

Case 7-2 Alar and PR: Getting to the Core of the Apple Problem

This is the story of the fall and rise of the American apple industry in 1989. It serves as an excellent example of public relations' role in bringing about a change in public perception and in redefining the problem. This case was precipitated by a forceful public relations and publicity campaign that brought discredit and disfavor to apples and apple products. The ensuing problem was met by an equally forceful rebuttal campaign with the result that, today, apples are being consumed in normal fashion.¹

The Situation

Apples have been part of a healthful diet for centuries. An apple a day kept the doctor away. An apple for the teacher was appreciated, even if apple-polishing students were not. A favorite person was “the apple of my eye,” and being “as American as apple pie” was as patriotic as one could get.

That's why the nation was shocked to hear, in February 1989, that people (especially small children) eating apples were jeopardizing their health. What had happened to change the shiny cure-all to a carcinogen? Alar and pr; *60 Minutes*, and the national media.

Since 1968, apple growers had used a chemical called daminozide (trademark Alar) to slow the ripening process and retain the red color. However, in 1985, scientists reported Alar and its residue, UDMH, could cause cancer in animals. Many growers stopped using Alar at that time² and in 1986 a self-designated public interest group called the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) began a study of pesticides and resultant risks to preschool children.³ (See Figures 7-2 and 7-3.)

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began a regulatory process to consider banning the pesticide and, in early February 1989, announced that the process was being sped up, possibly as a result of efforts by NRDC. There was no rise in consumer awareness of Alar-related problems at that time.⁴

On February 26, however, the CBS show *60 Minutes* aired a segment entitled “A Is for Apple,” which characterized the risk, especially to preschoolers, of getting cancer from eating apples and apple products as “intolerable.”⁵ It based the report on a white paper from NRDC, “Intolerable Risk: Pesticides in Our Children's Food.”

NRDC followed the CBS report with a major news conference in Washington, D.C., the next day, augmented by regional news conferences in a dozen cities around the country.⁶ In short, a major publicity effort had begun.

¹Thank you to Steven Rub, a student at the University of Central Florida, who developed this case study under the direction of Frank Stansberry, APR, who retired from UCF in 2006.

²“Apples Without Alar,” *Newsweek*, October 30, 1989, p. 86.

³“Intolerable Risk: Pesticides in Our Children's Food,” a report by the National Resources Defense Council, February 27, 1989.

⁴“The Alar Scare: Rebuilding Apple Consumption During the Alar Crisis,” a report by Hill & Knowlton (undated).

⁵*60 Minutes*, Transcript “A Is for Apple,” broadcast February 26, 1989.

⁶*The Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 1989, an op-ed article on the Alar issue.

