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## Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Use of Apologies in Five High-Profile Food-Poisoning Incidents

Emmett Dulaney  
*Anderson University*

Rebecca Gunn  
*Oral Roberts University*

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**Research Articles**

***Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Use of Apologies  
in Five High-Profile Food-Poisoning Incidents\****

EMMETT DULANEY  
*Anderson University*

REBECCA GUNN  
*Oral Roberts University*

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the role that apologies play in situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and focuses on a number of recent food-poisoning incidents. The article first establishes the importance of trust to firms with a marketing orientation, and the harm that comes when that trust is lost. This is followed by an overview of apologies versus pseudo-apologies and how both factor into the principles of SCCT. Finally, examples of five high-profile apologies related to food-poisoning incidents are provided and the way that the principles of SCCT were applied in each instance, along with the outcome, is explored.

**KEY WORDS** Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT); Apology; Pseudo-apology; Public Relations; Crisis Management

**THE TRANSITION OF FIRMS TO A MARKET ORIENTATION**

Many organizations today employ the philosophy of relationship marketing, which is a move away from transaction-based marketing and toward recognition of the lifetime value of the customer. The philosophy that a firm chooses to embrace is based on the firm's organizational and personal values (including such factors as the firm's culture, goals, motive, mission, personal philosophy, and belief about the customer), and, to be genuine, it represents more than just a mantra (Day 1999). The marketing philosophy that the organization chooses drives its marketing strategy, which in turn drives the marketing

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\* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emmett Dulaney, Professor, Marketing, Anderson University, 1303 E. 5th Street, Anderson, IN 46012; eadulaney@anderson.edu; (765) 641-4126.

tactics the company employs. According to Peter Drucker, “True marketing starts out ... with the customer, his demographics, his realities, his needs, his values” (2001:21), and the philosophy of the firm then determines what tactics it uses to address these.

Arthur Felton defined the marketing concept as being “a corporate state of mind that insists on the integration and coordination of all the marketing functions which, in turn, are melded with all other corporate functions, for the basic purpose of producing maximum long-range corporate profits” (Kohli and Jaworski 1990:2). Thus, to be successful, an organization must be backed by a solid foundation—a commitment throughout the firm to creating, delivering, and communicating customer value to chosen target markets (Kotler 2003). The commitment should be evidenced by an outside-in perspective that is apparent throughout the firm’s mission and vision statements, as well as the company’s culture (referred to by some authors as *esprit de corps*) and overall beliefs about the customer.

Accepting the philosophy of the marketing concept, the firm uses this philosophy as its driver in crafting and executing marketing strategies and tactics. Rather than focusing on quick one-time revenue-producing transactions, the firm looks more to capturing customer loyalty and customer (not necessarily market) share. Day maintains that it is necessary for the firm to be closer to the market than its rivals are and defines the market-driven firm as requiring “a superior ability to understand, attract and keep valuable customers” (1999:5). If a firm is market-driven, at least three elements are required: an externally oriented culture, distinctive capabilities in understanding the market, and a configuration within the firm that allows it to anticipate and respond to market conditions (Day 1999). The focus on customers and competition is fundamental: “Customer-related and competitor-related responsiveness both affect market performance” (Homburg, Grozdanovic, and Klarmann 2007:21).

One of the primary goals of market orientation is to ensure that the entire organization understands the importance of customer satisfaction and strives to optimize it. There is significant empirical evidence that employee work satisfaction has a positive impact on customer satisfaction, and there is a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and financial performance (Homburg and Furst 2005). As such, Fornell et al. (2006:11) point out that “investments based on customer satisfaction produce sizable excess returns.” Kotler, Rackham, and Krishnaswamy (2006:74) indicate that “the first step inevitably involves improving communication”: The wording is not increasing communication but is improving communication and making certain the message is on target and meaningful to the audience. As the organization embraces the philosophy of market orientation, the needs of employees and customers should be treated with equal importance (Papasolomou-Doukakis 2002).

Market-oriented firms differ from non-market-oriented firms in every aspect of their organization. Philosophy drives strategy, and strategy drives tactics; thus, market-oriented firms not only have different values but also, through their dissimilar philosophy, utilize distinct strategies and tactics. Rather than focusing on the transaction (which can be successful in the short term but can harm the firm in the long term), a market-oriented firm focuses on the customer and the value that the customer holds for the firm throughout the term of their relationship. The market-oriented firm wants to keep

the customer and to benefit from the customer's repeat business. To be truly market oriented, a firm must focus on the target market, customer needs, integrated marketing, and profitability. Crucial to the successful realization and implementation of this philosophy is an ability to acquire and disseminate information, and to use that information in decisions ranging from product development to promotion, pricing, and distribution. The visible manifestation of a market orientation should be witnessed by higher employee satisfaction, price premiums, higher profitability, and an increased likelihood of long-term success (Best 2000; Jaworski and Kohli 1993; Slater and Narver 1994).

