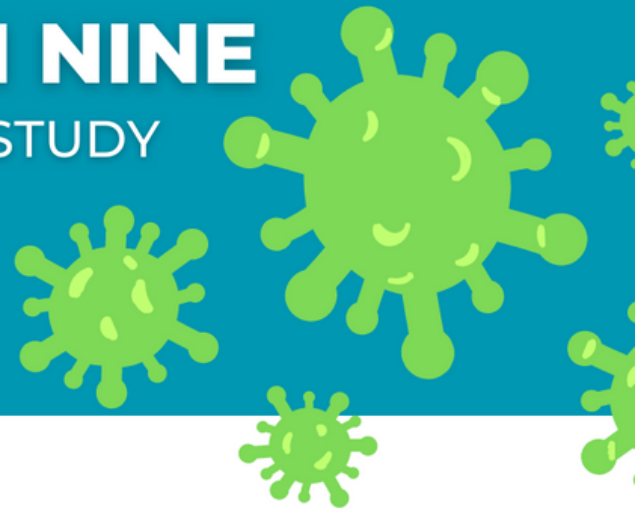


NOROVIRUS AT SUSHI NINE

A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS CASE STUDY

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BACKGROUND

Sushi Nine is a popular Asian cuisine restaurant located in North Carolina's capital city of Raleigh. The restaurant has been a local staple for sushi lovers for more than a decade, but recently found themselves at the center of a crisis.

Shortly after Thanksgiving of 2023, an outbreak of norovirus was linked to the restaurant, ultimately leading to more than 200 complaints, a government investigation and a temporary closure of the establishment (Wake County Public Health and Wake County Environmental Services, 2023). This crisis not only led to health issues for patrons, but resulted in additional paracrises including rumors and challenges.

A TIMELINE OF THE CRISIS

According to Wake County Government (2023), an individual became ill after eating at Sushi Nine on December 1, 2023 and alerted the local health department. "Staff immediately responded and initiated [an] investigation," and "soon after more reports reached Wake County's Public Health Communicable Disease team" (2023). "In total 241 complaints were received" by Wake County Public Health staff, "and all of those diners reported visiting the restaurant between Saturday, November 28 and Tuesday, December 5" (2023).

Samples taken from several of the complainants all came back positive for norovirus (Wake County Public Health and Wake County Environmental Services, 2023). According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024), norovirus is a highly contagious virus that causes vomiting and diarrhea, and can lead to dehydration and even stomach or intestinal inflammation.

Sushi Nine voluntarily closed to the public on December 5 for deep cleaning and reopened to the public a few days later on December 8 (Wake County Public Health and Wake County Environmental Services, 2023). During that time, news of the outbreak reached mainstream media as the local NBC affiliate WRAL first reported food poisoning linked to the restaurant on December 7 (Jackson et al., 2023).

Until WRAL broke the news to the public, neither Sushi Nine nor the Wake County government had posted any public notices of the issue via press release, website or social media. However, both entities did respond to WRAL's request for comment and were included in the initial story.

In the days that followed, news traveled swiftly via social media and to other local, state and national media outlets, including the likes of USA Today and Forbes. Wake County Public Health and Wake County Environmental Services formally addressed the norovirus outbreak via press release on December 14 and announced the outbreak's closure in the same manner four days later (2023). Sushi Nine publicly posted about the crisis for the first and last time via their social media channels on December 26.

THE AFTERMATH

As noted previously, in total nearly 250 individuals became sick with suspected norovirus linked to dining at Sushi Nine (Wake County Public Health and Wake County Environmental Services, 2023). Symptoms of those affected ranged from nausea to severe diarrhea and vomiting (Jackson et al., 2023). One customer claimed he believed he was “going to die,” while another required a trip to the emergency room after losing eight pounds related to the virus (Jackson et al., 2023).

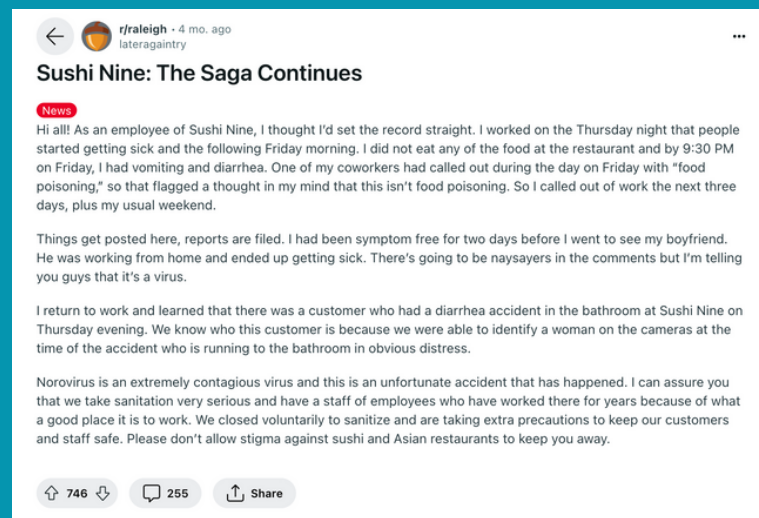
In addition to the illnesses and temporary business closure, several customers filed a lawsuit against Sushi Nine. The first suit was filed in mid-December by a groom who claimed he became ill throughout his wedding weekend after dining at the restaurant (Glusco, 2023). Four more customers ultimately joined the suit filed by foodborne illness lawyer and attorney Bill Marler (Jurney & Melamed, 2023).