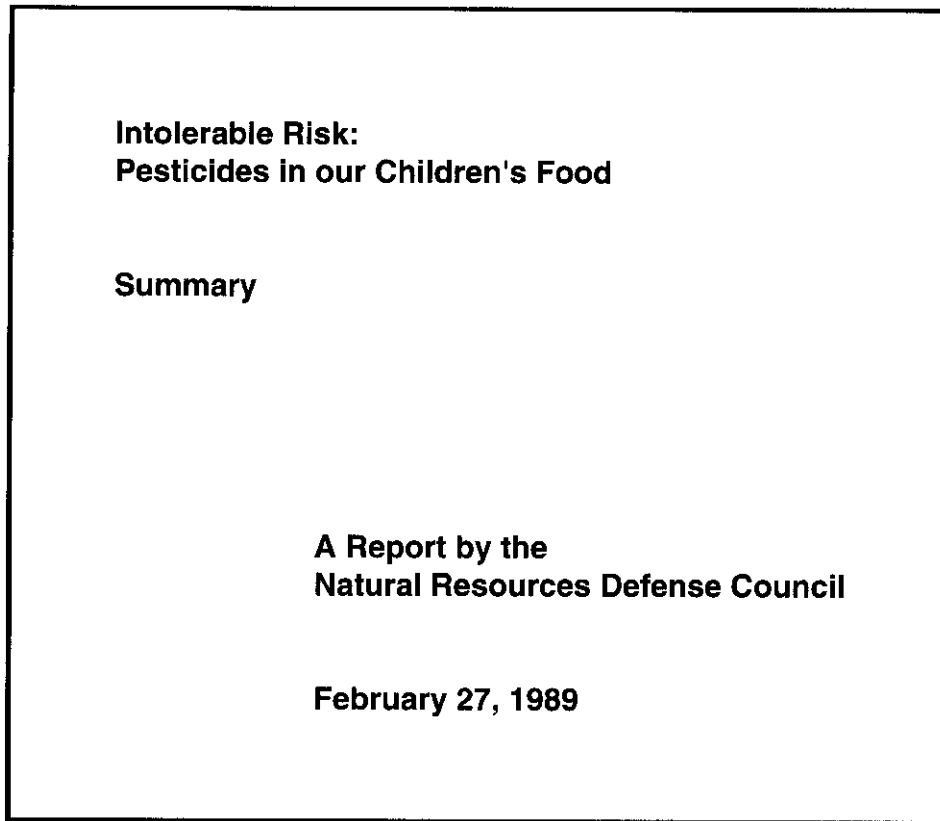


FIGURE 7-2 The NRDC published a 141-page report in 1989 that examined the types and amounts of pesticides that are in foods

Source: (Courtesy of the NRDC.)

National awareness of the “danger” of eating apples rose from virtually nil at the first of the month to 95 percent at the end of the month, as all news media jumped on this journalistically enticing story.

Faced with that type of public awareness and concern, the members of the International Apple Institute voluntarily stopped using Alar on their crops.⁷ In June, Uniroyal, maker of Alar, announced plans to discontinue sales of the pesticide in the United States.⁸

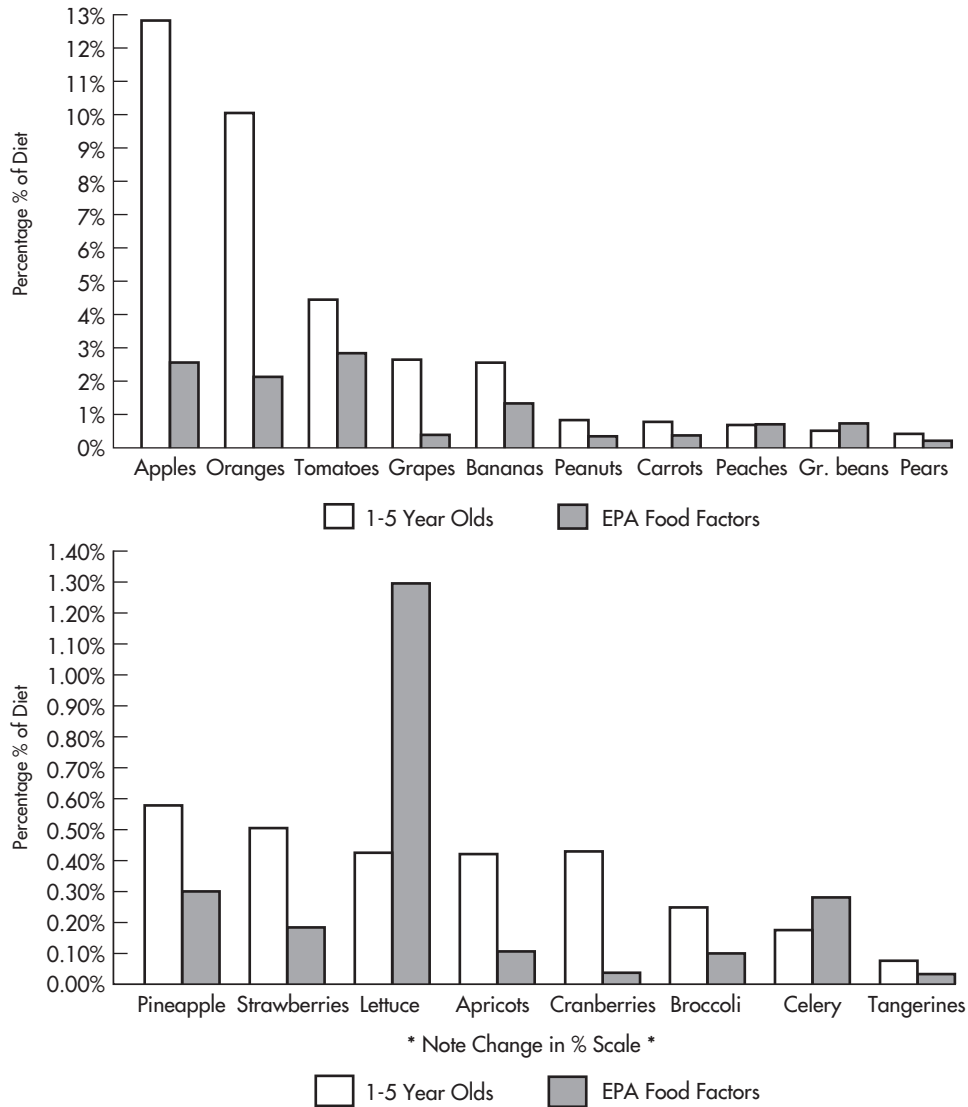
Meanwhile, apple growers began to fight back. Spurred by the Washington State Apple Commission, the industry hired the public relations firm Hill & Knowlton (H&K), to mount the counterattack. H&K had been monitoring public opinion since before the first volley from NRDC. Its research showed that “purchase intent” for apples had gone into a “deep decline.”

