



Horticultural
Development
Company

Grower summary

FV 360

Leafy Salads Issues
Management

Final Report 2010

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The results and conclusions in this report may be based on an investigation conducted over one year. Therefore, care must be taken with the interpretation of the results.

Use of pesticides

Only officially approved pesticides may be used in the UK. Approvals are normally granted only in relation to individual products and for specified uses. It is an offence to use non-approved products or to use approved products in a manner that does not comply with the statutory conditions of use, except where the crop or situation is the subject of an off-label extension of use.

Before using all pesticides check the approval status and conditions of use.

Read the label before use: use pesticides safely.

Further information

If you would like a copy of the full report, please email the HDC office (hdc@hdc.org.uk), quoting your HDC number, alternatively contact the HDC at the address below.

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Headline

This report highlights key activities undertaken by the British Leafy Salad Association during 2009 in response to articles produced by the press. The project ensures that factually correct information is produced which indirectly promotes consumption of leafy salads.

Background and expected deliverables

The leafy salad industry handles a 'Ready To Eat' (RTE) product. The press occasionally issues technically erroneous and misleading media coverage on many aspects of leafy salad production – both within the outdoor and the protected sectors. RTE produce is often the subject of suspicion and viewed as a potential source of food-borne diseases. Microbiological issues are frequently covered by the press in food reports.

If the British Leafy Salads Association (BLSA), did not have an Issues Management platform in place numerous factually incorrect articles would have been produced. The BLSA Issues Management project has corrected articles that have gone on to be published. Food journalists are aware of this project and so use it as a port of call for reliable information on technical issues related to the industry. There is no other system in place to defend and promote the industry against negative press publicity. Monitoring press statements is a 24 hour / 7day task. Individual companies do not have the time and resources to carry out this important role.

Mustard Communications is the PR agency that manages this project. The agency has worked with the leafy salad sector since 2004 and is fully aware and briefed on major technical issues that arise within the media. However, the press are constantly finding new 'scare stories.' Mustard Communications responds accordingly to these press articles following consultation with industry experts. The agency often averts bad news stories before publication.

Summary of the project and main conclusions

Journalists were provided with accurate information about how leafy salad crops are produced in the UK. Bad news stories were turned into positive press coverage which resulted in an increase in sales of UK produce. Mustard Communications are now recognised as the leading source of accurate technical information on leafy salads by the press. The agency is the "one stop shop" for their enquiries and information is kept up to date by a range of industry experts working in collaboration with Wendy Akers of Mustard Communications.

The cost of subscribing to a daily print press monitoring service alerts the industry to potential adverse press stories. A network of technical contacts has been established over the last seven years. However, this requires constant updating and liaison as new products reach the market and as new food issues arise. Whenever journalists contact the agency with a news story they are provided with information on the benefits of eating leafy salads and advised to include information on seasonality, health and nutrition attributes in the hope that a good news story is published that increases the consumption of leafy salad products.

The summary (Table 1) of issues addressed proves the necessity for an issues management campaign. Negative press reports are responded to so that they do not develop any further thereby ensuring they are not taken up by additional publishers.

Over the past twelve months many of the reports have involved issues in other countries and currently journalists assume that the growing systems in the UK are the same as overseas and therefore will potentially have the same problems/issues. By corresponding with these writers we are educating the food and media press about our UK industry, particularly highlighting our stringent food safety checks and standards.

A particular success story was the prevention of a television programme being aired because it had factually incorrect information. This halted the resultant bad publicity, which may have led to consumers not purchasing leafy salads. Producers are aware that it is extremely difficult to get consumers to return to purchasing a product after a food health scare.

The full summary of key activities undertaken during 2009 is given in the table below:

