

Discussion Topics and Background for  
FDA's Risk Communication Advisory Committee  
November 2, 2012

Given the vast amount of food-related information in the media and on the Internet, the FDA has heard from consumers that it can be confusing to know what to do or believe with respect to food consumption and protecting or promoting one's health. One concern related to consumers being inundated with health-related information is "message fatigue" – a phenomenon whereby people selectively tune out certain messages, including risk messages, largely because they grow tired of receiving so much information. We would like to explore to what extent message fatigue and related communication barriers may affect consumers' exposure to and acceptance of FDA messages related to food safety and nutrition.

A broad objective of this discussion is to identify and explore specific information, ideas, and suggestions that can assist the agency in developing a research agenda related to a variety of potential communication challenges and solutions. The agency is particularly interested in identifying approaches for determining, distinguishing, and understanding communication factors that may relate or contribute to consumer fatigue, confusion, or misunderstanding in response to food safety and nutrition information. The agency seeks input about existing research literature and data that pertain to distinct yet interrelated communication challenges outlined in the questions that follow. The agency also seeks feedback on what future research may be most needed to enhance its efforts in assuring that consumers have access to useful, high-quality information about food safety and nutrition.

Listed below are the agency's proposed questions for the committee. Where relevant, examples of prior research, food safety and nutrition topics, and past agency experiences are briefly described to illustrate key concepts that may assist the committee in better understanding some of the agency's perspectives and challenges.

- 1) Dr. William Hallman and his colleague, Dr. Cara Cuite, have authored a comprehensive overview of food recalls and the communication considerations involved in such events (report available at: [http://foodpolicy.rutgers.edu/docs/news/Impr\\_Food\\_Recall\\_%20Comm\\_FPI\\_2010.pdf](http://foodpolicy.rutgers.edu/docs/news/Impr_Food_Recall_%20Comm_FPI_2010.pdf)).

The authors called attention to the potential for consumers to grow fatigued or confused about food recalls over time:

"...well-publicized foodborne illness outbreaks involve long periods of investigation into the source of the problem. As a result of the evolving story, multiple communications are required....Consider that when new information about a particular foodborne illness outbreak and associated food recalls are

released over time, the public, and the media, will experience some degree of fatigue with the story. Unfortunately, after the initial news stories are released, new details about the contaminated products may be ignored by both the media and the public. Instead, later news coverage is likely to focus on other issues, including perceived responsibility for the contamination, stories about those made sick and the impacts of the illness on their lives. While such stories may keep the outbreak or recall in the news, they often fail to continue to provide essential information to consumers about the products involved, how to identify them, or what to do with them.” (p. 6)

- a. What data or research on food recall fatigue, or related challenges, does the agency most need to enhance and improve its communication activities in the future?
  - b. What measurement or research approaches might be most effective and efficient for assessing the presence of fatigue or related communication problems as articulated by Hallman and Cuite?
  - c. What measurement or research approaches might be most effective and efficient for assessing consumers’ actions (or inaction) in response to FDA messages, and the reasons thereof?
- 2) One primary difference between nutrition information and food recall information is that nutrition communication is not typically associated with the immediacy that may characterize some food recall events. Nevertheless, communications in these two domains share similarities, such as the influence of media, the presence and activities of different communicators, uncertain and changing information, and a large volume of information that varies in its reliability.
- a. What are the best practices for communicating in an environment where there are multiple communicators and/or inconsistent messages? What data or research will best assist the agency in understanding how this communication context may affect consumer understanding and acceptance of FDA’s messages about routine food safety information and nutrition?
  - b. What are the best practices for communicating information as scientific knowledge is updated?
  - c. What considerations should the agency bear in mind when public perceptions of an issue depart from what scientific evidence would suggest? For example, consumers may be exposed to health claims about the benefits of some types of dietary supplements, but these claims may have weak or equivocal evidence to support them. The agency has found that consumers are not always sensitive to the quality of available

scientific evidence. What strategies could the agency consider for increasing consumers' use of credible food-related information?