In its report, “The Alar Scare: Rebuilding Apple Consumption During the Alar Crisis,” H&K noted that the media blitz

⁷*New York Times*, May 16, 1989, pp. 1, 19.

⁸*New York Times*, June 30, 1989, pp. 1, 11.

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NOTE: Current preschooler consumption estimates were derived from the CSFII — *Nationwide Food Consumption Survey: Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals, Women 19–50 Years and Their Children 1–5 Years, 6 Waves, 1985*, and are average intakes of all forms (*i.e.* raw and processed) of each produce type for all children included in the 1985 Nationwide Food Consumption Survey. Food Factors were obtained from EPA, Toxicology Branch, Revised Average Food Factors, May 1, 1978.

FIGURE 7-3 The report of NRDC examined pesticide intakes by children and noted the large consumption of apples by children

Source: (Courtesy of the NRDC.)

from Alar's critics "led to a widespread panic, and a firestorm of negative reporting on the safety of apples. Moms across America began dumping apple juice down the drain. Cancer hotlines were deluged by calls from anxious parents. The message they were getting everywhere was 'don't feed your kids apples, it's not worth the risk.'"

The strategy for gaining back the lost confidence was threefold—to get the facts about the safety of apples to worried consumers; to discredit the NRDC report as "bad science," and to get key sources (government regulatory bodies, scientists, the medical community) to reaffirm apples' wholesomeness and nutritional benefits.

The plan worked; by fall 1989, per capita consumption of apples had returned to an all-time high, a trend that continues today.

The Facts

The facts about Alar and apples are pretty clear. Alar is a plant growth inhibitor. Without Alar, apple growers will have to pick the crop four to six days earlier, before the apples drop. Thus, some varieties may go to market a little "green" and may lack perfect visual appeal. Shelf-life may also be affected.

Alar, as one of many products produced by Uniroyal, contributed only \$4.6 million in sales at the time of the controversy, which accounted for about six-tenths of one percent of Uniroyal's total sales. It was not a major player in the overall sales picture.

Before 1985, about 35 percent of all "eating" apples were treated with Alar, including most red apples and some Golden Delicious. By 1989, the industry estimates of

Alar usage were between 5 and 15 percent.⁹ Most growers stopped using Alar after EPA investigations in 1985.¹⁰

Risk factors from Alar-tainted apples are less clear. In a table released by NRDC as part of the "Intolerable Risk" report, apples fell at the midpoint of 26 fruits and vegetables rated by frequency of detectable levels of pesticides. Strawberries were ranked first (63 percent with detectable levels). Apples and spinach (29 percent) were in the middle, and corn and bananas (1 percent) were at the bottom.

