Stakeholder Reputation Research

Food Standards Agency

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1. Executive Summary

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

In order to achieve its objectives, the Food Standards Agency, of which the Meat Hygiene Service is an executive Agency, needs to understand the views of its stakeholders and must work successfully with a large number of stakeholders with different perspectives and often strong and opposing views about different aspects of the Agency's work. Between 2003 and 2006 the Agency commissioned research on an annual basis to better understand the views of key opinion leaders i.e. senior level political, media, corporate and non-governmental organisations/think tank/academic stakeholders. The results were generally positive, although the Agency scored less well on aspects related to giving advice on diet and nutrition and appearing to balance the interests of all stakeholders. In addition, some felt the Agency gave them too little time at the policy consultation process and some corporate stakeholders raised concerns about independence in relation to evidence based decision making.

The Agency decided to conduct a new audit in 2009 in order to continue to measure and benchmark how stakeholders view it in terms of trust, credibility and communication. In addition, the audit was designed to help the Agency identify areas where it could improve how it conducts its business and be used to measure future stakeholder strategy. More specifically the key objectives of the research were to:

- Monitor trends in stakeholders' perceptions of how the Agency currently goes about its business
- Understand in more detail, stakeholder perceptions of how the Agency engages and communicates during policy development and implementation
- Identify areas of concern for stakeholders regarding how the Agency conducts its business and proposals for addressing these
- Examine the perceptions stakeholders have of the FSA in relation to particular policy areas
- Identify any changes in perceptions of the Agency since the audit was last conducted in 2006.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A large-scale qualitative and quantitative research study was used, consisting of 50 qualitative in-depth interviews and 589 quantitative interviews with:

- Stakeholders. For this research (and in previous waves of research conducted by the Agency) 'stakeholders' are defined as those key organisations who have an important relationship with the FSA and include: Industry, NGOs, Public Sector (Government, Civil Servants and Local Authorities), Researchers & Academics, Media and Members of Parliament/Assemblies. The 2009 research also included stakeholders who could answer specifically on the Meat Hygiene Service.

- Enforcers i.e. those that enforce regulations on behalf of the Agency including Environmental Health Officers, Trading Standards Officers and Port Health Inspectors
- Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) from catering, retail and manufacturing sectors, including abattoirs

The research was conducted in three stages, as follows:

- Stage 1 - Qualitative Research: 22 in-depth interviews with senior contacts at key stakeholder organisations. Interviews were conducted between 17th February and 27th March 2009.
- Stage 2 - Quantitative Research: Computer Aided Telephone Interviews (CATI) with 291 stakeholders, 100 enforcers and 198 SMEs. Interviews focussed on both the FSA and/or the MHS. Interviews were conducted between 30th April and 11th June 2009.
- Stage 3 - Qualitative Research: 13 in-depth follow-up interviews with stakeholders, enforcers and SMEs and 15 in-depth interviews with Members of Parliament/Assemblies. Interviews were conducted between 10th June and 16th July 2009.

MAIN FINDINGS

The Food Standards Agency

The Food Standards Agency is highly regarded by all audience types and there have been signs of progress since 2006 among stakeholders on a range of aspects.

Stakeholders have a high regard for the Agency, with 70% rating it positively for its overall performance (up from 58% in 2006). This high and improving perception by stakeholders seems to be based on a combination of good engagement, being effective in its key roles, being honest and open in meetings and the way it operates, strong (and improving) communication and an improvement in terms of being seen to be balanced in the way it weighs up stakeholder interests. However, there is an increase in dissatisfaction for policy consultations, with the FSA not always seen to be entering consultations with an open mind (in the main, this appears to have been driven by the 'scores on the doors' and 'traffic lights' consultations).

Based on the feedback from this research along with other government stakeholder studies we have conducted, the FSA is highly regarded compared to other government departments and agencies, particularly for openness and engagement/communication.

