

Scientists urge food safety professionals not to dismiss social media

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With an estimated two billion people using the Internet worldwide, a scientific paper has outlined why food safety professionals cannot afford to dismiss the use of social media as a communication tool.

The science paper, titled 'The use of social media in [food](#) risk and

benefit communication', is published in a leading international journal *Trends in Food Science and Technology*. The authors are researchers from Ghent University in Belgium, University College Dublin in Ireland, and a communications company in the United Kingdom. Their research into this area is part of the FoodRisC ('Food Risk Communication - Perceptions and communication of food risk/benefits across Europe') project, which is funded under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) of the European Commission.

The researchers believe that many opportunities are opening up for food risk communicators through the wide variety of social media applications and the [digital environment](#). As a result, users of social networks are playing a fundamental role as disseminators of food risk and benefit information. So, for food professionals, being able to monitor online conversations could provide an insight into consumers' perceptions of food issues. This also allows detection and tracking of impending issues and ongoing debates on topics such as [genetic modification](#) and [animal cloning](#).

However, because of the broad landscape of social media, it can often be seen as a minefield of information which is either incorrect or misleading. This is where food risk communicators need to be proactive on social media, details the science paper. This could effectively increase visibility for the general public and key opinion formers (i.e. popular bloggers and journalists), and help to establish food professionals as credible interactive sources of information, enabling timely communication with the public.

Having a social media presence, claim the researchers, is vital in order to rapidly address and correct developments containing inaccuracies and misinformation, thus ensuring an erroneous momentum does not build up. This is particularly important in food crisis situations where social media can lend itself to scare mongering and create potentially

unwarranted panic and hysteria.

Active involvement with social media, in particular the constant monitoring and correcting of inaccurate information, is likely to require considerable effort, resources and long-term expense (the time and cost effectiveness of different popular social media tools are graded low, medium or high in the paper).

Commenting on the review findings, coordinator of the FoodRisC research project Professor Patrick Wall said, 'There is an increasing trend of private businesses investing in social media. Other risk and benefit communicators, such as food safety authorities, have been slow to use social media and there is a real need to harness this resource, so that it becomes a productive tool for communicating on food risks and benefits.'

The researchers conclude that the distribution of information is not the only task for food risk communicators in times of crisis. An organisation that takes responsibility or expresses sympathy during a crisis is regarded as more honourable and understanding. [Social media](#) applications are especially useful in this area due to the opportunity for direct communication and interaction with the audience.

More information: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...
ii/S0924224412002142](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0924224412002142)
www.foodrisc.org/

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