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Don't Worry... It [Corn] Won't Kill You: The StarLink Crisis

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What would you do . . . if someone told you that the food you just ate was not safe for human consumption? In 1999, consumers across the nation were faced with this fear and began to second-guess the food they had been accustomed to eating for years. After Kraft Foods' Taco Bell taco shells were recalled in September for containing traces of StarLink corn, a genetically modified corn hybrid not approved for human consumption, consumer confidence in U.S. corn by-products decreased and manufacturer credibility dwindled (Aventis stops, 2000). People wanted to know who to blame for the apparent food contamination problem. All fingers eventually pointed toward Aventis CropScience, a division of Aventis Pharmaceuticals S.A.; the creator of StarLink.

The issue of corn supplies being contaminated with StarLink began as rumors. The StarLink crisis began to ensue because there were not enough "hard facts" or substantial evidence from testing to deny the rumors and prove that StarLink did not cause allergic reactions in humans. This lack of initial information was in part due to a government agency failure to fully approve StarLink for human-consumption but also attributed to the risky actions taken by Aventis to market and sell a highly controversial product, the first of its kind. "StarLink was the *only* biotech product on the market to receive approval for animal feed but not human food uses" (Council for biotechnology, 2001). Rumors quickly spread throughout the nation that StarLink by-products were unsafe and prompted a nationwide recall of corn products. "Between 1999 and 2001 StarLink corn contamination prompted a voluntary recall of more than 300 food products

and corn exports to be denied" (Agricultural genomics, 2001, p.152). This recall pressured Aventis to develop the necessary plans of action to protect the integrity of its company and the U.S. corn supply from reputational damages.

This paper analyzes the corrective actions of Aventis Pharmaceuticals and its CropScience division; specifically, the execution of crisis management strategies needed to control the rumors until enough facts could be gathered to prove rumors invalid and confirm that no contamination problem existed. I argue that talk of biotech concerns during the time period in which the crisis occurred delayed the company and government agencies from providing the evidence needed to divert the rumors and biotech questions that stimulated the crisis; only when enough evidence could be gathered could the rumors be resolved. In support of this argument I present a history of events relevant to the onset and duration of the crisis. Next, I discuss the image restoration strategies of Benoit, Coombs and Hearit that pertain to the case of Aventis. Thereafter, I incorporate these strategies into the outline of actions taken by Aventis during the crisis in order to illustrate the various methods utilized to manage the rumors and control the accusations of corn and by-product contamination. Last, I assess the effectiveness of the company's actions to restore company image and to resolve the StarLink crisis.

Contamination Chronology

In August of 1998, StarLink was registered as a "plant pesticide" restricted for use in animal feed only (Springer, 2000). In April of 1999, Aventis re-submitted a request for StarLink to be used in human food that EPA declined because it could not prove StarLink's human allergen potential (StarLink: crisis in, 2000, p.17).

After the anti-biotech group, *Friends of the Earth*, discovered StarLink traces in taco shells (Springer, 2000) in September of 2000, Aventis immediately suspended sales of StarLink seed. According to *The New York Times* (Pollack, 2000), "Aventis S.A. had agreed to voluntarily cancel its marketing license 'at the strong urging' of the E.P.A.," and also said that "the agency was planning to revoke the permit formally, but that a voluntary withdrawal was quicker." The USDA said it would buy back StarLink from farmers with the stipulation that Aventis reimburses buyback costs.

By October, Aventis voluntarily withdrew its StarLink registration (Waitz and Zimmerman, 2000), supplied EPA with new data, and asked for a four-year approval of StarLink for human consumption (Pollack, 2001). However, the request was denied.

Midway through November, Aventis S.A. announced the divestiture of its agrichemical division, Aventis CropScience, into a separate company and attacked Garst Seed Company for solicitation of non-StarLink corn, contaminated with StarLink (Barnat & MacGregor, 2000).