## **THE VALUE OF TRUST**

Trust can be described as a key element in establishing relationships with consumers (Kang and Hustvedt 2014). Trust in a company is considered to be taking a company at its word—that whatever a company says it will do, it will do—and that the company will do all it can to maintain its promises (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). With an emphasis in market orientation on the lifetime value of the customer, it is important that the customer trust the organization. It is when trusting that they will be treated equitably and fairly—and with the same level of satisfaction—that customers opt to return repeatedly and to increase their value to the organization.

If a customer chooses not to return to the organization when in need of a good or service—if the customer opts to sever the relationship that previously existed—the firm loses the lifetime value of that customer through churn. Turnover is costly, and studies in trust indicate that the cost of acquiring a new customer is as much as 500 percent higher than the cost of keeping an existing customer (Covey 2006). Studies indicate that high-trust organizations, on average, outperform low-trust organizations in total return to shareholders by 286 percent (Covey 2006). For example, in the case the E.coli breakout experienced by Chipotle, the loss of two or three loyal customers has been estimated to be the equivalent of the loss of ten other customers (Jargon 2016).

## **WHEN MISTAKES HAPPEN**

When mistakes are made, trust is eroded. Customers who may have never thought twice about eating at a particular restaurant may choose to go elsewhere. The mistakes can be intentional (an out-of-control employee, for example), unintentional (preparing the wrong meal), and even well outside of the control of the organization (a supplier delivered tainted product), but the customer will associate those mistakes with the organization and will either reevaluate future transactions or will want assurances that the mistake will not happen again. Customers will question their agreement of common values and mutual worth (Battistella 2014).

Although trust can take years to be built, that same trust can be lost in a moment (Covey 2006), and how the organization responds to a crisis can make all the difference in whether that trust is diminished. According to Covey, sometimes when you violate trust with a customer, you lose that customer forever, but other times, the incident, when handled correctly, actually builds trust.

## **OVERVIEW OF SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY**

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) attempts to map out “how crisis response strategies can be used to protect reputational assets” (Coombs 2008:263) and builds on what was once referred to as image restoration but is now known as image repair (Benoit and Pang 2008:255). SCCT incorporates attribution theory and is divided into crisis, response strategies, and recommendations. The crisis can be divided into types based on level of responsibility, factoring in crisis history, relationship history, and severity. Ten possible response strategies, grouped into three postures (deny, diminish, and deal), are available to the manager. The crisis-response recommendations offer guidelines based on the situation and on the chosen response strategy. Although every crisis is unique and must be responded to accordingly, the prescriptive guidelines offered by SCCT can help crisis managers protect reputational assets and can assist managers in preparing for and responding to a crisis (Coombs 2008:263).

THERE is a fair amount of overlap between SCCT and the theory of crisis communication and image repair discourse used for “image repair” (Benoit and Pang 2008:255), and both subscribe to the belief that the name and reputation of an organization are valuable assets that should be protected. One way to protect those assets is to bestow the organization with emotion, allowing it to express compassion for victims (Augustine 1995) without accepting responsibility (Cohen 1999). For example, Chipotle’s announcement of its \$50 million marketing campaign, continued expansion, and aggressive investments in staff and management do little to reflect compassion for the victims of the E.coli outbreak and could be interpreted by some as the exact opposite of concern.

## **APOLOGIES AND PSEUDO-APOLOGIES**

### *Genuine Apologies*

Apologies offer the opportunity to express emotion, and the wording is important, as “injuries are frequently unavoidable, but an offender’s compounding an injury with the insult of failing to apologize is not” (Cohen 1999:1069). It is, however, important to never ruin an apology with an excuse (Bovens 2008). The wording of the apology, and the sincerity expected to accompany it, matter, and it is important to not apologize for the wrong thing (Weeks 2003). In other words, don’t apologize just to be doing so, but be purposeful and intentional in assuring that it will never happen again (Koehn 2013) and pay attention to illocutionary phrasing and wording (Skytt 2015).

