisis Communication

1. **Respond Swiftly** – In today's world, communications occur in real-time thanks to social media (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). The longer you wait, the more of a chance for someone else to tell the story.
2. **Know the Facts** - Do not respond to hearsay or rumor. Provide a complete, clear picture of exactly what happened – no matter how uncomfortable that may be. If you are confronted with information you had not heard or cannot verify, explain that you will respond to a particular issue in your next update.
3. **Be Accessible** – Ultimately, crisis communications is a conversation. Don't just blast out a dry "statement." Customers and the general public may want more information, so be sure that an actual person – not a voice recording – is accessible during normal business hours.

How to React in the Right Way Online

With the rise in popularity of social media, the public is now just as powerful as mainstream media. A negative comment on a Facebook page about your market can be just as devastating to your business as an article in the newspaper. There are minimal checks and balances in the online world. For example, viewers of a YouTube video can leave comments and add their own personal take on the situation – both positive and negative. *It's your responsibility to join in the conversation by monitoring where your name appears online – and then responding to user comments (although do ignore blatantly hostile comments).*

Social Media Rules

- **DO ignore overtly hostile comments** – these are usually deleted by the media in which they were posted, especially if they contain profanity or slanderous statements.
- **DO respond to concerns.** If someone wonders what your farmers market is doing about the situation, identify yourself as a representative of the market (you do not need to give details as to exactly who you are) and give them a brief overview of what you're doing to correct the situation. You may also refer them to your website if you have more details there.
- **DO NOT comment on hypothetical events or events/examples that have nothing to do with your business.** If there is a "mad cow disease" in another country, you cannot possibly understand the elements of what may have happened. If pressed, tell anyone that you will respond when all the facts become available and suggest that they may need to follow up with others more familiar with the specific situation.
- **DO NOT assume someone's culpability as this may subject you to legal action.** For instance, you cannot blame the water supply or the packaging on a food safety situation at your farmers market unless you are prepared to show proof. You CAN point out there are many factors that need to be assessed and understood, but be clear that you/we/they do not KNOW for certain what is involved.
- **DO NOT get into a lengthy back and forth discussion with anyone in an online environment.** Suggest that the person contact you to discuss the matter in more detail. Remember, be transparent and give them your phone number or an email address and hours you are available. If that person does not contact you directly, but continues to post publicly, remind them (and all readers) ONCE that you have invited them in to discuss the issue and then DO NOT respond to them again.

Responding to A Crisis Elsewhere – With A Connection To Your Market

When a crisis occurs related to food safety, many reporters in the news media may contact local farmers markets for commentary. It is advisable to refrain from commenting on the exact food safety situation, but you can feel free to share what YOU do at your market to keep customers safe.

In fact, when a big news story hits about a food safety outbreak that references a product you have for sale, create your own "positive" news by sending out a press release that reassures the public that YOUR product is safe, because of the proactive food safety measures in place at your markets.

After a Crisis, Gaining Confidence Back

Once a food safety crisis occurs, and the public hears about it, you'll have to work hard to retain existing customers and continue attracting new ones. Below are a few tactics for rebuilding customer confidence in your organization.

Open your doors: Invite the community to literally see for themselves how your market is now not only completely "food safe" for the public, but is a great place to be. Put out a brief sheet on how you've made changes in policy, and offer a tour of your market. Shift focus to the positive elements of your market by having a vendor scavenger hunt where customers can get to know different vendors.

Create a fun, upbeat event with live music or children's games if possible. You're not ignoring what's happened; you're acknowledging it but moving on and celebrating the strength of your organization! Also, be sure to interact with as many people as possible. This reminds your customers that you're human, and mistakes happen – it's easier to forgive a person, harder to forgive an "organization."

Do something new: So the media has put you under a microscope after a food safety crisis or food safety breach? Make the most of it. Use the increased interest in your market to show the community that you're a strong organization. Start a blog for your market: each week interview one of your vendors.

Consider an e-mailed or mailed newsletter to share all the good that goes on at your organization. If you are currently engaged in social media or email, try adding a contest, a new feature in your newsletter, a new feature for your farm or business that will lead to new people to "friend" you or give you their e-mail addresses.

Support the positive, minimize the negative: There is a lot that happens to assure food safety and quality in everything you do; show that in what you project. "We will continue to promote and advance safety and safe practices at our business and to make certain that our customers and friends get the very best we have to offer."

Be patient: A food safety crisis is serious. But it is a single event, not a defining trait. With consistent, positive, transparent communication, overtime your organization will re-gain its customers' confidence. Focus on regaining customer confidence by doing what you do best, and eventually customers will come back.

Being Proactive – How to Build Trust Outside of a Crisis

As the saying goes: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. By following the guidelines established in the “Guideline for the Sale of Foods at Temporary Food Markets” as well as the Food Safe and MarketSafe on-line and in-person programs, your market will be taking action to reduce the chance of a food safety crisis. However, there are communicative tactics that can be taken NOW to lessen the blow of a crisis in the future, should one ever occur.

