WHAT BRANDS CAN LEARN FROM THE CINNAMON TOAST CRUNCH SHRIMP MOMENT

A more effective first response may have helped General Mills move on

By Jessica Wohl. Published on March 26, 2021.
General Mills faced a communications crisis this week when a comedian with a fishy name — and a large Twitter following — claimed he’d found shrimp tails in a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, one of the country’s top-selling cereals.

Jensen Karp tweeted about the curious discovery on March 22. He has continued to share his own comments and images, extending a situation the company would prefer to move past. It’s the kind of event that brands must be prepared to handle with clear communications and response strategies in place that are shared across the organization, experts say.

The company’s early response to Karp was not handled as well as it could have been, concedes General Mills Chief Communications Officer Jano Cabrera.
Karp's tweet directed at the Cinnamon Toast Crunch handle on March 22 suggested that the writer and comedian wasn’t doing a bit.

> Ummmm @CTCSquares - why are there shrimp tails in my cereal? (This is not a bit) pic.twitter.com/tTjiAdrnVp

— Jensen Karp (@JensenKarp) March 22, 2021

Cinnamon Toast Crunch replied, saying “We’re sorry to see what you found! We would like to report this to our quality team and replace the box. Can you please send us a DM to collect more details? Thanks!”

As Cabrera says, “what matters in this instance is food safety and quality,” and that’s the message that the company moved toward in subsequent communications.

Any personal private response to Karp should have asked what sort of resolution or response he was looking for, says Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership expert and the author of the books “What Great Brands Do” and “Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World’s Greatest Companies.”

> “Even if the company would not do what he wanted, they would at least understand what it would take for his concerns to be assuaged and be able to issue an appropriate response,” she says.

Also, public messages from the company shouldn’t have challenged or refuted Karp’s claims, says Yohn. “Regardless of whether or not there was any real basis for his claims, it’s the perception that matters,” she says. “People trust other people more than they trust companies – and they don’t like when companies seem to be bullying or diminishing other people.”
That first public response came too quickly, says Gene Grabowski, partner at Washington, D.C.-based public relations and public affairs firm Kglobal. “It’s very corporate and it’s very knee-jerk,” and consumers are fed up with corporate-speak, he says. “They want to hear real people talking and corporations still haven’t learned how to do that.”

What would Grabowski have suggested in that initial moment, what he calls the golden hour?

The team should have thought through the possible scenarios, including whether Karp is seeking publicity, whether it’s a setup, or whether the product was tampered with at some point before it reached Karp’s bowl. Grabowski, who has managed communications for more than 200 food and consumer product recalls, says when it comes to items found in food, in his estimation, about one-third of these things are hoaxes. “Of those that are real, very few of them are from the factory because of quality control,” he says.

Grabowski suggested a potential reply that he thinks may have struck a better tone.

“I would have responded: ‘Wow! If this is true, we really want to get to the bottom of this. We’re so sorry, please send us the box and the bag, we need to take a look at this because, like you, we want to get to the bottom of this.’

**Plan a response**

The situation with Cinnamon Toast Crunch is leading others to think about their own plans. Grabowski says two clients in the food industry called after seeing what unfolded.

On March 23, Cinnamon Toast Crunch issued a more declarative statement as buzz about the fishy situation grew:

“While we are still investigating this matter, we can say with confidence that this did not occur at our facility. We are waiting for the consumer to send us the package to investigate further. Any consumers who notice their cereal box or bag has been tampered with, such as the clear tape that was found in this case, should contact us.”
General Mills CEO Jeff Harmening stuck to that messaging during a March 24 interview on CNBC, stating “based on the information we have right now it is highly unlikely that this occurred at a General Mills facility.”

Grabowski says he’d give Harmening a B+ for that response. “The CEO of a major corporation does have to speak like the CEO of a major corporation,” he says.

What’s next
The situation between Karp and General Mills remains unresolved. Karp does not appear to be willing to turn over the packaging to the company and has posted about getting his own tests conducted.

Anyone tweeting at me to send the ENTIRE box to General Mills is a NARC

— Jensen Karp (@JensenKarp) March 24, 2021
“It’s really important for a brand to understand what is its obligation and where should its focus be,” says Cabrera. “We can say with a high degree of confidence this didn’t occur at our facilities but we want to know what did occur, and in order to do that we need to work with that consumer.”

Karp did not respond to Ad Age’s request for comment.

While Minneapolis-based General Mills sells products from yogurt to pet food, it is still best known for cereals led by its top two U.S. brands, Cheerios and Cinnamon Toast Crunch. And it is a big business, especially with many people eating breakfast and snacking at home during the pandemic. General Mills’ U.S. cereal sales rose 9% to $614.1 million in its fiscal third quarter, according to results it released on March 24.

Cinnamon Toast Crunch is often one of the top cereal brands running TV ads, according to data from iSpot. And Cinnamon Toast Crunch measured media spending in 2019 totaled $20.8 million, according to Kantar.

A commercial that’s been in heavy rotation since mid-2020 happens to be an animated tale of the cereal’s squares going through the process of being made in the factory.

General Mills hasn’t made any changes to its TV advertising but has paused social media.
Yohn says General Mills should back off from advertising and promoting the brand for a bit to avoid drawing any further unwanted attention and should double-down on its quality assurance efforts.

“If no further incidents arise, General Mills can expect this commotion to die down quickly since social media attention spans are so short these days,” says Yohn.

As for Karp, who is married to “Boy Meets World” star Danielle Fishel, he continued to retweet jokes about the incident such as Cinnamon Toast Crunch tempura shrimp.

Soon, even he almost appeared to be tired of the whole thing. On March 24, he tweeted “No real update and I’m not posting about this bullshit all day again. Waiting for the envelope I agreed on from General Mills to send them back pieces and some of a shrimp tail will leave home for DNA testing at Noon. They grow up so fast.”

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Late on March 25, General Mills issued an updated statement on the situation.

“Job one at General Mills is food safety and quality,” said spokesman Mike Siemienas. “Whenever a consumer raises a concern about the possibility of food tampering, we investigate thoroughly. Effectively doing so requires us to work in partnership with consumers -- and we are doing exactly that with Jensen Karp. We are working with Mr. Karp to obtain samples from the cereal he purchased, as well as the packaging, so we can conduct a thorough investigation and take appropriate next steps. We thank Mr. Karp for raising this issue and working collaboratively with us on this matter.”
Jessica is Ad Age’s food reporter, working out of the publication’s Chicago bureau. She focuses on the packaged food and restaurant industries. Jessica joined Ad Age after writing about food for the Chicago Tribune’s business section. She began her journalism career at Reuters, where she covered the world’s largest retail chains and consumer products companies.

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