



THE TIMES 100

BUSINESS CASE STUDIES

Communication – Bernard Matthews

Bernard Matthews rears over seven million turkeys every year. 13 million UK households buy a Bernard Matthews Farms branded product each year. Despite the size of its operations, the company remains close to its roots in East Anglia with its farms located across Norfolk, Suffolk and Lincolnshire.



Chance events can have a significant impact on a food business. For example, Jamie Oliver's high-profile campaign in 2005 to improve the quality of school meals singled out foods such as Bernard Matthews' Turkey Twizzlers as being unhealthy. In 2007, there was an outbreak of bird flu at a Bernard Matthews farm in Suffolk. Initially, Bernard Matthews did not speak up and defend its product range. This resulted in adverse press coverage and the company lost credibility with the media. The company's immediate reaction to the crisis was to focus on eliminating the disease, which it did successfully. Communications came low on the list of priorities. This meant that the resulting information 'vacuum' was soon filled with damaging and often inaccurate news reports. When the company realised the extent of the damage and finally opened up to the press it was too little, too late. As a result, Bernard Matthews' sales in the UK fell by 35% and the company went into a loss position. In 2008, the company implemented a business turnaround programme, involving improved communications to stakeholders.

The communication process involves a sender (who), transmitting information (what), in a form (how) so that the receiver will understand. Internal stakeholders include the employees, the managers and directors of the business and its owners or shareholders. Communications with internal stakeholders help to create a positive attitude within the company. This is particularly important when times are tough as employees may become de-motivated. Some of the ways that Bernard Matthews communicated with its stakeholders included:

- producing a bilingual weekly newsletter on business developments for all employees
- staff have access to news about the business on the company's **intranet** site
- face-to-face meetings inform managers about progress and new initiatives
- shareholders are kept informed through regular meetings and financial statements.

Important external stakeholders include customers, the government, the company's suppliers, the media and the communities that live close to the company's farms and operations. Its communications programme aims to improve perceptions of the company and brand whilst increasing public awareness of turkey as a tasty, versatile and healthy meat. These are important parts of rebuilding trust with consumers and restoring the company's reputation. Bernard Matthews uses written, visual and face-to-face forms of communication to get its messages across to external stakeholders.

- **Advertising** - Bernard Matthews advertises on television and in the press. This is a powerful and effective way of getting a message to a wide audience.
- **Internet and social media** - Bernard Matthews currently has four websites. These promote new products, the company's farming credentials, new initiatives and the health benefits of eating turkey.
- **Media and public relations** - Bernard Matthews also seeks to communicate indirectly with consumers by engaging with the media and other opinion formers. The management regularly meets with journalists to ensure that they understand what the company is doing e.g. its emphasis on animal welfare and sustainability.

Questions

1. Define communication.

2. Describe some of the different methods Bernard Matthews uses to communicate with its external stakeholders.

3. Explain the problems caused by Bernard Matthew's lack of communication during the outbreak of bird flu.

4. Analyse the importance of effective communication to organisations like Bernard Matthews.

Task

An organisation is planning to relocate its offices from the Midlands to Scotland. Staff will be given the opportunity to move with the organisation and generous relocation allowances will be paid. Those staff not willing or able to move will have to find alternative jobs. Develop a communications programme for the managers to use when informing the staff about the relocation and during the relocation process.

What have you learned?

Write one thing you have learned about communication on to a piece of paper, then make an aeroplane out of the paper and fly it to someone else in the room. The next person writes something different about communication on to the paper plane and flies it on to a third person. Keep doing this until five people have written on each plane. At the end, each plane should have five different points about communication written on them. These can be shared with the group or used for future revision.