For an apology to be genuine, at a minimum, the offender is required to accept responsibility for the act in question and to offer an expression of regret to the offended party (Benoit 1995). Some argue that taking responsibility for the wrongdoing is only a portion of what needs to be done and that the wrongdoer must apologize promptly, conveying a settled/just/prudent character, creating a supportive/consistent context, personally delivering the apology, exhibiting empathy, and following through on the apology (Koehn 2013). The element of atonement—including such elements as repentance, prayer, charity, and public confession (Koesten and Rowland, 2004)—can

further substantiate the sincerity of the apology. The party conveying the message also matters: For an apology to be effective, a senior leader needs to be the one expressing remorse, candor, and a commitment to change (Schweitzer, Brooks, and Galinsky 2015).

According to Lazare (2004), the most accepted view is that there are four components to an effective apology: the acknowledgment of wrong, a description of how the wrong occurred, an expression of remorse and commitment to keep it from happening again, and offers of reparation. Each of the four components can be broken into further parts. For example, the acknowledgment of wrong can be divided into correctly identifying both parties (wronged and responsible), acknowledging the offense, recognizing the impact, and confirming that it was a societal wrong (Lazare 2004). As such, the expression of sorrow and regret should not only be present in the apology but also serve as its centerpiece (Taft 2000).

### *Pseudo-Apologies*

A pseudo-apology is not a genuine apology but rather an attempt at image repair. Image repair is thus a persuasive set of messages responding to an attack or incident that could reflect negatively on the organization. Among the main strategies are evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, taking corrective action, and expressing mortification. By reducing offensiveness, a person accused of misbehavior may attempt to reduce the degree of ill feeling experienced by the wronged; the accused does not deny committing the offense, or attempt to lessen his or her responsibility but instead attempts to increase the audience's positive feelings and reduce its negative feelings toward the accused or the offense (Benoit 2014).

Pseudo-apologies are usually issued in the hope that attention to the situation will go away. These non-apologies, or simulated atonement, not only can work in some circumstances but also can be more effective than genuine apologies at repairing public image under the right circumstances, when they are worded in such a way as to tell the offended what they want to hear (Bentley 2015). Two commonly employed methods of this are disassociation and dispersion (Boyd 2011). Dissociation is an attempt to avoid responsibility, whereas diminution downplays the offense as not being that serious. Dispersion suggests that others are (also) guilty of the offense, and displacement involves apologizing for an offense other than the one in question.

Pseudo-apologies are often nothing more than "rhetorical expressions of redress (in which blame is denied, hidden, or diffused over multiple parties) ... a ritualistic act of contrition designed to repair damaged relations of trust" (Greenberg and Elliott 2009:201). Pseudo-apologies include wording intended to look like an apology but are not genuine and usually fail to take responsibility. In some instances, the non-apology may be worded with the intent of minimizing the incident and of downplaying the incident to look as if it could simply have been a misunderstanding (Kampf 2009). Any apology not prompted by a feeling of remorse lacks sincerity (Kimoga 2010). A genuine apology needs to name the wrong but avoid minimizing it. Explanations given in conjunction with an apology, for example, usually offer external mitigating

circumstances, but this is not so much a part of an apology as a part of an excuse (Scher and Darley 1997).

### *Striving to Regain Trust*

The effectiveness of any apology depends on an understanding of the audience and of what the audience considers appropriate and effective in the given situation (Meier 2004). Any corporate apology lacking an expression of sympathy should not be considered a genuine apology (Lee and Chung 2012). Regret alone is not enough; regret needs to be accompanied by an explicit statement of responsibility in order to benefit the organization (Pace, Fediuk, and Botero 2010).

It is important to note that reputations fall in the category of “soft variables” that are difficult to manage but have great value and need to be protected (Ott and Theunissen 2015). When a wrong needs to be righted, the organization should consider righting the wrong in such a way as to maximize the organization’s exposure from it (Page 2014). For example, if a customer complaint is resolved privately (such as by a customer calling a hotline and dealing one-on-one with a representative), then only the previously unhappy customer knows that the company apologized and righted the situation. By apologizing and righting the situation through Twitter, however, the company can gain public recognition for its actions.

Whether a sincere apology or a pseudo-apology is issued, the goal is the same: to regain the trust that was lost and to keep customers returning. Some have contended that corporate social responsibility (CSR) requires trust and reciprocal influence between an organization and its audience (Brennan, Merkl-Davies, and Beelitz 2013). As such, a failure to apologize, or lack of response to an incident, can be a detriment to CSR.