Aside from the litigation, the business itself became the subject of both a government investigation and public ridicule. As is standard practice, the local health department — Wake County Public Health — conducted an investigation of the restaurant following the first complaint of illness. Sushi Nine ownership and staff cooperated fully with the investigation and were given the all clear within a few weeks of the initial complaint (Wake County Public Health and Wake County Environmental Services, 2023).

However, the backlash to the news first shared by WRAL was much harsher. Social media commentors alluded to errors on behalf of the restaurant. “Probably forcing their employees to work when they're sick and it spread to their customers,” claimed one WRAL Facebook commentor. “Would love to see the restaurant’s sanitation score,” retorted another. Several others pointed to the fact that the establishment served raw fish and other traditional Asian dishes as the possible reason for illness, although these claims were unfounded by the investigation. Still other Facebook commentors had harsher responses: “They might as well close up shop. There is no coming back from this.”

Sushi Nine did not publicly acknowledge the outbreak on their official website or social media channels until weeks after the investigation ended. However, co-owner Lisa Fatfat did make a statement to WRAL news in early December, saying “Because we prioritize the safety of our patrons and the community, our team at Sushi Nine decided to voluntarily close the restaurant for 48 hours. With this time, we have taken proactive steps to address recent reports of alleged food poison. We are conducting a thorough deep clean and inspection of our restaurant. Our team is cooperating fully with local health officials” (Jackson et al., 2023).

Some Sushi Nine employees did come to the defense of their employer though, with one particular staff member taking to Reddit to post a lengthy, but anonymous, account of what took place (lateragaintry, 2023). The post garnered more than 250 comments, including some claiming to also be from fellow employees. The original post alleged that the source of the virus was a customer rather than a sick employee, improper protocols or spoiled food, but the Wake County investigation never confirmed a definitive source of the outbreak (lateragaintry, 2023) (Wake County Public Health and Wake County Environmental Services, 2023).



ASSESSING CRISES & PARACRISES TYPES

Crisis serves as a broad term that can be further examined through its multiple crisis types. This particular case of the norovirus outbreak at the Sushi Nine restaurant can best be explained as both a public health crisis and operational crisis.

According to Coombs (2022, p. 4), “public health crises are a threat to public health that exist across multiple geographic areas.” On the other hand, operational crises “disrupt operations either completely or partially” (Coombs, 2022, p. 5). In this case, the norovirus outbreak connected to Sushi Nine caused health-related issues for hundreds of patrons regardless of their home address and caused the restaurant to temporarily close, resulting in a disruption of normal operations.

As the initial crises unfolded, additional paracrises also arose in the form of rumors and challenges. Paracrises “resemble [crises] because [they] threaten the organization’s reputation and related assets” (Coombs, 2022, p. 6). They also uniquely take place in full view of the public, adding an additional layer of scrutiny to the existing crisis (Coombs, 2022, p. 6-7).

In this instance, social media comments perpetuated rumors about the norovirus outbreak’s source. As previously mentioned, multiple Facebook comments pointed to unclean employee habits and the type of cuisine — notably sushi — served at the establishment. However, neither the sushi nor employee behaviors were definitively proven to be the culprit (Marler, 2024). These rumors created a reputational crisis for the restaurant on top of the existing operational and public health crisis.

Similarly, Sushi Nine also faced the challenge paracrisis, which “occurs when some stakeholders argue that existing practices of an organization are irresponsible or simply wrong in some way” (Coombs, 2022, p. 31). This challenge came in the form of a lawsuit filed by five restaurant customers who were impacted by the norovirus outbreak. Their suit alleged fault on behalf of Sushi Nine as “ultimately the restaurant is responsible for what they sell to consumers” (Jurney & Melamed, 2023). While the lawsuit is currently still making its way through the court system, knowledge of the suit’s filing generated additional news coverage and social media chatter all on its own as the original crisis was still taking place.

