

Subway's "Fishy" Tuna Scandal: A Public Relations Case Study

Rebekah Alegria
University of Texas at San Antonio

Until 1630, the population of Mantua was about 30,000 inhabitants and its economy was really sturdy, thanks to agriculture and some manufacturing activities. The war and its overwhelming effects were added to the ones of the humongous plague epidemic. In 1631, the city counted less than 7,000 inhabitants and each economic activity was absent. Thus the new dukedom's government tried to boost both the population and the economic growth by guaranteeing tax exemptions for those people who chose to move to Mantua. This paper analyzes the stories of these entrepreneurs, who took advantage of the incentives, making private negotiations with the new government. The outcome was kind of surprising because the demographic growth was really fast, in 1640 already, the city was back to 25,000 inhabitants, but mostly the economic recovery was focused on new areas, such as stockings and caps factories and paper industry. The Plague and the war erased a city but a new one arose in its place, followed by a new ruling class and new economic basis.

INTRODUCTION

A January 2021 lawsuit against the national submarine sandwich chain Subway broke the internet and the reputation of the long-lived American company. The plaintiffs in the suit, Karen Dhanowa and Nilima Amin, filed the lawsuit in early 2021 claiming that Subway's tuna sandwiches were made with "anything but tuna" (Ledsom, 2021). This caused much uproar for both Subway and tuna lovers alike, hurting the company's reputation for a while and making their customers question the quality of the other provided Subway products. This is not the first time the quality of Subway's products has been put into question either.

History

Subway is an American fast food restaurant franchise that primarily sells sandwiches, wraps, salads, and soups. It is owned and operated by Doctor's Associates Inc., with its CEO being John Chidsey, who was appointed in 2019. Subway is one of the fastest-growing franchises globally, with 44,280 restaurants in 110 countries and territories as of September 18, 2015. It is the largest single-brand restaurant chain and the largest restaurant operator in the world. Subway is committed to customer satisfaction by offering high-quality, fresh food with exceptional service and good value. They take great pride in serving each other, their customers and their communities. They seek continuous improvement in all that they do. They value a sense of urgency and emphasize an innovative, entrepreneurial approach to business. Though these are their goals, their products have come into question in multiple occasions, including the quality of bread, tuna, and the inconsistent length of the famous footlong submarine sandwich.

PR Structure: Public Information Model

The public relations structure the brand chooses is the Public Information Model. This model is primarily concerned with providing important and factual information to the public about an organization to enhance and maintain the company's image if it is in question. Subway used this model in the form of its created informational website concerning the factual evidence of the quality of its tuna, the supply chain in which it derives, expert opinions and evaluations of the tuna, and a 100% guarantee of realness and freshness.

Social, Cultural, and Economic Context

The social environment of Subway has seen better days. In 2015, Subway brand and commercial spokesperson Jarod Fogle, was convicted of child pornography charges and soliciting sex with underage girls in 2015 after a 15-year partnership with Subway. Just six years later in 2021, Subway would find itself in yet another social and ethical scandal of whether their tuna is actually the real deal.

The political environment of Subway pertains to health regulations, where Subway has an advantage. Nowadays, many consumers and health organizations look down on and condemn the concept of "fast food" and the use of genetically modified and hormonally supplemented foods served to their customers. Subway is more of a healthy option for most people, offering guests with a selection of "fresh" deli meats, sauces, veggies, and sides to customize to one's liking, but further company spreading into developing nations with different social and cultural parameters would require altering the menus and catering to the specific customer needs.

Franchising for the Subway brand is a low cost compared to other franchise costs. Still, due to the guarantee of freshness by the brand, the cost of supplies and ingredients used in food prep and service is much higher than other fast food competitors. Because of this, Subway patrons value the product and service and have a higher perceived value for the brand, unlike other frequented fast food chains.

THE CAMPAIGN

Purpose

Subway's image has been rooted in freshness and quality that compares to no other fast food joint. Subway initiated this PR campaign to repair the reputation damage done to the image and branding of the submarine chain. The two prosecutors in the lawsuit claiming that Subway did not produce of-quality tuna created a huge controversy in a time in which "cancel culture prevails." The defendants claimed that Subway has deliberately misled customers by selling products "falsely advertised as 'tuna'" to charge a "premium price." (Carmel, 2021). Subway needed to act timely and effectively to preserve their image as a healthy and guaranteed-fresh establishment.

