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EHEC: Consumers Change Behavior, but Mostly only Briefly

General public continues to feel unsure / Production and are deciding factors for shoppers / Call for professional communication

Düsseldorf, June 8, 2011 – The EHEC (E. coli) virus continues to preoccupy consumers in Germany. Nearly one out of two Germans has changed his or her eating habits as a result of the media coverage, according to the latest representative survey by Ketchum Pleon, Germany’s leading communication consultancy. The study also indicates that only a few Germans are changing their eating and shopping behavior permanently.

The still rising number of EHEC cases is causing uncertainty among the German public. In view of the infection risk, many consumers are much more cautious than they used to be about produce such as fruit and vegetables. “Forty-five percent of Germans have changed their behavior in the course of the EHEC outbreak,” says Dirk Popp, Speaker of the Executive Board at Ketchum Pleon Germany. It is also apparent, however, that very few people draw lasting consequences from foodstuff scandals. The findings of the survey, commissioned by Ketchum Pleon from tns emnid, make it clear that “only one person in seven changes his or her eating and shopping behavior in the long term and more than one in three quickly reverts to eating habits of old.”

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Growing importance of hygiene and origin

Eighty percent of the respondents who had changed their behavior said they now cleaned fresh produce such as fruit and vegetables more thoroughly before eating it. Seventy-one percent also wash their hands more often than in the past. Eating raw vegetables is felt to be especially dangerous, which is why 73 percent have banned them entirely from their menus.

Purchasing restraint has not affected domestic producers and the food trade full on, however. Consumers are avoiding produce from growing areas they feel to be unsafe. "Origin is a very important factor for shoppers. Nearly two out of three consumers opt for vegetables from safe areas," communication expert Popp stresses.

Changes in behavior are seldom permanent

As a rule, however, consumers only adapt their behavior on a short-term basis during food crises, as the survey clearly indicates. In the long term only 14 percent of Germans are prepared to change their eating habits, while a further 34 percent are at least prepared to do so, at least in times of acute crisis, until the danger is over. "If you also take into account the fact that 50 percent of Germans do not change their behavior at all during outbreaks of diseases such as EHEC or swine flu, producers and retailers can face the future with hope," Popp says.

News coverage is not uncontroversial

Views differ widely on how the media have covered the E. coli outbreak. Fifty percent of respondents take the current coverage seriously and a further 21 percent who had long ceased to do so are now taking the coverage seriously once

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more. But nearly 30 percent said they did not believe what they were being told. "Professional communication is indispensable in the present situation. Objective information from all concerned and greater transparency are essential if lost confidence is to be regained, Popp says.

Doctors continue to be seen as the most credible source of information

Germans place no greater trust in anyone than in their family doctor. Eighty-two percent see their personal physician as the most credible source of information. A high level of trust is also enjoyed by healthcare organizations such as the Robert Koch Institute (78 percent). Print and online media in particular come nowhere near this level. Only a little over half of the respondents (53 percent) believe what they read or hear in the media. "It is quite clear that parts of the media have forfeited an enormous amount of credibility with many people. In view of the need for essential prevention in the case of acute diseases that," Dirk Popp says, "is an alarming trend."

About the study

The representative survey of 1,003 consumers aged 14 and over was undertaken in cooperation with tns emnid on June 3 and 4, 2011. Distinctions can be drawn by socio-demographic data such as age, gender, education, income, size of household, and (German) federal state as well as by attitudes toward EHEC.



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Über Ketchum Pleon:

Ketchum Pleon ist Deutschlands führende Agentur für Kommunikationsberatung und europäischer Marktführer für Corporate Communications, Public Affairs, Change, Healthcare, Brand- und Sales Communications. Für das 1988 gegründete und am 1. Januar 2010 mit Ketchum fusionierte Unternehmen sind allein in Deutschland mehr als 350 Beraterinnen und Berater tätig. Zu den über 200 Klienten gehören zahlreiche DAX-30 und Euro Stoxx-Unternehmen, Bundes- und Landesministerien sowie Non-Profit-Organisationen.

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