EMPLOYING ENTERPRISE RISK MANAGEMENT

The best way to manage a crisis or paracrisis is to prevent one altogether, which starts with knowing risk. “Risk and crisis are intricately linked,” as “risk has the potential to do harm while a crisis is inflicting harm” (Coombs, 2022, p. 22). By employing the enterprise risk management strategy, businesses can identify, assess and prepare for potential risks that can interfere with the organization’s objectives and operations (Coombs, 2022, p. 22).

In this case, Sushi Nine management should have catalogued potential risk types and conducted a risk assessment “to identify factors or weaknesses and [determine] the probability... [they] will be exploited or developed into a crisis” (Coombs, 2022, p. 26). A prepared assessment by Sushi Nine could have denoted operational and compliance risks such as sick employees, poor quality food products received from vendors, improper food preparation or storage, lack of hand-washing by staff or even sick customers, all of which could cause a norovirus outbreak like the one experienced in 2023.

By noting and assessing the likelihood of these risks manifesting into a greater problem in advance, Sushi Nine could have prepared a crisis management plan, which would have been ready to enact upon the initial complaint.



CRISIS MANAGEMENT PROCESS

By definition, crisis management is “a set of factors designed to combat crises, to lessen the actual damage inflicted, and to facilitate resilience” (Coombs, 2022, p. 8). Crisis management can be broken down into four key steps: prevention, preparation, response and revision (Coombs, 2022, p. 8).

“Prevention, also known as mitigation, [are] the steps taken to avoid crises” and often include detecting warning signs and taking any necessary actions to prevent the crisis from occurring altogether (Coombs, 2022, p. 8). In the case of Sushi Nine, working with the public and in the food industry guarantees the potential for viruses and illnesses, as previously noted via risk assessment. By practicing routine cleanliness checks and adhering to stated safety protocols, many such crises can be prevented. In addition, Sushi Nine should require all employees to stay home when feeling unwell as a standard protocol of employment. Lastly, in the case of an ill patron, the restaurant should conduct thorough spot cleaning of all potentially infected areas and make note of the circumstances in the event of a pending outbreak.

The second step, preparation, involves diagnosing crises vulnerabilities, selecting and training a crisis management team and spokespersons, as well as developing and managing a crisis communications plan (Coombs, 2022, p. 8). For Sushi Nine, a plan of action would already be created and in place to handle any crisis once it arose. In this particular case, the owner and managers of the restaurant should have taken note of vulnerabilities that could commonly occur and designed an actionable plan for each potential scenario, including the possibility of an illness affecting customers. A spokesperson would be identified to address the public in the case of the event and staff would routinely revisit and rehearse what to do if the crises were to occur.

Next, response is “the application of the preparation components [of] a crisis” (Coombs, 2022, p. 8). If Sushi Nine had a crisis plan in place, they would have begun to act accordingly when the initial crisis was first identified. In this case, once the local health department had notified them of a potential norovirus outbreak, staff would have implemented their planned course of action, such as closure for deep cleaning, cooperating with the local authorities and alerting internal and external stakeholders.

This stage typically aims for organizations to reach a point of recovery, “which denotes... a return to normal operations as soon as possible following a crisis” (Coombs, 2022, p. 9). For Sushi Nine, a temporary closure of the restaurant occurred early in the crisis, which disrupted routine operations, but the continued backlash from the public and government investigation lingered for an additional few weeks. In all, the restaurant did not formally announce an end to the event via their social media accounts until December 26, nearly a full month after the crisis began.

Lastly, in the revision step, organizations evaluate their response to the crisis to determine what did or did not work well (Coombs, 2022, p. 9). In this case, Sushi Nine should review the crisis with their team and revise any needed protocols to prevent mishandling of similar situations in the future.

The restaurant’s public statement indicated that they “implemented enhanced cleaning and food preparation processes to maintain the highest standards of hygiene moving forward,” but that is only part of the revision process (Sushi Nine, 2023). In addition to effecting these operational changes, the restaurant should examine their communications response and make changes going forward. Instead of waiting for news to break via local media, the identified spokesperson should get ahead of the incident and issue a statement at the start, broadly alerting the public of the situation and explaining the steps being taken to address the issue. As the crisis is handled with the appropriate authorities, the business should continue to provide updates through to the conclusion of the event. This would not only provide transparency to the public, but serve as a mitigation effort for any paracrises that could arise.



CONCLUSION

As Coombs (2022, p. 5) noted, “crisis is unpredictable but not unexpected.” By employing a risk assessment early, Sushi Nine could have better prepared for the potential norovirus outbreak that ultimately befell them.

In the wake of the inevitable public health and operational crisis as well as the accompanying paracrises, the restaurant could have managed the response and fallout better through implementing the four steps of crisis management.

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