As in 2006, there is still a discrepancy between NGOs (who still have a very favourable view of the Agency) and Industry (excluding caterers) and the Media who have a less favourable view (although still mainly positive) of the Agency. Industry stakeholders are less happy about the FSA being too prescriptive and striking a balance between all its stakeholders, while the media are much more likely to feel they don't receive enough (proactive) communication and that the FSA is unduly influenced by the food industry.

There do not appear to be any major differences in the views of the Food Standards Agency between those operating in England and those operating in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The same strengths and weaknesses were mentioned and only a few commented on issues between the FSA in London and the devolved offices.

Trust in the FSA has grown over the last 3 years, with over three quarters (77%) trusting the FSA compared with two-thirds in 2006 (69%).

There have been some significant uplifts in terms of perceived effectiveness. Over 80% think the FSA is effective at protecting consumer interests (a big rise from 2006 when the figure was 65%) and providing advice and information to consumers. In addition, over 80% think the Agency is effective at providing advice and information on food safety issues to the food industry and over two-thirds (69%) think it is effective at regulating the food industry (both big rises from 2006 when figures for these measures were 62% and 37% respectively).

Almost four out of five stakeholders (79%) agree that the Agency is open and accessible. Based on feedback from the qualitative interviews, this is an area where there has been an improvement in the last 3 years (although even then, the FSA was perceived as strong on this aspect) and where the FSA is rated highly compared to other government departments and agencies. This openness is conveyed by a willingness among FSA staff to talk openly and frankly at stakeholder meetings as well as demonstrated by the Agency as a whole in the way it publishes information openly.

The Agency also scores well on aspects linked to engagement (which is highly important to stakeholders). High numbers of stakeholders praise the FSA for keeping them informed, listening, effectively managing the relationship, understanding the stakeholder and being willing to work closely with them. Ratings are more mixed for the relationship feeling like a real partnership (although not all want this type of relationship) and the FSA having a good knowledge of time pressures and constraints (often evidenced by last minute requests for information or feedback). There is also evidence that some find it hard to access the Agency i.e. knowing who to contact on a specific issue (exacerbated by the recent restructure) or finding what they need from the website.

Although the FSA scores quite well on aspects related to policy consultation, there has been an increase in the number dissatisfied with this area (10% dissatisfied in 2006 vs. 19% dissatisfied in 2009). Although the Agency is praised for seeking views and taking input into account, there is less satisfaction that the FSA comes to the consultation with an open mind (45% satisfied vs. 33% dissatisfied). There is evidence from the initial qualitative interviews (mainly those in industry or trade associations representing industry) that this has been driven by disenchantment with the 'scores on the doors' and 'traffic lights' consultations. Comments do seem to suggest that this is in relation to the policy outcomes rather than the consultation process itself.

Generally speaking the FSA is seen as balanced and there have been some noticeable improvements in this area since 2006. It is also clear though that this is a very difficult

area for the Agency with high numbers of NGOs feeling industry is too influential and vice versa. It is however generally acknowledged that the FSA makes decisions based on evidence.

FSA staff are very highly valued by stakeholders with over 80% satisfied with FSA staff for being responsive, approachable and knowledgeable. However, there is a little evidence that the Agency is sometimes seen as lacking resource in terms of some "mid-level staff" and when senior staff are unavailable, stakeholders are less impressed.

Ratings for communications are also high and have improved significantly since 2006. Over half (53%) believe FSA communications have got better in the last 2 years. However, there is evidence that some are still not clear on the exact role of the Agency and how that links to other government departments and agencies. The media are less satisfied with the communication they receive (only 52% are satisfied with the amount of information they get from the Agency compared to 80% of all respondents and 43% would like more contact generally compared to 16% of all respondents).

Ratings of the FSA among **enforcers** are very high on almost all aspects. In particular it is clear that this audience rates the Agency highly for its independence, its openness, its accessibility and the fact that it communicates well and provides useful resources and information. However, there is room for improvement in terms of understanding businesses and promoting food within local authorities.