Studies have shown that the medium in which the organization communicates its crisis-response messages can factor in to the stakeholders’ perception of the content. Although there may not be a perceived difference between the use of video or print in the expression of sympathy or compensation (Coombs and Holladay 2009), social media can have “the most positive effect on secondary crisis communication and reactions” (Schultz, Utz, and Göritz 2011:26). Twitter can, and should, factor strategically into the channel choices that can be used to target stakeholders (Schultz, Utz, and Göritz 2011).

The speed and ability of an organization in regaining trust are greatly affected by the feelings that existed about the organization before the crisis (Claeys and Cauberghe 2015). Although the act of apologizing is important for expressing contrition, it is imperative that sincerity be genuine, or else the apology serves no lasting purpose (Smith 2013).

## **ILLUSTRATING SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY THROUGH CASE STUDIES**

The best way to illustrate the concepts discussed in this article is to examine five high-profile cases in which SCCT was employed and apologies were issued. Only recent incidents (occurring within eight years of this writing) involving food poisoning were examined. The cases are discussed in chronological order.

*Maple Leaf Foods*

A Toronto-based producer of lunchmeat, Maple Leaf Foods faced an outbreak of listeria in the middle of August 2008 that led to the suspected deaths of twenty-two and the illness of myriad others (Charlebois and Horan 2010). On August 25, 2008, CEO Michael McCain released a video (available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIsN5AkJ1AI>) in which he apologized and offered his deepest sympathies:

My name is Michael McCain. As you may know, listeria was found in some of our products. Even though listeria is a bacteria commonly found in many foods and in the environment, we work diligently to eliminate it. When listeria was discovered in the product, we launched immediate recalls to get it off the shelf; then we shut the plant down. Tragically, our products have been linked to illnesses and loss of life. To the Canadians who are ill and to the families that have lost loved ones, I offer my deepest sympathies. Words cannot begin to express our sadness for your pain. Maple Leaf Foods has 23,000 people who live in a culture of food safety. We have an unwavering commitment to keeping your food safe with standards well beyond regulatory requirements. But this week our best efforts failed, and we are deeply sorry. This is the toughest situation we've faced in one hundred years as a company. We know this is shaking your confidence in us. I commit to you that our actions are guided by putting your interests first.

The apology did not try to shift blame or minimize the situation. The CEO stepped forward as the face of the organization and admitted that the crisis could shake the consumer's confidence in the company; he apologized for failing and assured people that everything that could be done would be. In later discussions of the event, he stated, "Going through the crisis there are two advisers I've paid no attention to. The first are the lawyers, and the second are the accountants. It's not about money or legal liability; this is about our being accountable for providing consumers with safe food" (Lamont 2012).

The Canadian Press named McCain its business newsmaker of 2008, and David Dunne, a professor at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, remarked, "A lot of what they did was technically perfect. I think they've done as much as could be done, and it's a real example to other companies that face crises. Most companies are way too slow to deal with these things and they're afraid of admitting responsibility and so on, so this is a real example of how to do it right" (Ewing 2009). Ruth Davenport of CJNI radio in Halifax added, "The listeria crisis was a headline story in and of itself, but McCain's sincerity in trying to reach out to the victims and consumers elevated it even further" (Ewing 2009).

With more than 200 products recalled, the outbreak was considered one of the worst ever, and the apology, though only approximately one minute in length, "illustrates



how communication can generate widespread support even after an error with tragic consequences has occurred” (Greenberg and Elliott 2009:201).

*Fat Duck Restaurant*

In January and February 2009, an outbreak of norovirus was blamed for more than 500 illnesses at the Fat Duck restaurant, which is owned by celebrity chef Heston Blumenthal (Morris 2009), in Bray, Berkshire, England. An investigation published in September of that year by the Health Protection Agency (HPA) pointed to oysters as the probable cause. The report also blamed the practices of the restaurant for allowing the illness to continue to spread over a six-week period (Manos 2009). Blumenthal fired back and blamed the HPA for a sloppy investigation (Kuhn 2009), and also issued an apology to diners:

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to you regarding your visit to my restaurant, The Fat Duck earlier this year.

I am so sorry that I have not been able to write before. I have wanted to contact you personally for many months, ever since the problem first emerged. But I was advised by the official bodies carrying out the investigation, our lawyers and insurers that I could not do so until both the factual and legal situation had been established.

We all thought that the HPA report would come in months ago, but it was held up by the swine flu outbreak. Now that the report has finally been released I can at last apologise personally.