History of Image Contamination

In a period of time in which biotech issues are ample, the discovery of an approved biotech corn, StarLink, in the food chain fits grounds for crisis. The StarLink crisis broke shortly after anti-biotech group *Friends of the Earth* exploited Kraft Foods for the production and solicitation of contaminated food.

Several anti-biotech groups soon focused attention on the source; they accused Aventis CropScience of irresponsibly marketing and selling StarLink corn. According to government agencies, StarLink (a chemical-producing protein found in the corn hybrid) had been approved only for industrial use and animal feed because it potentially could

cause allergic reactions in people (StarLink problem, 2001, p. 152). The truth of the matter was that government agencies approved StarLink for "animal feed only" as a precaution because they could not prove that it was, or was not, a human allergen (StarLink: crisis in, 2000, p.17).

This uncertainty factor of whether or not certain amounts of StarLink cause allergic reactions generated a contamination crisis fed by anti-biotech groups. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) were not very well understood at the time, as consumers hesitated to buy foods in which they knew contained GMOs. After the discovery of the taco shell recall, due to failure to comply with government food regulations, consumers assumed that the food was recalled due to the product being unsafe.

"What is perhaps most embarrassing for the industry is that all of this was triggered by its critics" (Raeburn, 2000). The animal-feed contamination was discovered by the Genetically Engineered Food Alert (with whom *Friends of the Earth* are associated), and not by government agencies and regulators. This organization is a "coalition of environmental groups that favor tougher biotech regulations," (Raeburn, 2000). The downfall of StarLink began because the media was first to announce the discovery of its illegal whereabouts in the food supply, and with the help of anti-biotech groups, generated a false sense of contamination among consumers before government officials could address the issue of product safety. Thus, government agencies were forced to immediately clarify the issues of StarLink corn in the food supply, when in reality the issues where still under debate and tests were still pending. *Food Chemical News* reported,

> The FDA does not view the StarLink recalls as a public-safety issue. Instead, the agency has classified the Kraft recall as a Class II recall, which is used to describe food that contain an adulterant but do not pose a serious risk to human health. (StarLink: crisis in, 2000, p.17)

After the FDA reassured publics that there was no serious health risk, Joe LeVitt, head of FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition pointed out that the crisis was nothing more than a matter of miscommunication between industry and regulation. "The StarLink problem was caused by a very narrow issue, and that issue was the approval of something for animal use but not for human use" (StarLink: crisis in, 2000, p.17).

With all eyes on them, Aventis CropScience's management had to consider several issues surrounding the StarLink crisis. First of all, emotional issues ensued as consumers feared that StarLink corn was harmful to their health (Barboza, 2000). Consumers and farmers raised biotech issues (StarLink: crisis in, 2000, p.17). Farmers, upset that no one would buy their genetically modified corn, complained, and a few filed lawsuits that claimed they would lose large profits and future business if nothing were done to correct the contamination problem (Brammer, 2001). Biotech issues beset government agencies. Environmental groups attacked the agencies for their failure to prevent unapproved biotech corn from entering the food chain. Instead of addressing accusations, the agencies shifted the blame to Aventis, who they believed was guilty of neglect for not complying with StarLink corn regulations (Frankencorn, 2000).

Aventis and other concerned parties pointed out the failure to prove StarLink's effects on humans shortly after the agencies accused Aventis of negligent behavior

(Frankencorn, 2000, p.44). Soon thereafter, speculation arose that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) all could be held mutually responsible for the failure to properly regulate and enforce that StarLink corn be grown under strict guidelines (StarLink: crisis in, 2000, p.17). Farmers who planted StarLink corn could also be found partially responsible for StarLink's presence in the food chain.

Lawsuits: Potential and Pending

Farmers claimed Aventis' negligence harmed U.S. corn exports and filed a class action suit in December of 2000, the first against Aventis (Barboza, 2000, N/A). Japan, an importer of more than 30% of U.S. corn exports (Frankencorn, 2000, N/A), denied a shipment of corn in December after it heard about StarLink contamination issues. The second class action lawsuit filed against Aventis was by farmers whose corn may have been contaminated as a result of nearby StarLink planting or after harvesting, that did not actually plant the StarLink corn (Barboza, 2000, N/A).