Send a press release to local media announcing your organization’s participation in the “Guideline for the Sale of Foods at Temporary Food Markets” program, highlight how important it is to your organization to serve your customers with a quality product – that’s also safe.

Create signage to hang at your organization announcing that food safety measures are in place.

Produce additional signage that encourages safe customer practices: “Four Rules of Food Safety: Clean, Separate, Cook, Chill.”

Consider setting up a food safety table at your market where you can pass out information sheets on safe transport, storage, preparation, and handling of market items. If you’re a vendor, consider including an information sheet with each purchase, specific to the product you’re offering. At the very least, place a placard with succinct food safety guidelines near your cash register.

Launch a “Food Safety Awareness” Day/Week/Month that highlights the preventative measures your customers can take to avoid eating unsafe food. Include demonstrations of proper handling and storage.

If you have a Twitter account, Facebook page, or blog, use these online spaces to stress to the public that you are dedicated to food safety. Invite their comments and perspective and instruct them on proper food handling at your business and once consumers bring products into their own homes.

Decreasing the Likelihood of A Crisis

On a regular basis, check in with your vendors, board and staff to identify areas where your farmers’ market may be vulnerable to a crisis.

You may be able to remove the possibility of a crisis by dealing with potential problems.

Prioritize critical issues by magnitude and likelihood of occurrence.

Proactive – Be the First to Know

Set up a “Google Alert” at www.google.com/alerts, and enter your farmers’ markets’ name and your vendor’s names.

This free service will alert you immediately if anything related to food safety occurs on the Web – sending you a link to the posted article, video, image and even a Twitter mention.

Also, even if a food safety breach has not occurred, yet a “rumor” is going around in the social media realm, you’ll be AWARE so you can REACT in the right way.

Create an alert

1. Visit [Google Alerts](#).
2. In the “Create an alert about” box, enter the words you want to get email notifications for.
3. Click **Show options** to say how often you get alerts, what types of results you want to get, and more.
4. Click **Create Alert**.
5. Once your alert is set up, you’ll start getting emails any time we find new search results for your keywords.

You can also create an alert by clicking the + next to any of the suggested topics on the Google Alerts page.

Media Training

It can be intimidating to speak to the media. Staff and board can take media training in order to feel more comfortable talking to the media.

Key Stakeholders

As contact details can change – keep this document updated on a regular basis!

Organization	Contact	Contact Details	Reference
Farmers Market	Market Manager, Board President		
BC Association of Farmers Markets	Executive Director, Communications Manager		BCAFM can participate in your crisis team or consult.
Local Health Authority	Environmental Health Officer (EHO)		There is an EHO who is responsible for each farmers market in regards to food safety.
The Cooperators	BCAFM liaison		Provider of farmers market liability and directors and officers insurance for BCAF markets.
BC Agriculture Council	Communications Manager		For animal and human health safety issues
BC Ministry of Agriculture	Government Communications Liaison		Resource for animal health safety issues
BC Centre for Disease Control	Food Safety Specialists		They're the contact for farmers' market related issues For human health safety issues and for guidance on what to do next.
BC Ministry of Agriculture	Industry Development Officer		For support

Industry Stakeholders

The BC Agriculture Council is comprised of 30 member associations. If the crisis involves one of these agriculture sectors, the association may have a role in your plan.

Organization	Contact Details
BC Blueberry Council BC Broiler Hatching Egg Producers' Association BC Cattlemen's Association BC Cherry Association BC Chicken Growers' Association BC Dairy Association BC Egg Producers' Association BC Fruit Growers' Association BC Grain Producers' Association BC Grapegrowers' Association BC Greenhouse Growers' Association BC Landscape & Nursery Association BC Pork Producers' Association BC Potato & Vegetable Growers' Association BC Poultry Association BC Strawberry Growers' Association BC Turkey Grower's Association BC Wine Grape Council Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia F.A.R.M. (Food and Agriculture Responsibility Members') Community Council Fraser Valley Cole Crop Growers' Association Fraser Valley Peas, Bush Beans and Corn Growers' Association Horse Council British Columbia Peace Region Forage Seed Association Raspberry Industry Development Council United Flower Growers' CO-OP	Refer to the BC Agriculture Council's website

This guide was adapted by the BC Association of Farmers Markets, with permission, from the manual "Crisis Communications Guide" published by Farmers Market Federation New York and Cornell University Cooperative Extension Jefferson County in August 2011.