I am so very sorry that you or any of your guests had a bad experience in any way in my restaurant, The Fat Duck. I have spent my entire adult life trying to create a dining experience that would delight and entertain my guests and my whole team are focused on this one aim. It was deeply upsetting to all of us that your enjoyment of The Fat Duck was not as we had intended it to be.

Irrelevant of the outcome of reports or advice it was always my intention, as I made clear at the outset, to invite anyone affected by the unfortunate incident earlier this year, back to the restaurant as my guest. I would be delighted if you would consider returning to The Fat Duck at a time that is convenient for you. Please contact my assistant Deborah

who will assist with your reservation. If this is not appropriate to you personally, please contact us and we will address each individual situation with our insurers.

Once again please accept my sincerest apologies.

Kindest regards,  
Heston Blumenthal

Whereas the CEO of Maple Leaf Foods claimed that he ignored the suggestions of attorneys and issued his apology when they advised against it, Blumenthal used attorney suggestions as a reason for not apologizing for more than half a year (“I was advised by ... lawyers and insurers”). He did not come out and apologize directly for the guests being infected with a virus that causes severe diarrhea and vomiting but instead was “writing ... regarding [their] visit to my restaurant” and “a bad experience” that they may have had. He shifted the focus from the patron to the employees: “It was deeply upsetting to all of us that your enjoyment of The Fat Duck was not as we had intended it to be.”

In this letter, there is no guarantee that the situation can never happen again, that standards have been changed, or that any substantial measures have been put in place. Instead, guests are invited to come back again and to coordinate doing so with an assistant. The letter offers a free meal as compensation for the shortcomings of the previous meal, in the same way a fast-food restaurant would give free fries to someone who found the fries soggy. All told, this makes for a very poor apology, and in 2012, after eight years in the top ten of the World’s 50 Best list, the Fat Duck fell to number thirteen. In February of 2015, it closed and a new incarnation of it opened in Melbourne, Australia (Rayner 2015).

### *Foster Farms*

From May 2012 to April 2013, 134 individuals in 13 states were afflicted by salmonella poisoning, and the source of the outbreak was traced to Foster Farms chickens slaughtered at two separate facilities. While efforts were being made to find the cause, a separate outbreak occurred, from February to October 2013, that infected another 338 individuals with salmonella—this time across twenty states and in Puerto Rico. The investigation traced the cause back to Foster Farms chicken once more (CDC 2013).

Some stores voluntarily removed the products from their shelves, but the contamination continued to spread and an estimated 40 percent of those who became ill required hospitalization (Hylton 2015). It was not until July 2014 that officials from the USDA were able to make a genetic match to the chicken and to truly identify Foster Farms as the culprit. By that time, there were 621 confirmed cases of salmonella infection and it was suspected that as many as 18,000 may have been sickened (Hylton 2015).

In the midst of the crisis, the president of the company, Ron Foster, issued an apology but defended the company’s lack of action. Rather than recall the chicken

products, the company had continued to sell them after it was clear that consumers were becoming ill. His reason was that the company already met or exceeded industry standards and the food would be safe to eat if cooked to a minimum of 165 degrees Fahrenheit (Pierson and Hsu 2013). “If we had pulled our product from the market and put someone else’s in, we’d be lying to the consumer because you’re saying someone else is better,” Foster said (Pierson and Hsu 2013).

This pseudo-apology fails to meet most standards for an apology. It blames the consumers for not heating the food to a temperature high enough to kill the bacteria. It also defends the company’s actions by stating that the company met current standards (which allow for 7.5 percent salmonella in chicken carcasses); subsequent tests by the Food Safety and Inspection Service showed a 25 percent rate of the bacteria at Foster Farms (Sifferlin 2013).

In 2015, the PBS show *Frontline* ran an episode entitled “The Trouble with Chicken” that focused on problems with food safety and Foster Farms. Although Foster Farms disputed the allegations, the company declined to make any representatives available to discuss the issues publicly (Metz 2015).

### *Blue Bell Ice Cream*

In 2015, an outbreak of listeria was traced to Blue Bell ice cream. Blue Bell issued a voluntary recall for all its products (not only ice cream but also frozen yogurt, sherbet, and frozen snacks) that came from suspected facilities. The president and CEO of the company, Paul Kruse, released an apology (the video of which can be found at <http://cdn.bluebell.com/ceo-video-message>):

We’re committed to doing the 100 percent right thing, and the best way to do that is to take all of our products off the market until we are confident that they are all safe. At every step, we have made decisions in the best interest of our customers based on the evidence we had available at the time. We have brought in one of the world’s most respected food-safety microbiologists to inspect our plants and systems to help us get to the bottom of this issue.

