



## Risky Business - Part 2

*The art of risk communication*

“**F**armed salmon are laced with toxins, study finds” screamed the headline on the front page of Canada’s largest newspaper on Jan. 9, 2004. The story went on to say that “salmon from Toronto supermarkets were so contaminated that they shouldn’t be eaten more than once every two months” because “they pose an increased risk of cancer.”

That same paper, the next month, under the headline “Bad Fish Rap” warned: “Canadians have become so anxious about lurking health threats that they are actually helping to harm themselves. To guard their health, they are damaging their health.” The article went on to state that “the levels were vanishingly small...less than 50 parts per billion for PCBs, one-40<sup>th</sup> the allowable standard.” After saying that both Health Canada (HC) and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) were adamant that their risk assessments had found the contaminant levels to be well within the safe standard, the paper seemed surprised that “despite all that, a health panic followed.” After describing the nutritional value of salmon, the paper concluded that “we should be eating more fish, not less.” Seemingly oblivious to its role in creating the alarm in the first place, the paper sanctimoniously concluded that “the salmon scare is only one example of how our modern phobias are harming our health...it’s a complicated world but we all have to be better at weighing risk against benefit.”

Is it any wonder that the consumer is confused? Faced with such contradictory information, how can consumers get better at weighing food safety risks and benefits? From the point of view of the art of risk communication, what lessons can we learn from this recent food scare?

First of all, it’s instructive to note that there were two earlier “scientific” studies on levels of PCBs in salmon that had been funded by environmental groups and used by them to create food scares designed to harm the aquaculture industry. In spite of these, consumption of farmed salmon actually went up. This apparent anomaly can only be explained by the same interesting phenomenon that caused beef sales to go up during our BSE crisis: even in the face of many recent food scares, Canadians continue to have confidence in the safety of their food and in their food safety regulatory system.

Perhaps it’s because we haven’t had the major regulatory failures like Britain has experienced with BSE, or maybe Canadians have become inured to the scare stories. After all, we still go into our grocery stores and spend \$1 billion on food every week without real worries about the safety of it: price, convenience and quality are consistently rated as more important consumer considerations.

This time it’s different. The stories in January led to an immediate drop in sales of over 25 per cent and they have stayed down. Focus groups have revealed that Canadians are angry and feel a deep sense of betrayal: they specifically increased their consumption of salmon for health reasons and now read that they were increasing their risk of cancer. If this is a precursor of things to come for other food products, the industry’s current complacency may get a real shake up.

This case was also different for the calculated way the study was packaged for the public. A million dollar PR campaign arranged to have embargoed copies in the hands of environmental reporters across North America so that they could prepare their stories in advance. The food industry was caught off guard. Retailers were unprepared. While both HC and the CFIA were quite quick to put out press releases, the damage had been done.

In the face of such a well-funded campaign, industry and government faced a daunting risk-communication challenge. The actual food safety risk was negligible but the campaign created a perception risk that was difficult to counter. And besides, the science was actually a lot more complicated than anybody talked about. There is still deep uncertainty about how to measure the toxicity of PCBs or even to determine which of the 209 possible types to test for. We all say we want science-based standards but these can only be developed by making many conservative policy assumptions about such things as acceptable levels of risk. But how do you package this scientific complexity in a 30-second sound bite and a one page press release in a balanced way that is understandable to consumers?



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