Lawsuits blamed Aventis for the StarLink crisis as being responsible for "clos[ing] off foreign markets and depress[ing] the price of American corn here and abroad" (Barboza, 2000, N/A). Richard S. Lewis, a partner at Cohen, Millets said that because of Aventis' negligence, "the whole credibility of the American corm market is taking a beating and people who did not plant StarLink corn cannot sell their crop in several markets" (Barboza, 2000, N/A).

Finally, tension and concerns were put at ease in June of 2001, after the Center for Disease Control (CDC) released a report regarding complaints associated with StarLink. The report stated,

> More than 40 people reported various adverse reactions after its discovery in the food supply. The CDC and the FDA identified 28 of those people who appeared to have suffered allergic responses to something. All 28 were chosen for follow up testing, and the CDC found that the biotech protein in StarLink corn, which protects crops against insect pests, did not cause their allergic reactions. (Public interest, 2001)

The levels to which Aventis CropScience recognizes and admits the above allegations are discussed later on when image restoration strategies of Benoit, Coombs and Hearit are incorporated into the arrangement of company reactions.

STRATEGIES OF IMAGE RESTORATION: BENOIT, COOMBS AND HEARIT

This section describes the image restoration strategies of three different theorists: William L. Benoit, Timothy W. Coombs and Keith M. Hearit. Their views on how to manage a crisis, although differing, contain similar strategies of corrective action to be executed in order to restore an organization's image.

Benoit

Benoit's theory of image restoration contains five main categories of action to be exercised when faced with crisis: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, correcting action, and mortification (Brandon & Benoit, 1996, p.29). The purpose of this strategy is to salvage a positive corporate image. Without a positive image, the company's financial livelihood could be lost (Benoit and Brandon, 1994, p.76).

Denial

The first tactic usually implied when addressing a crisis is denial. Benoit (1995) discusses three forms of denial—simple denial, partial denial and shifting of blame.

Simple denial is issued when an organization simply denies doing something. Partial denial is when an individual does not deny the act entirely, but it can deny that the act was harmful. Shifting the blame, or scapegoating, is "arguing that another party actually performed the offensive act" (Brandon & Benoit, 1997, p.153). The ability to sustain denial increases the likelihood of restoring damaged images and reputations. This strategy is most likely to succeed if the accused are truly innocent (Benoit, 1995). However, any form of denial that is accepted by an audience will work in favor of image restoration (Benoit, 1997a).

Evasion of Responsibility

Evasion of responsibility is similar to that of denial in the sense that it deals with accepting or not accepting responsibility for an event. There are four subcategories of evasion of responsibility: *provocation, defeasibility, accident* and *good intentions* (Brandon & Benoit, 1999, p.153).

By method of *provocation*, an organization claims that its action is in response to the offensive act of another organization (Brandon & Benoit, 1996, p.29).

Defeasibility evades an organization from responsibility by claiming a lack of information about or complete control over the offensive act (Brandon & Benoit, 1996, p.29). Image repair comes into play when defeasibility is accepted by audiences (Benoit, 1997a).

By describing an offensive action as an *accident*, one should be held "less accountable" if able to convince publics of this truth (Benoit, 1997, p.177).

A final attempt to evade responsibility is to explain the *good intentions* in performing the act, despite the wrongful act results (Brandon & Benoit, 1996, p.29).

Reducing Offensiveness

The largest category of image restoration is reducing offensiveness in regard to the event that occurred. There are six subcategories: *bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser,* and *compensation* (Brandon & Benoit, 1999, p.153).

Bolstering persuades publics to view an offender in a more positive light by replacing negative aspects with positive characteristics (Brandon & Benoit, 1999, p.153). The counteraction of negative feelings through bolstering strengthens positive images (Benoit, 1994).