Through further internal testing, we learned today that *Listeria monocytogenes* was found in an additional half gallon of ice cream in our Brenham facility. While we initially believed this situation was isolated to one machine in one room, we now know that was wrong. We need to know more to be completely confident that our products are safe for our customers.

As Blue Bell moves forward, we are implementing a procedure called “test and hold” for all products made at all

of our manufacturing facilities. This means that all products released will be tested first and held for release to the market only after the tests show they are safe.

In addition to the “test and hold” system, Blue Bell is implementing additional safety procedures and testing, including

- expanding our already robust system of daily cleaning and sanitizing of equipment,
- expanding our system of swabbing and testing our plant environment by 800 percent to include more surfaces,
- sending samples daily to a leading microbiology laboratory for testing,
- providing additional employee training.

At this point, we cannot say with certainty how listeria was introduced to our facilities. We continue to work with our team of experts to eliminate this problem.

We urge consumers who have purchased Blue Bell products to return them to the place of purchase for a full refund. Consumers with any concerns or questions should call 979-836-7977 Monday through Friday, eight a.m. to five p.m. CST or go to [www.bluebell.com](http://www.bluebell.com) for the most up-to-date information.

We are heartbroken about this situation and apologize to all of our loyal Blue Bell fans and customers. Our entire history has been about making the very best and highest-quality ice cream, and we intend to fix this problem. We want enjoying our ice cream to be a source of joy and pleasure, never a cause for concern, so we are committed to getting this right.

The facility where the contamination occurred, in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, was closed immediately after the problem was found. Subsequent testing showed listeria in a Texas facility as well, but this was traced to items that had originated in Oklahoma and then moved to Texas (Newman 2016). That facility was temporarily shut down until the issue could be resolved.

Blue Bell, one of the largest ice cream makers in the United States, kept its products from store shelves for four months while it focused on cleaning its plant and enhancing sanitation and testing procedures. The company took to social media to

reassure consumers of its safety practices (Newman and Gasparro 2015) and promoted those practices on its website. Transparency was a key to Blue Bell's strategy to keep consumer confidence, and, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, once the product was reintroduced, "Blake Rizzo, an IT professional in Houston, drove to a nearby Randalls grocery store at 6 a.m. Monday to stock up on Blue Bell before it could sell out ... the store was packed" (Newman and Gasparro 2015).

### *Chipotle*

In October of 2015, Chipotle Mexican Grill was linked to an outbreak of E. coli that affected more than 50 people across several states (Jargon 2015). The outbreak led to extensive national coverage in the media, particularly because this epidemic followed two other problems that had occurred with Chipotle since the summer: California had seen 234 individuals sickened by norovirus in August, and Minnesota had seen 64 people affected by a salmonella outbreak in August and September (Zuraw 2015). The norovirus occurrence was attributed to a sick employee violating company policies (Rhodan 2016) and the salmonella was linked to a batch of tainted tomatoes (Garcia and Goldschmidt 2015), but no direct link to the E. coli contamination was ever found (Hauser 2016).

In early November 2015, Chipotle addressed the public directly about the incidents and released a press release announcing that it was temporarily closing 43 restaurants in Oregon and Washington. The company was also, according to the release, taking additional cleaning and sanitizing steps, testing distribution centers, replacing all food items in the closed stores, batch-testing some ingredients, helping with the Centers for Disease Control investigation, and retaining two consulting firms "to help the company assess and improve upon its already high standards for food safety" (Arnold 2015). In December 2015, Steve Eells, chairman and co-CEO, issued an apology:

As a chef, nothing is more important to me than serving my guests food that is safe, delicious, and wholesome. From the beginning, all of our food safety programs have met or exceeded industry standards. But recent incidents, an E. coli outbreak that sickened 52 people and a norovirus outbreak that sickened approximately 140 people at a single Chipotle restaurant in Boston, have shown us that we need to do better, much better.

The fact that anyone has become ill eating at Chipotle is completely unacceptable to me and I am deeply sorry. As a result, we are committed to becoming known as the leader in food safety, just as we are known for using the very best ingredients in a fast food setting. I want to share with our customers specifics about some of the significant steps we are taking to be sure all of the food we serve is as safe as it can be.

To achieve our goal of establishing leadership in food safety, we collaborated with preeminent food safety experts to design a comprehensive food safety program that dramatically reduces risk on our farms, throughout our supply chain, and in our restaurants. The process began with a farm-to-form risk assessment of every ingredient and all of our restaurant protocols and procedures.