The incident created tons of negative press surrounding the submarine sandwich chain, much like they had seen before in previous incidents concerning their bread quality and the measurement of the promised foot-long sub. Subway needed to assure the public that the ingredients and food items, especially the tuna they serve, were and is of proper FDA quality and is fresh, as deliberately promised by the brand.

Subway expectedly experienced a loss of sales and revenue due to the false lawsuit accusation, effecting the already declining chain even more. Just in 2020 alone, about 2,000 to 2,400 locations shut down and many were experiencing dramatic sales loss due to the pandemic (Kay, 2021). The lawsuit and its effect on the brand did not aid in these declines. Subway needed to find an answer to the tuna uncertainties before it was too late.

Target Publics

In its PR efforts, Subway primarily used social media and the media to distribute their messages, disallowing a means of two-way communication between consumers and the brand. But, the message effectively delivered to a larger, global audience.

The Subway primary target publics were:

- Media

- Social Media
- Loyal Subway patrons
- Future Subway guests
- Employees of Subway
- Subway Investors
- Tuna lovers
- The tuna industry
- Guests who frequent Subway specifically for their tuna
- Government agencies such as the FDA (Food and Drug Administration and AFT (Applied Food Technologies)
- Food, Health, and Scientific organizations

Research Methods

The research methods most likely used by Subway to create and establish its campaign were both non-quantitative and quantitative. The non-quantitative methods were most likely used to develop an understanding of the false narratives that the target public believed to combat them with qualitative and scientific research conducted by the brand to alleviate their reputation. Quantitative research was at the forefront of this study, as many testing avenues and research were done on the methods that Subway acquires, prepares, and serves their tuna.

OBJECTIVES

Subway did not list out clear objectives in a specific campaign that I could reference during their campaign. The following objectives were observed by myself through actions made by Subway through customer relations. That being said, these objectives will not be time-bound or measurable.

Impact Objectives

Informational

- To inform the public of the truth/facts surrounding Subway tuna within 6 months of the incident.
- To deny the rumors spread by the false claims lawsuit as soon as research proves rumors to be false.
- To increase public awareness of the origins of Subway's tuna fish within 6 months of the incident.

Attitudinal

- To restore the brand's reputation for fresh ingredients, including the tuna fish.
- To reverse the negative attitudes and ill will being expressed toward Subway due to the false rumors.
- To reinforce favorable public opinion towards Subway.

Behavioral

- To increase tuna sales for Subway.
- To discourage the public from believing false narratives online concerning Subway and its products.
- To encourage the public to visit Subway's website for factual product information.

Output Objectives

- Promote a discount on social media for tuna footlongs if ordered on their website within a month of the incident to increase visits to the brand's webpage.
- Establish a website containing all factual evidence about Subway's tuna and its supply chain.

PROGRAMMING

Public Relations Model

As mentioned above, Subway's PR strategy used the Public Information Model as a reactive response to distribute information to its target publics without the opportunity to hear feedback from them. The negative feedback already being conveyed online, on news outlets, and on social media most likely prompted this model to be used. This model aims to reiterate factual and correct information to the public to alleviate the spread of misinformation and repair the companies image.

Messages

The campaign created by Subway was deliberately carried through online via their specially-made website debunking the tuna rumors, subway.com/en-us/tunafacts. This website had the theme "*Subway Tuna is REAL Tuna*", portraying the message that has only and always provided real tuna to their customers and this is backed up by the company themselves and by quality, scholarly sources as provided on the site.

Action Plan

After the initial filing of the lawsuit reached the public's hands in early January 2021, a press release was issued soon after to set the facts straight by the company, specifically John Chidney, CEO of Subway. John stated in the press release, "There simply is no truth to the allegations in the complaint that was filed in California. Subway delivers 100% cooked tuna to its restaurants, which is mixed with mayonnaise and used in freshly made sandwiches, wraps, and salads served to and enjoyed by our guests. The taste and quality of our tuna make it one of Subway's most popular products, and these baseless accusations threaten to damage our franchisees. These small business owners work tirelessly to uphold the high standards that Subway sets for its products, including its tuna." (Subway, 2021). Soon after the press release, research and a thorough investigation of the brand's tuna unveiled the tuna to be 100% real.

Soon after the truth was revealed, Subway erected a strictly dedicated website to alleviate the false rumors about the brand. The website includes facts, scientific testimonials, details on the supply chain, and more. The purpose of the creation of the website is to foster and win back the trust of future and loyal Subway consumers, as they would then have direct insight on the process of catch-to-table tuna they receive.