A more plausible option is to *minimize* the implied damage done. The strategy of *minimization* reduces negative feelings emitted by the wrongful act (Brandon & Benoit, 1996, p.29).

Differentiation is a strategy in which the accused attempts to divert public attention to a similar, yet more offensive act (Brandon & Benoit, 1996, p.29), thus reducing the offensiveness of the act by the accused.

An individual organization can employ *transcendence* by attempting to put the wrongful act in a lighter context. Transcendence can evade some responsibility and weaken the sting of guilt (Benoit & Drew, 1997).

The strategy to *attack the accuser* can be useful in attempts to harm the attacker's credibility (Brandon & Benoit, 1999). Weakening the attacker's credibility can reduce the intensity of the attack and any damage done to the reputation of an organization or individual (Benoit, 1995).

The purpose of utilizing *compensation* strategy is to reimburse the person who has suffered damages from the wrongful act, in hopes to weaken their feelings of ill regret. Here, it is appropriate to offer to repair damages and/or take steps to prevent recurrence of the offensive act (Brandon & Benoit, 1999, p.153).

Corrective Action and Mortification

The last two categories of Benoit's image restoration strategy are corrective action and mortification. The difference between the two is that corrective action is focused on correcting the problem, but does not necessarily accept or deny responsibility for an offensive act. Mortification on the other hand is not corrective action, but rather pure acceptance of the guilt, in addition to an apology or plea for forgiveness (Brandon & Benoit, 1999).

Corrective action "promises to correct the problem" and may take the form of "restoring the state of affairs existing before the objectionable action" in addition to taking action "to prevent the reoccurrence of the offensive act" (Brandon & Benoit, 1996, p.29). The strategy of corrective action is extremely effective when plans are publicized, not just talked about (Benoit, 1995). According to Benoit, "admitting guilt and showing regret can often lead the audience to pardon the wrongful act" (Brandon & Benoit, 1999). Although an apology may not actually be given, Benoit suggests that management's discourse may "represent mortification," if the company "expresses regret" (Brandon & Benoit, 1996, p.29). Therefore, expressing regret is equal to an apology in some cases.

In *Communication Reports*, Benoit first notes, "If the description of the situation used in a study leads respondents to believe that the accused did commit the offense,

denial cannot be expected to be an effective account" (Brandon & Benoit, 1999, p.153). Benoit's second point was simple: "If a person is responsible for an offensive act, we expect that person to apologize and we are often willing to forgive them when the apology seems sincere" (Brandon & Benoit, 1999, p.153).

Coombs discusses seven primary corrective strategies, that of which some coincide closely with those of Benoit. However, Coombs goes a step further and defines his strategies as either defensive or accommodative in nature and explains the importance of a crisis' nature in determining what strategies to utilize during a process of image restoration.

Coombs

Basically, Coombs says that when an organization is at fault or to blame for a misdeed resulting in crisis, an organization should utilize strategies of accommodation and when faced with rumors or natural disasters a defensive strategy will work best to prevent guilt association (Coombs, 1999, p.126).

Full Apology

In the event that an organization is guilty of a "misdeed," Coombs says a *full apology* is in order wherein the company accepts all responsibility associated with the crisis and "asks stakeholders to forgive its misstep" (Coombs, 1999, p.123). A full apology strategy is the highest form of accommodation (Coombs, 1999, p.124).

Corrective Action

Coombs believes that *corrective action* in also an accommodative strategy because a company must do everything in their power to repair damages done and prevent a repeat of any damage in similar instances (Coombs, 1999, p.123).

Ingratiation

Ingratiation, another method of accommodation, is not a strategy of how to accept or deny responsibility, rather to offset negative factors with positive factors. An organization should accommodate victims and publics by praising stakeholders and bolstering the good deeds done by the company in past and present times. This strategy can put victims at ease with the reiteration of goodness. However, ingratiation should only be used if the organization has a strong reputation of good deeds (Coombs, 1999, p.123-125).

