

Engaging Foresight to Meet the Future Before it Arrives

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by Bonnie Banks

When Topps Meat Chief Operations Officer Anthony D'Urso walked into his office on June 25, 2007, he did not realize that in exactly 90 days, his family's company would be forced to end its 67-year legacy and close its doors for good.

On September 25, Topps Meat announced a massive recall of 21.7 million pounds of ground beef, which had been tainted with a potentially fatal E. coli bacteria strain, O157:H7 (Gold, 2007). This strain of E. coli bacteria is harbored in the intestines of cattle and can also get on their hides. Improper butchering and processing can result in the meat being infected (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). According to the USDA Food and Safety Inspection Service (2007), at least 25 people in eight states reportedly contracted E. coli infections that matched the strain found in the Topps patties.

Highlighting the example of Topps Meat, this article emphasizes the relevance of foresight, also known as futures thinking, in the strategic planning process.

Foresight Takes Center Stage

Gold (2007) explains that several months prior to the recall, Topps began to compromise its standards of safety inspections by combining tested meat with samples sent from companies that do not test their meat. Apparently, Topps did not test the samples received from outside slaughterhouses. As a result, all of their supply suffered contamination.

The law on testing requirements states that, "Slaughterhouses are not required to test carcasses for pathogens, and if they do, they are not required to hold onto the meat until they get results." This

has been a sensitive issue for years. In a citizen petition filed by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (2002, p. 2), the USDA Food and Safety Inspection Service was called upon to amend its testing requirements.

Even though the law does not require the desired level of testing, the beef industry has been practicing a high level of quality control in combining meats from different herds for at least 40 years, and thereby practicing good forward thinking. According to Tom Field, Colorado State University animal sciences professor, "Standardization of performance testing became critical to assuring that the industry offered user-friendly tools to commercial producers (like Topps)" ("Forty years of foresight," 2007, p. 2).

Another important area of strategic foresight in this industry has been the transition from within-herd ratios to expected progeny difference (EPD) for several traits. This led to the innovation of national sire summaries for each breed. According to Ike Eller, former executive director of the Beef Improvement Federation, "Sire summaries helped the industry go from records that could only be used in one herd to information that could be used in herds across the country as a selection tool" ("Forty years of foresight," 2007, p. 2).

Perhaps Topps Meat's choice not to exercise every opportunity to exploit available quality controls can be attributed to a lack of foresight. The article, "From forecast to foresight" (2007, p.1) identifies accurate foresight as the most needed element in organizational strategic planning. It says that, "strategic planning is based on the principle that the future is created by man. It is in this context that action triggered by foresight - action that aims at influencing what will be - becomes relevant and essential."

It can be said that no organization plans to fail, except when it plans not to fail. In any strategic planning agenda, the use of foresight contributes positively ("The art of foresight," 2004). Precaution is critical to success and can save lives. "Foresight may reveal potential threats that (organizations) can prepare to deal with before they become crises" ("The art of foresight," 2004, p. A1).

Foresight Techniques

Managers at Topps Meat could have “planned not to fail” by implementing some basic rational, empirical and scientific techniques such as those listed below (“The art of foresight,” 2004):

- **Scanning**

Scanning is an ongoing effort to identify significant changes in the world beyond one’s own organization or group. Scanning focuses mainly on trends that occur through time.

- **Trend Analysis**

Trend analysis is the examination of a trend to identify its nature, causes, speed of development and potential impacts. Careful analysis may be needed because a trend can have many different impacts on different aspects of human life and many of these impacts may not be apparent at first.

- **Trend Monitoring**

Trends that are viewed as particularly important in a specific community, industry or sector should be carefully monitored and results reported regularly to key decision makers.

- **Trend Projection**

When numerical data are available, a trend can be plotted on graph paper to show changes through time. The futurist can then extend the trend line, projecting it into the future based on the recent rate of change. Such a projection shows where the trend should be at some point in the future, assuming there is no shift in the rate of change.

- **Scenario Development and Analysis**

Organizational leaders explore future possibilities through imagination. They create various scenarios in an attempt to imagine future possibilities on the basis of what is known. Scenarios are useful in helping organizational leaders understand what successes or repercussions could result from a particular decision.

Embracing the Future

Topps Meat could have benefited from futures thinking by developing an organizational strategic plan. Utilizing a strategy/scenario matrix, company leaders could have examined the possible consequences of a decision to relax safety precautions before implementing the choice to do so. Scenario planning, for example, would have yielded the possible outcomes in a story format with a beginning and an end. Had D'Urso foreseen his company's end before initiating compromise, he may have made an alternate choice.

According to the article "From forecast to foresight" (2007, p.1), "The purpose of foresight is not to provide recipes, nor specific remedies. Its function is to enhance the ability of an organization to focus on a few futuristic scenarios, debate their different strengths, assess the associated risks, estimate possible advantages, evaluate the costs/investments involved, and finally arrive at a pragmatic action plan that can be implemented."

Conclusion

Successful leaders are visionaries who guard the present and future interests of their organizations, customers and stakeholders. Successful leaders build enduring organizations and in so doing, make use of available strategic planning resources. Strategy is not about reacting to events in order to survive from day to day. Strategic planning involves proactive preparation for the future as well as developing ways to create the desired future. Lasting accomplishment results from anticipating, identifying and manipulating observable trends and planning purposefully to meet the future before it arrives.

About the author

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