Additionally, one social media promotional post was shown across Subway's social media sites stating that if a customer purchased a tuna footlong sandwich from Subway online, the sandwich would be 15% off of the original pricing. This was strategically posted after the website's creation in mid-January to ensure that customers could view the informational website that Subway created to dispute the tuna rumors. This also contributed to the boost in tuna sales for the company.

Controlled Media Use

For the controlled media use, Subway released a newsletter about the incident to customers and the research findings to combat the false claims. Additionally, a website was created to specifically address the facts and the fiction about the tuna they serve, along with having the social media promotional deal on footlong tuna sandwiches of 15% off, only available on Subway's newly released website.

Uncontrolled Media Use

For the uncontrolled media use, national and international news outlets covered the lawsuit and Subway's responses. Subway also sent press releases to media outlets and their website with the CEO's response to the false claims. There was also national and international coverage on the findings of the tuna scandal that confirmed the realness of the fish served at their establishments, along with the uncontrolled social media posts, as consumers and viewers were left to comment and share the posts as they pleased.

Communication Principles

Subway was consistent with its communication principles while addressing the media throughout the campaign. They made sure to stand strong, concise, firm, and correct in all released media and statements

to the public and to those involved in the lawsuit. Still, they failed to leave an open medium of communication with its target audiences.

EVALUATION

It is impossible to measure the exact success of the campaign, being that the objectives of Subway's campaign were not directly stated and assumed by myself. Objectives were not measurable or time-bound, and the brand has yet to release this information to the public, if they ever were to.

Results of the Campaign

Since the campaign's establishment, Subway began to grow as a company. Soon after releasing all of the information pertaining to the tuna, Subway established a new menu, "Eat Fresh Refresh" in July of 2021 that has allowed the company's business and profits to soar. Data from Technomic states that domestic sales were down to 8.3 billion dollars in 2020, a worrisome 2 billion less than the year before's 10.2 billion (Dominko, 2021). Since the implementation of the PR campaign, along with the implementation of a new, refreshed and fresh menu, Subway is reported to beat its predicted 2021 sales projections by nearly 1 billion dollars (Coley, 2021).

Strengths of the Campaign

Subway's strengths during their PR crisis were that they attempted to attack all false claims with facts as fast as they could. Subway also included expert opinions and appeals in their efforts to dispute rumors with facts on their website and on their social media. Subway also issued a promotional deal on their tuna sandwiches in order to win the public's opinions back, which was a strong move.

Weaknesses of the Campaign

Through my research, I could not find a public apology for the misinformation that was spread. Though they did not start the spread of rumors, an apology to customers who believed the rumors should have been issued. The whereabouts of the tuna and its process of getting from production to the customers should have been better detailed to avoid this chaos. The PR department also did not make a two-way symmetrical way of communicating with customers, and did not allow any other concerns other than the lawsuit to be voiced, i.e., through consumer surveys.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The section below will include the recommendations for Subway and CEO John Chidney that I believe should have been followed initially. The outline includes detailed objectives, how to evaluate those objectives, and programming different and more sustainable than the one Subway seemingly followed. Because Subway did not have measurable objectives, they were unable to be evaluated.

Objectives

Impact Objectives

Informational.

- To inform 70% of current customers that Subway will be evaluating a detailed investigation of the issue within one day after the initial incident.
- To inform 50% of potential Subway Customers that the brand is conducting a detailed investigation of the issue within one day after the initial incident.
- To inform 90% of Subway investors that the brand is conducting a detailed investigation of the issue within one day of the initial incident.
- To inform 200 media outlets of Subway's detailed investigation of the issue within one day after the incident.

- To inform at least 5 social media platforms of the thorough investigation conducted by Subway and trusted scientific experts following this issue within one day of the initial incident.
- To inform 90% of Subway employees globally of Subway's thorough investigation of the issue within one day after the incident
- To bring awareness of the factual evidence for 80% of current customers proving the quality of Subway's tuna and its supply chain within 3 months of its release.
- To bring attention to the factual evidence for 80% of future customers proving the quality of Subway's tuna and its supply chain within 3 months of its release.

Attitudinal.

- To reverse negative attitudes towards Subway by current Subway customers by 35% within 6 months of the incident.
- To decrease negative attitudes towards Subway by future customers by 35% within 6 months of the incident.
- To reverse negative attitudes towards Subway by investors by 40% within 3 months of the incident.
- To inspire positive stories from 100 media outlets pertaining to Subway's promising future within 3 months after the incident.
- To restore confidence among loyal Subway consumers by 50% within 6 months of the incident.

