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FOOD & BEVERAGE

How the cyclosporiasis outbreak is testing Taco Bell's brand

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Taco Bell fa



By Jon S

AdlookNext-Gen Omnichannel
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Taco Bell is moving quickly to remove suspect lettuce from its restaurants. Repairing brand damage from association with “explosive diarrhea” may take longer.

Federal health officials late Thursday linked shredded iceberg lettuce served at Taco Bell restaurants in five states to an outbreak of cyclosporiasis, an illness caused by the Cyclospora parasite. More than 1,644 people who became ill reported eating at Taco Bell, including 94 who were hospitalized, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. No deaths have been reported.

The Food and Drug Administration traced the lettuce to a single supplier in Mexico and is investigating whether the produce was distributed to other restaurants or retailers. The agency has not named the supplier, although media reports citing people familiar with the investigation identified it as Taylor Farms.

Taco Bell began removing potentially affected ingredients from select restaurants before health officials publicly confirmed the connection. The chain is now working on removing lettuce from the supplier nationwide.

“Based on ongoing conversations with public health officials, and out of an abundance of caution, Taco Bell has taken immediate action to voluntarily remove potentially impacted lettuce from a supplier in select states,” the brand shared in an updated statement. “The affected ingredient from our supplier is being indefinitely removed from our supply chain nationwide and will be replaced within 24 hours in select states.”

By removing the lettuce before the CDC confirmed the link, Taco Bell “stole the thunder” from the announcement, said Hinda Mitchell, founder and president of food and agriculture communications agency Inspire.

“They took their voluntary action ahead of the CDC announcement,” Mitchell said. “That’s a really good strategy in a crisis, especially when you know that something’s coming.”

Taco Bell’s initial statement stressed the uncertainty surrounding the investigation. “Public health officials have not confirmed a link to Taco Bell or any specific ingredient, supplier, restaurant or retailer,” the chain stated earlier in the week, adding that it had “voluntarily and temporarily removed limited ingredients at select restaurants as a precautionary measure.”

Kate Finley, founder of food and beverage communications agency Belle Communication, said the ingredient removal was the right operational decision, but the statement failed to convey its significance.

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By Friday, the brand had posted a [warmer message](#) on its LinkedIn page. “We’re proud that we were a quickly and encourage all relevant restaurants, retailers and foodservice operators to do the same,” it know the Taco Bell fandom runs deep and we will always do the right thing for them.”

Finley recommended still more action, including putting an executive on camera and providing updates on a set schedule, even when there is little new information.

Uniquely disadvantaged

Getting ahead of the government’s announcement addresses only the first stage of the crisis. Taco Bell must now explain what it is doing to prevent another outbreak, whether through its website, social media, email marketing or signs in restaurants, Mitchell said.

“There’s three pieces,” Mitchell said. “There’s ‘we learned,’ ‘we acted,’ and then the third piece is: What did you do about it to keep it from happening again?”

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Rebuilding trust will require more than a communications campaign, said Aaron Allen, founder of restaurant consultancy Aaron Allen & Associates.

“What Chipotle did was such a comprehensive effort that it wasn’t just the PR side of it,” Allen said of the chain’s response to its [2015 food-safety crisis](#).

Chipotle temporarily closed restaurants for employee training, introduced educational programs and increased transparency with suppliers, Allen said. Taco Bell may also need to show that its response extends beyond removing the lettuce and issuing statements, he said.

It is not a new experience for Taco Bell, which faced an E. coli outbreak in 2006 that was linked to lettuce served at its restaurants. Past incidents reliably resurface whenever a new crisis arrives, Mitchell said, inviting questions about the safeguards established afterward and whether they were followed.

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s can involve
or jokes.

“They’re uniquely disadvantaged because the punchline predates the parasites,” Finley said.

As an example, “The Daily Show” earlier this week poked fun at Taco Bell.

Social media was filled with similar jokes.

<https://x.com/ThrillaRilla369/status/2077133440219021441>

Still, Taco Bell has considerable brand equity with consumers and a history of communicating with them in a more direct and human voice, and drawing on those relationships could shorten its recovery, Finley said.

Shares of parent Yum Brands fell about 7% between last Friday’s close and Thursday’s close.

Shifting ad dollars

The outbreak’s “blast radius” could extend well beyond the affected restaurants, Allen said, bringing greater scrutiny and uncomfortable questions from customers across the chain.

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Allen expects Taco Bell's response to extend beyond public statements. The chain may need a continuous online information page, additional employee and supplier programs, and changes to its media spend

"I would expect to see them shift ad dollars from promotions to brand reputation repair," he said.

Frank Yiannas, a former FDA deputy commissioner and Walmart VP of food safety, said protecting a brand in such a crisis begins with protecting customers—not trying to manage perceptions.

"Don't get caught in a state of disbelief or let the first instinct be to protect the brand," Yiannas said in an email. "The priority should always be protecting customers."

That requires cooperating quickly with investigators and being able to identify the source of an ingredient within 24 hours, Yiannas said. If evidence points strongly to a product, a company should consider removing and replacing it before a supplier issues a recall or regulators take action.

Yiannas said a company should also conduct what he called a "reset," including replacing the suspected ingredient with unaffected product and thoroughly cleaning food-contact surfaces to reduce the possibility of cross-contamination. It should also reinforce food safety practices throughout its restaurants, including screening employees for illness.

The CDC said the FDA is determining whether the supplier sent potentially contaminated lettuce to other restaurants or retailers.

Mitchell expects more restaurant brands to examine their own suppliers as the investigation unfolds.

"We likely will see others in foodservice try to distance their supply chain from the affected product," she said. "So over time other brands will announce their intention to review their produce suppliers as well. Again, in that effort of trying to get ahead of any issues and to reassure their consumers."

Some brands joined in the humor around the outbreak as a marketing opportunity.

Arby's used concern about lettuce to promote its meat-heavy menu on social media, tying a July 15 post to an offer giving]

<https://x.com/Arbys>

Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership expert and author, said Arby's may have gained attention at the cost of reminding people that foodborne illness is a risk across the fast-food industry.

"You lose more than you gain by kind of taking advantage of someone else's problem and reminding the customer of the risk of eating fast food in general," Yohn said.

Arby's did not return a request for comment.

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