Justification

The strategy of *justification* is not necessarily one of accommodation or defense, it is a neutral strategy to be implied when crisis damage in minimal. Responsibility is not accepted and the concern expressed toward victims is downplayed, along with the severity of the crisis (Coombs, 1999, p.125). The focus is on the protection of the organization's reputation. Coombs said "defining a crisis as minor trivializes victim concerns, " (Coombs, 1999, p.125) or in other words, threatens the validity of their complaints.

Excuse

Likewise, an organization should avoid using the *excuse* strategy when damage done is severe, otherwise excusing the crisis makes an organization look petty, to say the least. An excuse "acknowledges crisis" but its main contention is to reduce the amount of associated responsibility. "The strategy is to use lack of intent or lack of control to prove a lack of crisis responsibility" (Coombs, 1999, p.125).

Denial

Denial, the common defensive strategy is to be used, according to Coombs, when there is enough evidence to prove that no crisis exists or that an organization is not responsible (Coombs, 1999, p.125). Coombs strategy of denial indicates no crisis, no responsibility, no victims, and no connection or responsibility to any victims. Denying any remorse or association protects organization reputation. This defensive strategy is useful is handling rumors (Coombs, 1999, p.127).

Attack the Accuser

The *attack the accuser* strategy is also an appropriate defensive tactic for addressing rumors. An organization can attack stakeholders that claim a crisis and victims exist by denying their concerns and attacking them with wrongdoing. It is appropriate to use only when there is an identifiable and refutable attacker (Coombs, 1999, p.125).

Coombs also recognizes the prodromal stage of a crisis, which is a potential stage of a crisis, wherein defensive strategies can be utilized to prevent a crisis from ensuing rather than defend itself from the crisis. Coombs says that organizations must pay attention to the warning signs or prodromes of a crisis and react to them to stop a potential crisis from occurrence (Coombs, 1999, p.17).

Hearit's strategy of image restoration is not as widespread as that of Benoit and Coombs, but explores more in depth the execution of corrective action.

Hearit/*Corrective Action*

Hearit (1995) reaffirms the idea that *corrective action*, through method of apologia, is critical for crisis recovery. Hearit defines corporate apologia as a "public

response to a social legitimacy crisis, a response that seeks to distance institutional actors from their wrongdoing and reaffirm adherence to key social values" (Hearit, 1995, p.1). A corporation must remove its self from the spotlight of the crisis through corrective actions, but at the same time should reassert its goodness and values (Hearit, 1995).

Hearit explains that *corrective action* is the first step that should be taken to handle a crisis because this move signals company responsibility for the crisis and company control over the situation. Control should indicate that the crisis will not occur again, or at least not in the foreseeable future (Hearit, 1995, p.10).

According to Hearit, *corrective actions* should include articulated plans from the corporation that indicate what the organization is doing to "make things right" (Hearit, 1995, p.10). Hearit said, "Delivery of apologiae, with well crafted corrective action strategies, is critical because apologiae are a ritualistic form of communication that reassures publics that institutions have learned from their mistakes and that a repeat of the problem is unlikely" (Hearit, 1995, p.11). In his analysis of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill (1989) crisis, Hearit pointed out that Exxon would have a long-term path to recovery because it failed to "reassure the public" and "did not convince the public that the company learned from the oil spill" (Hearit, 1995, p.11). It is important for an organization to value responsibility and corrective actions in their pursuit to recovery.

Image Decontamination: Image Restoration In Action

Although Aventis never apologized for the wrongful act, it accepted responsibility for the act from the beginning, and additionally expressed a sincere concern for correcting the problem and making things right again. Aventis sought to control and calm the crisis by method of corrective action throughout the entirety of the crisis.

When first accused of contaminating the U.S. food supply of corn in September of 2000, Aventis did not deny the allegations that StarLink had illegally entered the food supply; rather it denied the specific allegations that StarLink had contaminated the corn (Waitz and Zimmerman, 2000). Denying that it was responsible for a harmful-to-humans contamination problem allowed Aventis to protect a portion of its reputation by not acknowledging any victims and a firm foundation was set from which to denounce the rumors of contamination. The company tried to minimize the offensiveness of these allegations and insisted that the genetically modified corn was not harmful to anyone's health. (Waitz and Zimmerman, 2000). However, this insistence was contradicted by the government agencies that originally denied StarLink for human consumption.