Behavioral.

- To increase Subway profits by 30% within the next year.
- To increase Subway tuna sub sales by 40% within the next year.
- To decrease negative comments and posts on social media by 50% within 6 months of the incident.
- To offer a 15% discount to Subway patrons who order tuna subs to increase likeability to the brand and their product by 40% within the next year.

Output Objectives

- To send quote from Subway CEO or spokesperson to 300 media outlets explaining Subway's side of the story along with promising a scientific and reputable response to the crisis within 24 hours of the initial incident.
- To issue an immediate statement, apology, and solution through Subway's website within 24 hours after the incident occurred.
- To send 200 press releases to various national and international media outlets (television, radio, print, etc.) outlining the incident and the plan for conducting a thorough investigation 48 hours after the event.
- Conduct three television interviews done by the 2 highest rating national news outlets, and top international news outlet within a week of the incident.
- To invite 100 global journalists to a press conference with Subway CEO, Subway executives, and the FDA for a Q&A surrounding the incident within a month.
- To achieve 50 positive articles from the press conference about the manner in which Subway and other experts handled the crisis within two weeks of the press conference.
- To send 500 press releases to all sorts of media outlets (television, radio, print, etc.) to explain the scientific and testing findings of Subway's tuna and how it is manufactured within 3 days of its creation.
- To invite 100 global journalists to a press conference with Subway CEO, executives, and the FDA to speak on the details of the tuna findings and plans to promote their fresh tuna within a week after the release of the information.
- To generate 75 articles about the proved realness of Subway's tuna to inform the public of the information and how Subway's reputation has and will continue to hold up within its freshness within two weeks of the press conference.

- To generate 100,000 positive social media impressions on each platform within 6 months of the real tuna campaign establishment.

Programming

PR Model: Two-Way Symmetrical Model

Theme: “Subway, Meat Fresh”

Messages

- “Caught Fresh to Eat Fresh”
- “Meat With Us!”

Actions

- Hold a press conference with Subway CEO, Executives, and FDA representatives on the case
- Send an immediate memo to employees to not speak to the press or anyone on the issue.
- Immediately speak on the issue on Subway’s website
- Be aware of the public’s opinions of the issue on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and Snapchat News.
- Establish new website specifically for Subway tuna facts and detail the Subway supply chain.
- Create the Subway tuna website and announce to the new campaign to the media.
- Incorporate new graphics for campaign and social media sites.
- Configure a detailed social media campaign with calendar, scheduled posts, and creative hashtags.

Uncontrolled Media

- National and International news outlets covering incident.
- Followers and other users posting the hashtags on social media to promote Subway’s real tuna and sub deal campaign.
- Press conference regarding the incident and true findings concerning the tuna.
- National and International news coverage of the truth about Subway’s tuna and the detailed supply chain information release.
- Press releases to media outlets detailing the tuna findings and promotional tuna deals.

Controlled Media

- Marketing emails to members of the Subway Club Loyalty members and others
- Sending out internal survey about company actions, services, products, and necessary changes and or recommendations.
- Sending out company newsletter about the incident and the actions transpiring since.
- Sending out a customer survey through email and on social media websites to generate a response of how Subway can improve its services and product.
- Press conference with CEO of Subway.

Use of Effective Communication

Source Credibility

The CEO of Subway, John Chidney will personally confirm and push for the fresh guarantee of not only Subway’s tuna, but also all other meats and ingredients provided to future and current customers, employees, social media, the media, and investors.

Salient Information

New customers and current customers who are interested in Subway and their services, especially the tuna. Also included would be the media and their awareness of the tuna scandal, its resolve, and the new menu items that have boosted Subway’s success.

Evaluation

Impact Objectives.

Informational.

- The listed objectives to inform Subway's current/future customers, employees, and investors of the thorough and detailed investigation of the incident will be measured through an online survey.
- The goal to bring awareness of the new Flex-Schedule Program to 70% of current and 50% future customers will be measured through online surveys released on the website and social medias of Subway.
- Additional informational objectives can be measured by calculating the popularity of images and posts shared about the incident through Subway's social media sites and press releases sent to media locations.

Attitudinal.

- Attitudinal objectives can be measured by surveying current customers, future customers, and investors to measure how well the new campaign is working to decrease negative attitudes of Subway and their tuna.
- Send a survey through email to Subway Club Loyalty Members asking if their confidence in Subway has been restored to determine if the 50% goal has been met.
- Calculate the total number of television, print, and radio stories discussing a promising turnaround and future for Subway after the incident.