Throughout our supply chain, we are implementing high-resolution sampling and testing of many of our ingredients to prevent contaminants, including E. coli, from getting into our restaurants. Testing of this kind is unprecedented in the restaurant industry because of the large number of samples tested. We are also working without our supplier partners to further enhance their food safety programs.

We have also designed many improvements within our restaurants to ensure our food is as safe as possible. This includes the introduction of additional microbiological kill steps to eliminate microbial risk. Additionally, we are rolling out new sanitation procedures in our restaurants and implementing additional food safety training for all of our restaurant employees. More information about these changes is available online at [chipotle.com/foodsafety](http://chipotle.com/foodsafety).

In the end, it may not be possible for anyone to completely eliminate all risk with regard to food (or from any environment where people congregate), but we are confident that we can achieve near zero risk. Chipotle is an incredibly focused company. Our menu has remained virtually unchanged for the last 22 years and we only have 64 ingredients in our food. Rest assured that we have looked at each of these ingredients, where they come from, and how they can be made even safer. I believe our restaurants are safer today than they have ever been.

The last 22 years have been an incredible journey and we are not going to shy away from this new challenge. I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize on behalf of all of us at Chipotle, and to thank our loyal customers who have stood by us through this difficult time.

Steve Ells  
Founder, Chairman, and Co-CEO

SCCT was applied when Chipotle apologized for the outbreak, put a face with the company (Steve Ells), and tried to assure the various publics that Chipotle was doing everything in its power to control and correct the situation. The apology was carefully worded and released through a plethora of outlets, including social media, to make sure it received maximum exposure. Ells made himself available to a number of news organizations for interviews and follow-ups to further put a human face with the organization. When it became apparent that no one malefactor could be identified for causing the E. coli contamination, the company announced through an equally large number of outlets that it would close its stores for a day to roll out the safety changes and make that meeting public. Transparency of this magnitude is aligned with the SCCT, and the company applied it well.

Chipotle has always prided itself as serving “food with integrity”; synonyms for integrity include *honest*, *truthful*, and *reliable*. What worked in Chipotle’s response to the crisis was that the company stuck to being honest, truthful, and transparent. It not only kept communication open through press releases, its website, an FAQ on the outbreak, social media, and making key executives available for discussion but also asked the farmers and ranchers who were their vendors to be open and transparent as well. This kept the dialogue going between the corporation and its publics and allowed them to walk through the investigation and remedies together (Jargon 2015).

## **DISCUSSION**

Although those in the legal profession have traditionally often discouraged apologies for fear that apologies be construed as admissions of guilt and used against the issuers in court proceedings (Patel and Reinsch 2003), others have come to view apologies as expected rituals. Trust is gained through transparency (Kang and Hustvedt 2014), and when a problem occurs, apologies allow transparency to occur, enabling consumers to begin trusting again. Regardless of the view taken, apologies offer opportunities to repair public images, but to be genuine, apologies must acknowledge responsibility for the offense, as well as include remorse and a promise not to let the offense happen again (Hearit 2006). When an apology will help the situation, it is important that the organization issue one, but it is critical that the apology be issued at the right time. If the apology is issued too early, the audience is not yet ready for it and it will not be as effective as if issued when the situation is understood and the stakeholders are receptive (Ebesu Hubbard et al. 2013).

Whether an apology is accepted or not can be partially attributed to evaluative expressions and positive tone of voice (Jiang 2013). A bad apology can strain relationships and lead to bitterness or cause bitterness to remain (Hargie, Stapleton, and Tourish 2010). In most situations, the words are just the first step—there is a need to move beyond apologia (Coombs et al. 2010).

Lazare (2004:107) outlines four components to a successful apology: (1) acknowledgment of the offense; (2) communication of remorse and the related attitudes of forbearance, sincerity, and honesty; (3) explanations that do not diminish the seriousness of the offense; and (4) reparations. Table 1 examines each of the five cases

discussed above, and these four components in the companies’ public apologies. Areas of weakness are in italics.

The companies that issued true apologies rather than pseudo-apologies have done well at protecting their reputations and restoring trust. Recently, Maple Leaf Foods’ stock price rose 31 percent over the previous two years, and the company has zero debt and has reorganized with a lean corporate structure (Atkins 2015). Blue Bell ice cream “is again being supplied to a large area of the southeast, including most everything south of a line stretching from New Mexico to the Carolinas” (Flynn 2016).