Table 1: The 2009 BLSA Issues Management summary of activities

Press Article	Activities Undertaken
The use of Citrox in Salad Bags	The BBC's flagship current affairs programme Panorama conducted an investigation into the use of citrox in salad bags as part of a proposed programme on food labelling and food fraud. The focus was on 'Citrox 14W Plus', a salad washing aid, and 'Citrox Antifoam' and in particular the organic status of the materials back in 2007. The agency liaised over several months with members on the best responses to give and as a result, Panorama decided the content was not strong enough for its programme and it was moved to a one off programme entitled 'What's really in your Food?' which was broadcast on 14 July. Members felt the issue had been well handled which resulted in minimal damage to the sector.
The <i>Clostridium difficile</i> Bacterial Story	Glasgow's Caledonian University carried out an investigation into the reasons for the spread of <i>Clostridium difficile</i> . Part of their work investigated the 'potential risk' of spread through bagged salads, as they are consumed uncooked. Researchers went out and purchased bags of salads for analysis. Their results showed that one of the thirteen bags tested contained <i>C.difficile</i> bacteria. Their report was issued to the press, resulting in a number of calls to the agency. The team reacted immediately liaising with members over the story to create an official response. In addition the team drafted individual responses for the following journalists running with the story: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dean Herbert, Scottish Daily Mail. • Robert McNeil, The Scotsman • Andrew Beaven, Scottish Daily Mail • News Editor, The Times, Glasgow • News Editor, www.dailyexpress.co.uk • BBC Radio Scotland • The Sun
The Scottish Food Enforcement Liaison Committee's Research Working Group	The Scottish Food Enforcement Liaison Committee's Research Working Group issued a report which was summarised in a very misleading way. It seemed to indicate that salad bags were one of the top eight food groups that fail food safety microbiological tests. In fact, once the agency investigated this with members, it was found that none of the salad bags highlighted in the report actually contained any pathogens. Members approached the working group to highlight their concerns and to request that this be made clear in any press release. The agency also drafted a holding statement in case the story was picked up by the press.

Press Article	Activities Undertaken
Israeli Study into how Salmonella can grow inside Iceberg Lettuce	The agency was alerted to a study by the Agricultural Research Organization at the Volcani Centre and Tel-Aviv University in Israel, who examined the role that light and photosynthesis play on the ability of Salmonella bacteria to infiltrate lettuce leaves via stomata. The team advised members that this was potentially a very damaging story, especially as they had video images which appeal to TV broadcasting and there had been a recent withdrawal of Israeli iceberg lettuce. The agency liaised with members to draft a holding statement in case of press contact
Chlorine/MAP/ Pesticides	<p>The agency continues to correct misconceptions on a number of issues, particularly on the use of chlorine and MAP in salad bags & the use of pesticides. Letters have been issued to the following in relation to these issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily Mail May 18. Circ: 2,228,897 – journalist Michael Hanlon • Countryfile Magazine. October issue. Circ: 350,000 journalist Joanna Blythman and the editor • Olive Magazine. November issue Circ: 88,944, to the editor • Clarissa Dickson Wright, who has recently published an autobiography which carried a section on salads
Japanese Scientists' New Method of Growing Salads	Daily Mail reported on new Japanese ways of growing salads which it dubbed "Frankenstein Food". The agency liaised with members over the probability of these growing methods being used in the UK and responded to journalist David Derbyshire.
Poor Weather leads to Concerns about Crop Shortage	The agency was approached by the BBC Business unit who had heard there might be a shortage of leafy salad crops because of poor weather conditions across Europe. The agency approached various members for feedback and drafted a response aimed at negating any possibly unhelpful press coverage about shortages or price rises.
Press Monitoring	Agency monitors the press and Google salad alerts daily for any negative stories or up and coming issues.

Financial benefits

Kantar Worldpanel data shows that consumption of a range of leafy salad products is increasing. By responding to inaccurate bad publicity we are preventing food scares from affecting consumer sales; at the same time the benefits of leafy salads are promoted to obtain proactive industry messages.

The Dunnhumby data details will be available from the BLSA office shortly – anyone who would like the full consumer information should contact the BLSA office.

Wendy Akers and the team at Mustard Communications continue to increase their knowledge of food issues and thus are able to respond quickly as they have direct contact with relevant industry personnel – the lead time to providing written responses to relevant journalists is very quick.

The technical representatives of the BLSA meet at least twice a year, and the marketing group quarterly – if any new issues are identified Mustard Communications are invited to the meeting for discussions. There is 24hour / 7 day email communication link between all involved.

Action points for growers

- Growers should continue to help this work by providing technical information to Mustard Communications for any products in which they are experts.
- Keeping Mustard Communications informed of any press enquiries that they receive, particularly if they are asked to take part in food television and/or radio programmes.
- Ensure that funding is secured on an annual basis to enable this vital work to continue.