In a safety assessment released in November, Aventis attempted to transcend the offensiveness of the act into a lighter context. Aventis said that "consumer exposure to food products containing Cry9C protein—even under worst-case scenarios—is many thousands of times smaller than that required to sensitize individuals and lead to a later allergic reaction" (StarLink seeks, 2000, p.28). Aventis did not hesitate to accept responsibility for what happened, but never addressed allegations that StarLink entered the food supply as a result of company negligence. It justified its inclusion as being the creator and provider of StarLink, but downplayed company responsibility for its forbidden presence in the food chain.

Instead of attempts to set the record straight, Aventis immediately focused on the implementation of corrective action, which allowed it to reassure its publics that the organization had control of the situation (Hearit, p.10). Within days of the taco shell contamination crisis, Aventis acknowledged responsibility of StarLink's illegal

whereabouts, and prepared to correct the problem. According to *United Press International*, "Aventis encouraged the used of Strategic Diagnostics, Inc. protein test kits at grain delivery locations to verify that 'StarLink grain remains in proper channels.' The kits, however, [could not] be used on processed food" (Aventis stops, 2000, N/A). According to a company spokesperson, Aventis also sent employees to meet with and buy back StarLink corn in October from each of the 2,600 farmers that had planted the corn (USDA, 2000).

The next steps taken by Aventis intended to evade partial responsibility of the alleged act of contamination and to reduce the offensiveness of StarLink's presence in the U.S. food supply of corn. Despite the fact that it was at the "strong urging of the E.P.A." (Pollack, 2000), Aventis voluntarily withdrew its StarLink registration in order to ensure that no new StarLink corn would be grown for future sales until it could be approved for both "food and feed use" (StarLink: crisis in, 2000, p.17). The company issued a press release from its headquarters in France that stated,

> Although the corn was grown and distributed by third parties, Aventis CropScience, who as the registrant of the StarLink technology has been the initial leader in taking responsible corrective actions, is assessing the degree of shared responsibility of the different actors in the agro and food chain as well as insurance coverage for such costs. (Waitz & Zimmerman, 2000, Press Release)

The press release is not only a strategy of defeasibility, wherein Aventis stated that it did not have control over how StarLink was grown or distributed (that action was the responsibility of third parties), the message foreshadows Aventis' later attempts to scapegoat. The attempt to blame other parties for the actual problem of contamination

was an excuse strategy to prove lack of intent or lack of control by Aventis (Coombs, 1999, p.125). However, this strategy was soon dropped when the company was forced (by lawsuits) to accept responsibility for marketing and selling StarLink.

Although Aventis points out that third parties were also responsible for the presence of StarLink in the food supply, it could not fully attack an accuser because there were no identifiable and refutable attackers that could be blamed for the same responsibility.

The same press release also directly stated company "good intentions" and engaged in low levels of bolstering. For example, Aventis identified itself as being involved in "top-ranking environmental and public health activities" and committed to "developing sustainable agriculture worldwide and developing and marketing innovative solutions that meet the needs of today's farming" which included a focus on "improved crop and food quality" (Waitz & Zimmerman, 2000, Press Release). Aventis asserted that the creation of StarLink was developed with the best intentions so that company concerns align with those of its publics.

Although Aventis tried to offset negative factors of the crisis with positive factors, it only implemented a partial strategy of ingratiation. Aventis accommodated only the farmers and those that claimed to have lost significant profits in the recall of over 300 corn products. However, Aventis did not accommodate the consumers who complained of allergic reactions to the genetically engineered corn by-products. It did not believe that these people were actual victims due its belief that StarLink was not harmful to humans.