Uniroyal continually said its pesticide was safe as used. Support for this position was widespread and broad-based. Canadian health officials noted pesticide residues only one-thirtieth of safety levels and commented that a child would have to eat 250,000 apples a day for Alar residues to impose a threat to health.¹¹

In England, British health officials saw "no risk to consumers," noting that an infant would have to consume 150 times a normal amount to reach even a "no effect" level of UDMH.¹²

Even Consumer's Union, through its publication *Consumer Reports*, said, "Apples treated with Alar are not necessarily unsafe to eat, since daminozide itself has not been firmly shown to cause cancer."¹³ Later, in a letter to the editor of another consumer's magazine, *Consumer's Research*, the editors of *Consumer Reports* acknowledged, "The statements that 'Apples are safe to eat,' and that 'The EPA should ban Alar' sound contradictory, but they are not." *Consumer Reports* further said that current data suggest that Alar, per se, probably is not a carcinogen, but that its breakdown product, UDMH, probably is.

⁹"Where the Daminozide Is," *Science News*, June 14, 1985, p. 169.

¹⁰"Law & Legislation," *Newsweek*, February 13, 1989, p. 65.

¹¹"An Apple-Spray Scare," *Macleans*, March 20, 1989, p. N-8.

¹²"Upsetting the Apple Spray Cart," *Chemistry and Industry*, January 1, 1990, p. 2.

¹³"Bad Apples," *Consumer Reports*, May 1989, p. 287.

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Thus, the risk is associated more directly with processed apple products than with raw apples (UDMH is released when apples are heated or otherwise processed). *Consumer Reports* saw the risk if UDMH levels rose to 45 parts per million and said, “While large enough to justify EPA regulatory concern, . . . there is no need for public panic over a risk this size.”¹⁴

The federal agencies, EPA, Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, agreed to issue a joint statement on March 16, 1989, which said, “The federal government believes that it is safe for Americans to eat apples.”¹⁵

Mothers and Others (a spin-off group from NRDC) said in a “fact sheet” that “chances are very slight that an individual child will get cancer from consuming apples or apple products,” even when Alar was in use.¹⁶ (See Figure 7-4.) And *Consumer Reports*, in a sidebar to its “Bad Apples” story,¹⁷ tested 44 brands of apple juice for daminozide levels and found only four (all regional brands unique to the New York area) unacceptable.

UDMH, however, continued to pose a problem. *Consumer Reports* said, “The likely carcinogen is UDMH, which appears when juice from daminozide-treated apples is cooked to produce the concentrate from which commercial juice is made.”

This perception of danger, dramatized by major new outlets, was what caused the public to panic. The impact on apple growers was immediate and substantial. Apple growers lost an estimated \$100–150 million

on the 1988 crop, which was being sold at the time. Most of this economic impact was felt in Washington State, where growers lost between \$100 and \$140 million on that year’s crop. Washington supplies 60 percent of the fresh, or “eating,” apples consumed in the United States.¹⁸

Apple juice sales in 1989 fell as much as 22 percent at one point and finished the year down about 14 percent,¹⁹ while overall apple sales were down 20 percent for the year.²⁰

The Public Perception

The facts notwithstanding, the public was not buying apples. The media images of danger were too clear. For example, the *60 Minutes* story that kicked off the scare was entitled “A Is for Apple,” but it showed a skull and cross-bones superimposed over a shiny red apple. The *Consumer Reports* story carried the title “Bad Apples.”

Urged and directed by NRDC, actress Meryl Streep took to the airwaves and popular magazines to say she was “furious” to discover that two of her children’s favorite foods, apples and strawberries, might be hazardous to their health because of Alar.²¹ *Newsweek* entitled its report “EPA Is Looking for a Few Bad Apples.”

The result was what publicist David Fenton described as “a sea of change in public opinion.” *The Wall Street Journal* reported that “apples and apple juice have been going down garbage disposals all across the country.” The school boards of

¹⁴*Consumer’s Research*, July 1989, p. 28. Letter from editors of *Consumer Reports* in response to article, “Does Everything Cause Cancer?”

¹⁵“Fruit Fights,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 1989, p. A-14.

¹⁶Mothers and Others, “Fact Sheet: Alar,” undated.

¹⁷“Apple Juice: A Long Way from the Tree,” *Consumer Reports*, May 1989, p. 293.

¹⁸Reuters, “Agencies: Alar Scare Nearly Over,” *Orlando Sentinel*, November 4, 1989, p. 12.

¹⁹A. C. Nielsen and Co. report to Florida Citrus Commission, October 1989.