Behavioral.

- The Subway product and revenue reports each quarter will be used to determine if profits increased by 30% within the year.
- The Subway product and revenue reports each quarter will be used to determine if tuna sales increased by 40% within the year.
- Conduct a social media evaluation across all Subway social media platforms to determine if there was a decrease in negative commenting and postings about the brand.
- Measure how many times the promotional code for the discount on tuna subs was used to determine if the objective was successful by 40% that year.

Output Objectives.

- Establish record keeping to keep track of the amount of news releases sent to publications and broadcastings; the amount of journalist contacts and number of speeches given to target audiences.
- Document the initial Subway statement, apology, and solution to ensure that it was delivered within 24 hours after the incident occurred.
- Keep records of number of media outlets that quote Subway's side of the story to determine if it was conducted within 24 hours of the initial incident.
- Keep records of number of media outlets sent press releases outlining the incident and the plan for conducting a thorough investigation and determine if they were released within 48 hours after the event.
- Track all social media impressions across Subway's social platforms within 6 months of the campaign to determine if the goal of 100,000 positive impressions were met.
- Keep record of how many television interviews were done to determine if there were three completed within a week days after the incident.
- Keep records of number of media outlets sent press releases informing them of the scientific and testing findings of Subway's tuna and how it is manufactured to ensure it was sent out within 3 days of its creation.
- Record the number of journalists invited the press conference with Subway CEO, executives, and the FDA for a Q&A and determine if they received notice within a month of the incident.
- Track the number of positive articles from the press conference and determine if 75 were generated within two week after the press conference.

CONCLUSION

Subway's fishy tuna scandal of 2021 is an example of why full disclosure, within legal limits is necessary. Without the disclosure of prime information, such as the freshness of an ingredient that you are known to serve and is a fan-favorite, people are left to conclude and assume the worst. This is always at the company's downfall, never in favor of the establishment. As I evaluate over the whole campaign, I believe that Subway could have benefitted more with a two-way method of the PR model. Consumers want to be heard in times of turmoil for companies. Subway's method of Public information was effective to a degree. Still, it could have been more receptive to audience opinions and requests, possibly for more information on what type of tuna they serve, not just that it is 100% a tuna concoction. Subway must consider that creating a solid campaign with a method of communication between them and consumers would allow the public to forgive and forget the crisis ever happened in the first place.

REFERENCES

- Carmel, J. (2021, June 19). *The Big Tuna Sandwich Mystery*. The New York Times. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/19/style/subway-tuna-sandwich-lawsuit.html>
- Coley, B. (n.d.). *Subway: Sales skyrocketed after unprecedented menu update*. QSR Magazine. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.qsrmagazine.com/fast-food/subway-sales-skyrocketed-after-unprecedented-menu-update>
- Dominko, M. (2021, May 5). *Subway losing restaurants for "Dirt cheap"*. Eat This Not That. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.eatthis.com/news-fast-food-chain-subway-losing-restaurants-dirt-cheap>
- Farfan, B. (n.d.). *Read these mission statements from top food and beverage chains*. The Balance Small Business. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/food-beverage-mission-statements-4068551>
- Kay, G. (2021, January 22). *Subway reportedly closed 10% of its stores last year as the fast-food chain struggles with pandemic restrictions and slumping sales*. Business Insider. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.businessinsider.com/subway-reportedly-closed-2400-locations-in-2020-2021-1>
- Ledsom, A. (2021, August 11). *Is a subway tuna sandwich made of bread and tuna? it depends on the Law Suit*. Forbes. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexledsom/2021/08/10/is-a-subway-tuna-sandwich-made-of-bread-and-tuna-it-depends-on-the-law-suit/?sh=2d29e53f14c4>
- Restaurants, S. (2021, January 28). *Subway® restaurants serves 100% wild-caught tuna and fights back against baseless allegations*. Subway® Restaurants Serves 100% Wild-Caught Tuna and Fights Back Against Baseless Allegations. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/subway-restaurants-serves-100-wild-caught-tuna-and-fights-back-against-baseless-allegations-301217629.html>
- SeafoodSource Official Media. (n.d.). *Subway CEO hits back at Tuna Critics*. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/foodservice-retail/subway-ceo-hits-back-at-tuna-critics>
- SUBWAY. (n.d.). *Subway® Tuna is real tuna*. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.subway.com/en-us/tunafacts>