- 3) The agency is often responsible for communicating technical concepts to consumers. One example of such a concept is the Percent Daily Value (%DV). FDA has explained that %DV can be used to compare products to see which foods are higher or lower in nutrients, to help distinguish food claims such as "reduced fat" vs. "light" or "nonfat," and to make dietary tradeoffs (see fact sheet at <http://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm079449.htm>; additional information available at <http://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/NFLPM/ucm274593.htm#see6>)
  - a. How can we identify and assess the main barriers to uptake and acceptance of FDA's technical messages?
  - b. What approaches could FDA consider for identifying and assessing which barriers are most common among our audiences? What, if anything, could FDA consider doing to overcome those barriers?

- 4) FDA's Health and Diet Survey (HDS) tracks national change of Americans' attitudes, awareness, knowledge, and behavior regarding various elements of nutrition and physical activity.  
<http://www.fda.gov/Food/LabelingNutrition/ucm202780.htm>

FDA's Food Safety Survey (FSS) is a nationally representative survey of consumers' self-reported behaviors, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about food safety. The questionnaires are designed to measure trends in consumer food safety practices, such as hand and cutting board washing; preparing and consuming risky foods; and using food thermometers. Results of the FSS help inform FDA's efforts aimed at improving consumer food safety behaviors.  
<http://www.fda.gov/Food/ScienceResearch/ResearchAreas/ConsumerResearch/ucm259074.htm>

- a. In order to monitor communication factors and influences that may affect consumer exposure, uptake, and acceptance of FDA communications about food safety and nutrition, how might FDA use tracking surveys, such as the HDS and FSS, to evaluate and improve communications over time?
  - b. What other methods or research approaches for evaluating consumers' responses to FDA communications might be most effective and efficient for the agency to consider?
- 5) We hear repeated recommendations related to targeting/tailoring of messages, but many of these kinds of "best practices" can be challenging for the agency to implement or pursue. How can the effectiveness of communication efforts be

documented and improved? What communication “success stories” can we investigate in order to generate ideas/strategies for overcoming our internal and external challenges?

- 6) Although distinct from fatigue associated with communication, we are aware that “prevention fatigue,” i.e., fatigue associated with maintaining healthy or vigilant behaviors over time, might also pose barriers to consumer uptake of health-related messages. For example, it appears to be difficult for food preparers to maintain a high degree of attention and vigilance in familiar, habitual situations involving daily food preparation activities. Moreover, comparisons of data obtained via observational versus self-report methods suggest that food preparers may not be fully aware of their inconsistent vigilance. As Fein et al. (2011) observed:

“Observational studies of in-home food handling practices have revealed consistently that many mistakes in food preparation occur because preparers fail to recognize in their immediate preparation situations hazards they know about in general. When reminded or primed about potential hazards, people perform more safely. Mistakes in food preparation appear to be more a problem of attention and vigilance than of knowledge or beliefs. Food preparers, like drivers, are certain they are safe and may reduce their vigilance in familiar circumstances where they are comfortable and secure with their usual practices. Unlike drivers, food preparers do not have a carefully engineered signage system to call their attention to hazards in the immediate situation, and ‘near misses’ are not obvious as they are when driving.” (p. 1521)

- a. What additional research could shed light on this phenomenon?
- b. As research continues to identify situated cues that might help improve food handling in the home, what communications or outreach strategies could FDA use to encourage consumers to employ those cues?

Additional Reading - optional:

Fein, SB, Lando, AM, Levy, AS, Teisl, MF, Noblet, C. Trends in U.S. Consumers’ Safe Handling and Consumption of Food and Their Risk Perceptions, 1988 through 2010. *Journal of Food Protection*, 2011;74(9): 1513–1523.

Labiner-Wolfe, J, Lin, C-TJ., Verrill, L. Effect of Low-carbohydrate Claims on Consumer Perceptions about Food Products’ Healthfulness and Helpfulness for Weight Management. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*. 2010;42: 315-320.

Guthrie, JF, Derby, BM, Levy, AL. Chapter 13: What People Know and Do Not Know about Nutrition, in *America’s Eating Habits: Changes and Consequences*, E. Frazao (ed)., Agriculture Information Bulletin No. (AIB750), May 1999, see link [http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/91066/aib750m\\_1\\_.pdf](http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/91066/aib750m_1_.pdf)

Andrews, JC, Burton, S, Kees, J. Is Simpler Always Better? Consumer Evaluations of Front-of-Package Nutrition Symbols. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*. 2011;30(2):175-190