²⁰“Avery’s Uniroyal Ends Alar Sales in U.S.; Apple Product Imports Still Worry Critics,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 5, 1989, p. B3.

²¹“Ms. Streep Goes to Washington to Stop a Bitter Harvest,” *People Magazine*, March 20, 1989, p. 50.

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Fact sheet: Alar

Mothers & Others is frequently asked about Alar, the chemical that was removed from the market in 1989 after a campaign by Mothers & Others and the Natural Resources Defense Council to call attention to problems of pesticides in children's food. Here, we address some of the facts and myths surrounding this controversial chemical.

Our children are safer with Alar off the market. In 1989, public pressure led the manufacturer of Alar (which was used on apple crops to control growth and enhance apples' red color) to take the product off the market. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) later banned Alar for use on food products—*years after the agency first acknowledged the chemical's potential to cause cancer*. After concluding its review of the scientific data in 1992, the agency reiterated that Alar and its “breakdown” product, UDMH, should be classified as “probable human carcinogens,” and that long-term exposure to Alar posed unacceptable risks to public health. (UDMH was formed when apples containing residues of Alar were processed into things like applesauce and apple juice.) Children eat significantly more apples and apple products, relative to their body weight, than adults do, and therefore received relatively greater exposure to Alar/UDMH. What's more, because their physiological systems are still developing, children are usually more susceptible than adults to the toxic effects of a contaminant. So children were *even more at risk* from exposure to Alar and UDMH than the general public—and are better off with Alar off the market.

There is NO truth to the claim that a child would have to eat 28,000 pounds of apples a day to be at risk from Alar. The chemical industry makes this claim based on high doses of UDMH fed to laboratory animals. Animals are routinely tested at very high doses, and a majority of the scientific community endorses the high dose method as a valid basis for regulating human exposure to chemicals, rather than waiting for actual proof of carcinogenicity in humans. However, the *human* risk from Alar was not based on the assumption that children would ingest an equal amount of UDMH as lab animals—risks to people are always figured on real exposure levels. In the case of Alar, exposure estimates were based on actual pesticide residue levels found on apples and on actual consumption data for pre-schoolers, which the USDA says is one ounce of raw apple and two ounces of apple juice per day.

FIGURE 7-4 Mothers and Others distributed a specific fact sheet about the Alar chemical

Source: (Courtesy of Mothers and others.)

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New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, among others, banned apples from the lunch programs. (Fenton later said that effect was one not recommended by NRDC.)

The NRDC report highlighted the risk to children, who, because of their size and tendency to eat more fresh fruit than adults, seemed more at risk. “Children ingest so many apples for their size,” Fenton said, “that the legal federal standard is unsafe.” Reuters reported “Many consumers and school lunchrooms stopped buying apples,” after hearing or seeing the report. “The negative messages about the safety of Alar and apples left the public unsure about what to believe,” the Hill & Knowlton report said. “This led to a startling decline in intent to purchase apples.”

The public was faced with cognitive dissonance—wanting to believe that apples were healthful, yet besieged by messages that apples would cause cancer. “The scare, though short-lived, was nearly everywhere,” reports Lee Baker in his book *The Credibility Factor*.²² People phoned the International Apple Institutes to see if apple juice should be disposed of in a toxic waste site!

Merchants, too, were worried. “Consumer reaction to the program [*60 Minutes*] was explosive, prompting many retailers to proclaim they would no longer sell Alar-treated apples or apple products.” The International Apple Institute said at the time that consumers’ concerns about the health effects of Alar had probably cost apple growers more than \$100 million, a figure that proved to be conservative.

Competitors, however, were delighted. A representative of the A. C. Neilson Company reported to the Florida Citrus Commission that “lingering effects of the Alar scare” in 1989 helped orange juice widen its lead over apple juice as the fruit beverage of choice in American homes.

The Public Relations Problem

Although the facts about apples and Alar weighed heavily in favor of the industry, the emotions were all negative.

The bulk of the communication, however, targeted apples and Alar in general—*without regard to the secondary role of UDMH*. Perception had been shaped in a way that left apples—all apples—tainted by association with the pesticide. Changing that perception was the challenge of the industry and its public relations counsel.