Additionally, Aventis used bolstering to emphasize that it employs approximately 15,300 people in more than 120 countries and "devotes over 10% of its turnover to Research and Developments of new chemicals, biotechnology and plant varieties," in order to reduce the offensiveness of the attacks on StarLink contamination (Waitz & Zimmerman, 2000, Press Release).

Aventis S.A. clearly scapegoated its CropScience division as the sole constituent of its organization responsible for the StarLink crisis. The company disassociated itself entirely from its CropScience division through divestiture and fired the top management of that division (Changes, 2001). Isolation of the crisis within one division allowed the company as a whole, to surpass damages and survive the incident.

Shortly after Aventis received a letter from the state Attorneys General regarding lawsuit, the company came forward to address the crisis head on and to initiate a form of mortification. In a rebuttal statement Aventis said that it takes "the concerns raised in the letter very seriously and note that [it is] making every effort to work with growers under the USDA program, and elevator operators and grain handlers on a case-by-case basis, in moving StarLink and corn commingled with StarLink to approved uses" (StarLink: crisis in, 2000, p.17). Aventis affirmed other methods of corrective action in the same statement, "As this letter suggests, we will be enhancing StarLink logistics in order to make the process as efficient as possible" (StarLink: crisis in, 2000, p.17). Aventis did not dwell on the damages; rather it focused on repairing damages and concerns.

Approximately three months after the StarLink crisis broke, Aventis had organized and launched an entire web site designed to address StarLink issues. The

web site includes company contact information, StarLink history, regulatory status of StarLink, claim procedures, consumer class action settlements, questions and answers and other valuable resources (Aventis, 2001).

Although Aventis accepted a majority of the responsibility for the crisis, the company did not believe that it was the only organization responsible for the crisis outbreak. When Aventis discovered in late November that Garst Seed Company had sold corn containing StarLink, not sold under the StarLink trademark, it took this opportunity to both scapegoat Garst and differentiate itself from being the sole damaging party that allowed StarLink to enter the food supply chain (Barnat & MacGregor, 2000, News Release). Again the company bolstered,

> While resolution of this matter is clearly the responsibility of those who produced and sold the seed, Aventis will make its services available to assist in containing this corn and channeling it to approved uses. Aventis has notified the EPA, FDA, and USDA of its findings, and is consulting with these agencies to determine next steps. (Barnat & MacGregor, 2000, News Release)

However, this attempt to correct action by use of scapegoating was not enough to save the CropScience division from what inevitably occurred a few months later. In February, Aventis S.A. fired the head of its U.S. crop division and two other top managers (Fuhrmans, 2001, p.1).

The company did not directly attribute management departures to the StarLink crisis; however, Aventis CropScience Chairman Alain Godard said he "asked for resignations to 'restore confidence' in the wake of debacle," and a spokeswoman commented, "This is an opportunity to move forward with new management"

(Fuhrmans, 2001, p.1). The ultimate decision to divest Aventis CropScience was the final strategic action made by Aventis S.A. It shifted the blame onto its own division and denied any responsibility for the wrongful act in order to alleviate the company as a whole, of any negative associations.

Closure to this crisis came shortly after Aventis CropScience submitted new data on StarLink corn to the EPA in April of 2001, and reported that new data indicated, "lower exposure estimates than what the Agency had estimated in its assessment last Fall" (EPA, web site, 2001). In June, following the FDA's evaluation of *Consumer Complaints Linked to Foods Allegedly Containing StarLink Corn*, the Center for Disease Control confirmed that it "[found] no signs of an allergic response to the biotech-engineered corn know as StarLink" (Public interest, 2001, N/A.).

Since the government publicly acknowledged that no physical harm arose as a result of StarLink corn in the food supply, there has been little public debate and coverage of the genetically modified corn and a lot less probing by environmental groups.

Reflections of Image Restoration

The comparison of the actions strategies taken by Aventis to those discussed by Benoit, Coombs and Hearit allow for a better understanding of what an organization must do in order to survive a crisis. These strategies exist as foundations from which to analyze Aventis' effectiveness in the execution of similar strategies, because successful execution indicates that company image has been somewhat restored.