Checklist – Provincial/Regional Protocol and Checklist for BC Association of Farmers Markets

Steps	Action	Notes and Reference	Who
<input type="checkbox"/>	As the situation is identified, set up media alerts to gather further details Ask stakeholders such as BCAC to forward media alerts, which includes radio and TV reports	To set up a media alert, page 10	Manager of Membership and Communications
<input type="checkbox"/>	Communicate with the staff and board immediately, convene a conference call with key board member and or stakeholders members.	Don't wait to find out if this issue will turn into a crisis. Share your concerns with your leadership team even if you are not sure this is a crisis situation. It is preferable to be overcautious in crisis situations. Stakeholders list, page 11	Executive Director
<input type="checkbox"/>	Assemble and review relevant reports, stories, data and comments. Contact subject market and/or vendor to get further details		Executive Director and Managers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Based on intensity of incident, identify response team	Establishing a response team, page 5	The response team will typically include BCAFME and Managers, BCAFME board member(s). The response team may include, in a consultative manner, either a farmers market representative and/or an industry stakeholder
<input type="checkbox"/>	Based on information, determine what level of communications the incident requires.	Formulating a response, page 5 Responding to a crisis elsewhere, page Error! Bookmark not defined.	Response team

<input type="checkbox"/>	Develop messaging	Based on Response, create a backgrounder and talking points	Consider consulting with industry colleagues to help develop messaging. Industry stakeholders, page 12	Drafted by Manager of Membership and Communications with inputs from response team.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Media Queries	Designate BCAFM spokesperson Prepare backgrounder/points for key markets	Media may contact BCAFM directly or member markets or market vendors Tips on communications, page 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response team to identify spokesperson • BCAFM to advise key markets on how to handle media queries (include in briefing)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Communicating with Members	Provide member markets with ongoing updates as determined by response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider protocols to protect internal/confidential material • Consider contact methods of list-serve, newsletter, direct emails or phone calls 	Prepared by Manager of Membership and Communications, distributed by BCAFM staff
<input type="checkbox"/>	Evaluation of Response	Review the outcome of the situation and the impact of the response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following up with markets and vendors for feedback • Report prepared for BCAFM board Communicating after the crisis to gain confidence back, page 8 	ED and Managers

Checklist - Local Protocol and Checklist for Farmers Markets

	Steps	Action	Notes	Who
<input type="checkbox"/>	Monitor	As the situation is identified, set up media alerts to gather further details	Depending on the size of your media market, this may involve setting up something such as a Google Alert, or simply monitoring the local paper and radio. To set up a media alert, see page 10	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Communicate	Communicate with the staff and board immediately	Don't wait to find out if this issue will turn into a crisis. Share your concerns with your leadership team even if you are not sure this is a crisis situation. It is preferable to be overcautious in crisis situations.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Research	Assemble and review relevant reports, stories, data and comments. Contact subject vendor/customer to get further details		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Identify Response Team	Based on intensity of incident, identify response team	Establishing a response team, page Error! <i>Bookmark not defined.</i>	Typically this would include the market manager and a board member. You are encouraged to involve the BCAF office
<input type="checkbox"/>	Determine Response	Based on information, determine what level of communications the incident requires.	Formulating a response, page 5 Responding to a crisis elsewhere, page 7	Response team
<input type="checkbox"/>	Develop messaging	Based on Response, create a backgrounder and talking points	Consider consulting with industry colleagues to help develop messaging. Industry stakeholders, page 12	Response team

<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Media Queries</p>	<p>Designate spokesperson Prepare backgrounder/points for spokesperson</p>	<p>Media may contact market, vendors or BCAFM Tips for talking with the media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response team to identify spokesperson • BCAFM is able to provide spokesperson with limited media training on how to handle media queries
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Communicating with Members</p>	<p>Provide relevant stakeholder (customers, vendors, board) with ongoing updates as determined by response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider protocols to protect internal/confidential material • Consider contact methods of list-serve, newsletter, direct emails or phone calls 	<p>As identified by response team</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Evaluation of Response</p>	<p>Review the outcome of the situation and the impact of the response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following up with stakeholders for feedback • Submit summary report for BCAFM <p><i>Communicating after the crisis to gain confidence back, page 8</i></p>	

Operational Documents

Appendix A: Issue Management Chain of Contact Log

	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:

Appendix B: Incident Description Record

When an issue transpires, it is very beneficial to track the chain of response for future reflection and increased organizational ability to deal with future issues.

Date	Detailed Incident Description	Steps Taken	Follow Up
			By: Action:

Appendix C: Industry Stakeholder Contact Log

This records the pre-established stakeholder group chain of contact.

In preparation for any potential incidents, fill out this section with your applicable regional and provincial contacts. Include BCAFm weekend staff contact, Centre for Disease Control contact, police, fire department, and a few regional media contacts.

Date Created: **Jan 15, 2016**

Date Revised: **Feb 25, 2016**

Date	Caller	Topic	Follow Up
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:

Appendix D: Media Communications Log

This log records all telephone calls from the media inquiring about the crisis. This will help to ensure that the many callbacks required are not overlooked. It will also assist in the post-crisis analysis.

Date Created: *Jan 15, 2016*

Date Revised: *Feb 25, 2016*

Date	Caller	Topic	Follow Up
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:

Appendix E: External Communication Log

This log records all telephone calls from other parties inquiring about the crisis. This will help to ensure that the many callbacks required are not overlooked. It will also assist in the post-crisis analysis.

Date Created: *Jan 15, 2016*

Date Revised: *Feb 25, 2016*

Date	Caller	Topic	Follow Up
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
	Name: Title: Company: Telephone:		By: Action:
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