The Public Relations Impact

Public relations techniques created the problem for the apple growers and processors, and public relations techniques helped get them back on their feet. David Fenton, public relations counsel to NRDC, outlined his program in a lengthy memo. In his memo, Fenton said that the situation was created “because of a carefully planned media campaign,” based on NRDC’s report “Intolerable Risk.” Participation by actress Meryl Streep “was an essential element.”

Fenton said that the goal of his campaign was to “create so many repetitions of NRDC’s message that average American consumers could not avoid hearing it. The idea was for the story to achieve a life of its own, and to continue for weeks and months to affect policy and consumer habits.” This goal, Fenton says, was met. “A modest investment by NRDC repaid itself many-fold in tremendous media exposure and substantial, immediate revenue for further pesticide work.” Other revenue-producing elements of the program were “self-published book sales . . . and a 900 phone number.”

The timing of the campaign was to grant *60 Minutes* an exclusive “break,” then to hold the Washington and satellite press conferences the following day. The *60 Minutes*

²²Lee Baker, *The Credibility Factor*, Homewood, IL: Business One Irwin, 1993, pp. 120–127.

broadcast moved the needle of public awareness to 45 percent, while subsequent coverage moved it to nearly 95 percent. (But both numbers are highly questionable; for initial exposure to reach 45 percent of *any* public, to say nothing of the food-consuming public, is virtually impossible. The total audience for *60 Minutes* proved to be a tiny fraction of this group.)

Fenton played the “Streep” card a week later fanning the flames. Her group, Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits, would lobby citizens to seek changes in pesticide laws and ask for pesticide-free products at retail outlets. Other celebrities joined the bandwagon as the story gained momentum. Schools began dropping apples from the menu; retail stores began rejecting Alar-tainted fruit. Alar was withdrawn from the market and the EPA, USDA, and FDA issued statements saying that apples were safe.

The media relations work done by Fenton and NRDC was thorough. In breadth and depth, the coverage generated and the resultant outcry met Fenton’s goals. In fact, the media took the story so strongly that, to some, the coverage became advocacy rather than reporting of factual information or news. This is often the case in contemporary journalism, as audiences and advertising decline and coverage becomes more and more sensational in an attempt to recapture them.

At a Smithsonian Institution conference for environmentalists and writers, Charles Alexander, science editor of *Time* magazine, said, “I would freely admit that, on this issue, we have crossed a boundary from news reporting to advocacy.” Later, David Brooks, editorial writer for the *Wall Street Journal*, wrote, “somehow the idea has gotten around that the environment isn’t just a normal political issue, but a

quasi-religious crusade. As a result, public discussion of the environment has been about as rigorous as one expects from a jihad. . . . The reporters who became advocates seem to think they are doing the environment a favor.”²³

Andrea Mitchell of NBC said, “Clearly, the networks have made that decision now, where you’d have to call it advocacy.”²⁴ “Usually, it takes a significant natural disaster to create this much sustained news attention for an environmental problem,” Fenton wrote in his memo. “We believe this experience proves there are ways to raise public awareness for the purpose of moving Congress and policy makers.”

The Apple Growers Respond

Apple growers would probably characterize the Alar scare as an “unnatural disaster.” According to Hill & Knowlton, the producers of *60 Minutes* had promised the apple industry a “balanced look at the pesticide issue,” but what occurred was later characterized by the *Wall Street Journal* as “fright wig treatment of Alar.” Apples, not Alar, took the center stage.

With overnight telephone surveys, H&K followed the decline in apples’ reputation. The public wanted to be assured that apples were safe before sales could rebound. What industry leaders hoped could be a low-profile response shifted into a higher gear. The truth would be the chief weapon.

While Washington State apples were hardest hit, and those growers would be the principal financial backer of the defense effort, it was decided that a national organization should represent the industry. Therefore, the International Apple Institute was identified as the nominal leader for the program funded by the Washington Apple Commission.

²³“Alar PR,” *Chemtech*, May 1989, p. 264.

²⁴Ibid.

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The strategy was threefold: (1) to get the facts out about apples' safety (and to separate apples from Alar); (2) to discredit the NRDC research as being based on old, discredited data; and (3) to get key influencers—government, scientific, medical—to stand up for the safety and nutritional benefits of apples and apple products.

