Finding your Sea Legs (or Stomach?)

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A University of Minnesota Food Industry Center survey recently found that more than half of Americans surveyed say that the recent BP oil spill would affect their purchasing decisions with regard to seafood. Many reported that they would eat only seafood they could be certain did not come from the Gulf of Mexico, and still others responded to the survey claiming that, because of fears about the oil spill, they would curtail their seafood consumption regardless of the food's origin.

The reality is that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are working daily with state and local governments to ensure the safety of Gulf Coast seafood. Working together, these groups have closed waters that are deemed unsafe, and they continue to test these areas for contamination. Any fish caught just outside of closed fishing areas is being tested for petroleum compounds before being sent off to market.

The analysts at the NOAA perform these kinds of tests each time there is a major oil spill, so the agency is well-versed in the most effective ways to ensure that the Gulf Coast seafood that reaches shelves is safe. It's quite possible — perhaps even probable — that after all the testing it has undergone, seafood that leaves the Gulf today is safer than any in recent memory. So why the public hesitation?

Consumers are wary, in part, because they are uninformed. In an absence of information, the public often errs on the side of caution and avoid foods that could be potentially harmful, even if there is no harm to be found. That is not to say that correct information on the state of Gulf Coast seafood is unavailable, but rather that information has not reached many consumers.

The situation is similar to the one faced by hog producers last year. When the H1N1

flu was initially labeled "swine flu," sales of pork plummeted, and hog producers were left trying to convince a skeptical or aloof public that pork products were unrelated to the outbreak and remained safe to eat.

Today, pork prices are on the rise, and though H1N1 is still a threat to public health, public attention has shifted, and the connection between the flu and pork has been severed in the public consciousness. Hopefully, the fate of Gulf Coast seafood will take a similar trajectory. Gulf Coast seafood advocacy groups are already trying hard to get their message out (if my inbox is any indication, that is), and — once all of the waters have been reopened — continued efforts to influence the public discourse will be key to getting the industry back on its feet.

What do you think? Are you eating Gulf Coast seafood? Let me know by e-mailing me at krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com *[1].*

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