The acceptance of responsibility for the wrongful action from the beginning, established a platform of respect from which Aventis could move to motivate and persuade people to trust its next move.

Through its consistent use of articulated and implemented corrective actions, Aventis successfully delivered apologia and reassured its publics that StarLink was safe and that there was never really a contamination crisis. It was crucial the company continued to reassert its belief that StarLink was not harmful. The continuous confidence Aventis displayed in its product prevented outsiders from doing further damage to its reputation. Aventis moved quickly to remove StarLink from as many contaminated sites as possible, and successfully salvaged any corn crops it could by reassurance of the product's safeness; thus management prevented the destruction of the entire U.S. food supply of corn. With the help of government aid, Aventis preserved U.S. import/export relationships with overseas buyers; any unresolved tensions could have cost many farmers their jobs.

Aventis handled the situation with persistence, through methods of reassurance, to prove its product safe. The company never ceased to present new data and research to the federal agencies, in hopes that its name would be cleared. Within a year, the company successfully repaired a large portion of its image and reputation after it gave the FDA enough evidence to agree with its claims, which ultimately proved the company innocent of harmful contamination. In the end, it was perseverance that resolved the crisis.

However, there are two specific actions that Aventis apparently avoided prior to the StarLink outbreak that should not have been overlooked, and are worth mentioning. Almost a year after the crisis first broke consumers discovered:

> . . . The government and the company that developed genetically modified StarLink corn (Aventis) had at least some indication that the corn (StarLink) might be entering the human food supply more than half a year before environmental advocates discovered it in taco shells, according to a government document. In a survey conducted in December 1999, nine months before the taco shell discovery, 2 of 230 farmers growing StarLink reported that they had sold the corn for food use or for export while another 12.6% said they did not know what happened to the corn after they had sold it, reported *The New York Times.* (Government and the company, 2001, p.12)

There was an obvious prodrome to the crisis that the government agencies and Aventis chose to ignore. Had these organizations not chosen to ignore this prodrome, the StarLink crisis could have been prevented, or the damages could have been less dramatic. Aventis should have created a crisis management plan to address issues of contamination as a precautionary method.

In my opinion, had there not been on-going controversial issues with biotech foods, the StarLink scare would never had been successfully launched by anti-biotech and environmental groups. Fortunately for Aventis, the scare proved to be unsubstantiated in the end and through its use of corrective action, Aventis was able to partially restore its reputation and positive public image. However, the fact that StarLink was a genetically modified organism sparked a great deal of controversy as to how the

U.S. government regulates GMO usage (Frankencorn, 2000, p.44). The StarLink ordeal also prompted consumers to be more conscious about what they buy and eat—hence the on-going issue of food product labeling was brought to the forefront.

To conclude, I have proven that the execution of image restoration strategies was needed so that Aventis could survive the StarLink crisis and successfully defend its company's integrity and overall image. I have demonstrated the difficulties in managing a biotech crisis during a peak period of biotech speculation and distrust with examples of class action lawsuits and anti-biotech probing. What more, I have confirmed that without "hard facts" and substantial evidence, no organization is able to properly protect and defend itself against rumors without the implementation of a crisis management plan to counteract the attacks of "misdeed" or "intentional wrongdoing."

A unique aspect of this crisis is that it was the first of its kind and supposedly the last of its kind. Never before was an agriculture product partially approved for market and sale, and according to government agencies, never again. Government agencies have been forced to review their regulation and approval processes in order to ensure that future crises, such as that of StarLink, never reoccur.

I believe that this case study has set precedence for other organizations of similar industry, in that prodromes should not be ignored and risky behaviors (such as marketing a biotech product) should be postponed until substantial evidence is available and usable to defend any criticisms or accusations. In abiding by this precedence, crises can be avoided and rumors prevented. Aventis Pharmaceuticals S.A. had to learn from its mistakes and to this day, I believe, continues to recover from reputable damages caused by the StarLink crisis.

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