

Communicating with consumers: how to talk about food risk

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The increasing availability of food and health information does not always improve people's knowledge. However, it does present them with the obligation to understand in order to make choices. This creates a greater need for trust in food and health information, which can only come from presenting balanced information from credible sources that addresses the questions people have and communicating it in a way that the general public will understand.

Today's digital environment characterised by the proliferation of mobile devices, makes possible an immediacy of the information, but also contributes to the information overload. Social media opens the doors for a direct dialogue with consumers and allows everyone to be a source of information. The consequence of all those elements is emotional discussions that start replacing fact-based debates, sensationalist headlines get prominence and uncredentialed sources of information succeed in undermining trust in science and increasing the uncertainty and complexity of consumer decision making.

A proactive approach to communicating about food would help to reassure the public about its safety, restore consumers' trust in the authorities charged with regulating it, and help people understand how to eat safely and healthily. This presentation will introduce a recent publication from the European Food Information Council "How to talk about food risk", a practical handbook that aims to guide communicators through a sequential step-by-step process for developing and implementing a proper risk communication strategy. This includes a systematic evaluation of the risk, the environment, and a self-analysis of the communicator; tools for understanding audiences and developing targeted messages and content; communication channel selection; and the importance of monitoring public response.