Foster Farms, in contrast, continues to draw scrutiny and was recently the focus of a Frontline episode on PBS looking into food-borne dangers. The Fat Duck restaurant has closed its flagship location and moved to Australia.

Although the outbreaks have been too recent for accurate reflection on the long-term effects at Chipotle, studies have shown that previously faithful customers were the ones who changed their eating habits the most and were 50 fifty more likely to stay away than were occasional customers during the outbreak. Those once-loyal customers have also been “even harder to lure back in” now that the crisis has passed (Jargon 2016).

**Table 1. Apology Components in Food-Poisoning Apologies**

<b>Company and Type of Apology</b>	<b>Acknowledgment</b>	<b>Remorse</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Reparation</b>
Maple Leaf Foods Apology	“Listeria was found in some of our food products.”	“I offer my deepest sympathies. Words cannot begin to express our sadness for your pain.”	“Our best efforts failed”	“We launched immediate recalls to get it off the shelf; then we shut the plant down.” “I commit to you that our actions are guided by putting your interests first.”
Fat Duck Restaurant Pseudo-apology	<i>refers to “the unfortunate incident” rather than using the word “norovirus”</i>	“I am so very sorry that you or any of your guests had a bad experience in any way in my restaurant.”	<i>discusses being unable to contact individuals because of advisers and unable to respond until much later because of HPA not being expedient</i>	“invite anyone affected ... back to the restaurant as my guest”
Foster Farms Pseudo-apology	<i>agrees that salmonella is in the product but says that salmonella is also in products from others and company is meeting current standards (later found to not be the case)</i>	<i>continues to sell product even though some grocery chains voluntarily remove it from their shelves</i>	<i>transfers blame to the customer for not heating the product to a high enough temperature</i>	<i>none given</i>

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**Table 1. Apology Components in Food-Poisoning Apologies, Concl.**

<b>Company and Type of Apology</b>	<b>Acknowledgment</b>	<b>Remorse</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Reparation</b>
Blue Bell Ice Cream Apology	“We learned today that ... listeria ... was found in our Brenham facility.”	“We are heartbroken about this situation and apologize to all of our loyal Blue Bell fans and customers.”	“We cannot say with certainty how listeria was introduced to our facilities. We continue to work with our team of experts to eliminate this problem.”	“Consumers with any concerns or questions should call ... or go to ... for the most up-to-date information.”  “We intend to fix this problem. We want enjoying our ice cream to be a source of joy and pleasure, never a cause for concern, so we are committed to getting this right.”
Chipotle Apology	“an E. coli outbreak that sickened 52 people and a norovirus outbreak that sickened approximately 140 “	“The fact that anyone has become ill eating at Chipotle is completely unacceptable to me and I am deeply sorry.”	“It may not be possible for anyone to completely eliminate all risk with regard to food (or from any environment where people congregate).”	“We are committed to becoming known as the leader in food safety.” “I want to share with our customers specifics about some of the significant steps we are taking to be sure all of the food we serve is as safe as it can be.”

## CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This article contributes to the literature by examining how the principles of SCCT were applied in each of five high-profile food-poisoning cases. One of the biggest components of SCCT is the expression of sympathy and connection with the various publics to acknowledge what has happened (though not necessarily accepting liability) and to assure them that it will not happen again. This works best with the publics’ belief that the organization is genuinely empathetic and is going above and beyond to make sure that the situation cannot happen again.

Although all of the companies examined utilized SCCT and apologies to respond to food-borne crises linked to their products, three of the apologies meet the criteria for genuine apologies whereas two are more appropriately classified as pseudo-apologies. Those organizations that issued apologies containing the four components of a successful apology appear to have fared better than those that did not. The successful apology requires (1) acknowledgment of the offense; (2) communication of remorse and the related attitudes of forbearance, sincerity, and honesty; (3) explanations that do not diminish the seriousness of the offense; and (4) reparations.

There are a number of limitations inherent in this study, the first being that only five organizations were examined and the outbreaks were of various sizes (one involved

only a single restaurant, whereas another involved recall of 200 products from the market). Time was also a significant difference: Cases ranged from 2008 to 2015. Additionally, the scale of severity of each outbreak could factor in: Both Maple Leaf Foods and Blue Bell battled listeria, whereas the Fat Duck dealt with norovirus and Foster Farms had salmonella. The outbreak at Chipotle was the most serious of all in terms of danger of the malady—E. coli—and it came on the heels of problems that the company faced with both norovirus and salmonella.

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