87% of enforcers rate the Agency's overall performance positively (even higher than stakeholders), rising to 100% outside England. Importantly, the vast majority (over 90%) are confident that the FSA is effectively fulfilling its key roles in terms of protecting public health and providing information about nutrition and diet.

Enforcers have high regard for the FSA's communication. 80% think the Agency is good at communicating with them and almost a half (46%) say this aspect has improved in the last 2 years.

There is evidence however that enforcers feel the FSA could be better at understanding both the issues that affect local authorities as well as those that affect the businesses that they enforce and advise. In addition, there is a feeling that the Agency could be more proactive at engaging with CEOs at local authorities to promote food generally (and thus help the EHOs/TSOs secure budget and resource). This might involve selling the importance of food safety and good nutrition and diet i.e. the positive impact this has on other areas of life like education, crime etc.

SMEs also rate the Agency's overall performance highly, especially caterers (70% positive rating) and manufacturers (66% positive rating). Retailers are slightly less satisfied (56% positive rating) although it is evident that this group has slightly lower expectations than caterers and manufacturers and only 4% rate the Agency negatively (with a large number sitting in the middle). These high ratings are driven by the high quality information that this audience sees i.e. the booklets, CD Roms, DVDs etc. The

information is seen as helpful and, importantly for this busy audience, easy to understand.

There is evidence that this audience would like to receive more direct communication from the FSA (rather than via their local authority) as communication with their local authority may be irregular and dependent on site visits. In addition, SMEs have mixed opinions on how effective the Agency has been at providing advice and information on nutrition. Like enforcers, SMEs feel the Agency could be better at understanding the issues that affect businesses and, in particular, the cost to industry when setting regulations. There is a feeling that this could be achieved by better direct engagement with small businesses.

The Meat Hygiene Service

Many **stakeholders** praise the front-line staff they see on their sites on a day-to-day basis (only relevant to some stakeholders included in the survey) but feel there is room for improvement at a head office level in terms of openness, engagement and a general willingness to act in partnership with organisations i.e. helping and advising them rather than just enforcing. There is also a need for more (proactive) communication from the MHS with a few feeling that the MHS only communicates when it is in their interests. Having said this, over the last two years, 30% thought the MHS communications have improved. Some feel improvements are needed in the overall structure of the department (it is seen to be bureaucratic and over-manned). There are mixed views on the success and future success of the transformation change programme and operational management structure.

42% rate the overall performance of the MHS positively, while one in five (21%) rate it negatively. 42% 'trust' the MHS, while a half (48%) think the MHS is open and accessible. 33% disagree that the MHS is open and accessible.

The MHS scores relatively well on engagement with between a half and two-thirds satisfied with the MHS for having a good knowledge of their organisation (67% satisfied), for listening (59% satisfied), willing to work closely (57% satisfied) and managing the relationship well (48% satisfied). However, although over half (54%) feel it is effective at engaging with stakeholders, 30% believe that the MHS is ineffective at engaging with them.

Front line staff are rated highly and are generally seen to be knowledgeable, approachable and responsive.

Abattoirs generally rate the MHS more positively than stakeholders. 56% of abattoirs rate the MHS positively, compared with only 42% of stakeholders. This audience feels positively about the staff they deal with on-site. 90% of abattoirs stated that MHS staff work effectively with them and their business.

The MHS is generally rated highly for engagement and communication among abattoirs. 69% think the MHS is effective at engaging with them, while two-thirds (65%) think the

communication is good. There were comments that both aspects could be improved at a head office level.

As with stakeholders, there are mixed views on the success and future success of the transformation change programme and operational management structure.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

The following are key issues emerging from the research that need to be considered by the FSA/MHS moving forwards:

- Maintaining openness and transparency
- Better understanding the issues and challenges faced by businesses
- (Proactively) communicating with the media
- Clarifying the role and remit of the FSA and how that links in with other government departments and agencies including promoting food in local authorities
- Review how the Agency consults on policy development
- Accessing the Agency including website navigation and knowing how to access the right individuals
- Developing more partnership orientated relationships with stakeholders/abattoirs where appropriate