Key publics were (1) governmental agencies, (2) industry insiders including growers, (3) the food industry including retailers and wholesalers, (4) the medical and scientific community, (5) schools, and (6) the news media.

The results were good. Consumer awareness of the Alar “danger” remained high, but by the third week of March 1989 (less than one month after the first *60 Minutes* broadcast) the decline in intent to purchase had reversed.

Sales bottomed out and began a slow climb upward until, by early May, shipments were “setting seasonal highs.” By fall, per capita consumption of apples hit an all-time high. During the 1989–1990 apple season, the average American ate 21 pounds of fresh apples.

Legacies of the Alar Debate

One of the legacies of the Alar debate was the passage of “agricultural disparagement” laws by at least 12 states. These laws, also called “veggie libel laws,” establish liability if someone knowingly makes false and disparaging statements about perishable food products that result in damages. The state of Texas passed an agricultural disparagement law in 1995. This law was the basis of an unsuccessful lawsuit brought against talk-show host Oprah Winfrey in 1996 by Texas cattlemen for an on-air comment she made concerning beef.²⁵

Opponents of the veggie libel laws say that the laws violate the First Amendment, stifle public debate, and discourage people from speaking out or filing complaints with government agencies. More than 15 states now have anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) laws in place, which prevent bringing a lawsuit based on an agricultural disparagement law. Anti-SLAPP legislation is not in response only to the veggie libel lawsuits but is a measure to prevent any meritless litigation that is aimed at suppressing free speech.

There continues to be numerous articles, studies and reports published that offer evidence that Alar is safe as well as unsafe. Representatives from both sides of this issue continue to resolutely maintain their positions.²⁶ Despite the removal of Alar from the marketplace in 1989, many in the food and chemical industry are committed to reiterating that the Alar “scare” caused an unnecessary panic and that Alar will always be synonymous with “hoax.” As soon as one article appears that supports the harmlessness of Alar, another follows, documenting the hazards of the chemical. The apple industry carried out a successful counterattack to maintain the healthy image of apples. But advocates on both sides of the issue of Alar's safety continue to keep that debate alive in the media.

Crops and Chemicals in 2007

The new “Alar” debate of the decade might be the genetic engineering of crops to make them more prolific and drought and bug resistant. Though there is little scientific research on the dangers in reengineering these crops, concern among many consumers is high. Thus, there is a steady increase in “organic”

²⁵See Case 6-2 in Chapter 6.

²⁶See “Ten Years Later, Myth of ‘Alar Scare’ Persists,” Environmental Working Group report (www.ewg.org/pub/home/reports/alar/alar.html) and “The Alar ‘Scare’ Was for Real,” Elliott Negin, *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 1996.

labeling in supermarkets. Milk is advertised as being “hormone free.” Farmers and organic food markets are becoming more popular. All these options are, of course, more expensive for the consumer. Yet, perceptions of safety

have increased their market share significantly. With continuing media coverage of concerns, food producers will be fighting these perceptions and defending their farming practices for years to come. ■

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. To carry out its work, a public interest organization such as NRDC must maintain a staff of administrators, scientists and researchers, lawyers, public relations practitioners, and others—as either employees or consultants. Because NRDC has no products or services to sell, in the usual sense, funds must be raised through memberships, contributions, and events to cover its budget. To what extent might this consideration influence the preparation, release, and promotion of a highly visible, controversial report such as the one on Alar? Do you think that the public that is the target of such campaigns—which are carried on by all public interest organizations as an important part of their *illusions*—is aware of this possible self-interest? If the public should be aware, whose responsibility is it to make them so?
2. Why would the public listen to an obvious nonexpert such as Meryl Streep on a scientific topic like this? Critics of such celebrity involvement in issues called her a “Hollywood toxicologist.” Are you aware of any similar incidents?
3. Among its target publics, Hill & Knowlton listed the news media. Are the media a *public*? Or a communications *vehicle*? What are the strategy implications of according them status as a public?
4. Does David Fenton’s campaign for NRDC raise any ethical issues? Check the PRSA code in the introduction to Chapter 10.
5. Is it possible that the attention focused on apples by the Alar scare played a part in the fact that Americans are now consuming the fruit in record numbers? Attempt to make a case for the position that it did.