

# In the 'Horsegate' hotseat: our experts score the CEOs

From sincere to suicidal we assess responses from retail bosses



## Our experts



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### Julia Glotz

**A**fter complaints from Number 10 that retailers had been too silent on the horsemeat scandal, last Friday, the levies broke.

As the Food Standards Agency released its first set of results on DNA tests across 2,500 samples of processed food, supermarket CEOs brushed off their media training skills and headed for the nation's TV and radio studios – and some have barely been out of the spotlight since.

But who came across well and who tanked, and how effective have the retailers' wider communications strategies around the scandal been?

We asked a panel of four PR and crisis communications experts to give their verdict on their performances.



### Tesco

Average score: 4.7/5

*CEO's key media moment: Philip Clarke in a video on the Tesco website*

**MB:** Tesco reacted quickly. Clarke's commitment to "build a world-class traceability and DNA testing system" and a new website to "open up our supply chain" were made before the Number 10 complaint and struck a bold note. A textbook performance. 4/5

**RM:** Best by far in scope and

scale of its response, with informative press advertising, customer emails and strong TV appearances from Tim Smith, who looked calm and collected on the BBC and delivered key messages reassuringly. Clarke's video appearance was less assured. Referring to this "terrible event" made it sound like someone's granny had been hit by a bus. 5/5

**JG:** Setting up a website for DNA results is an exceptionally good idea, but I hated the video. Clarke sounds like a CEO who's just completed his media training. When a crisis happens, you need to put yourself out there. A pre-filmed video appears stage-managed and as heavily processed as a frozen burger. However, Tim Smith's performances have been great, and Tesco have done everything you would expect them to do. 5/5



### The Co-operative

Average score: 4.7/5

*CEO's key media moment: Peter Marks on Channel 4 News*

**JH:** The interviews Marks gave were superb. He came across as down-to-earth, extremely empathetic and not frightened of saying sorry. Unlike some others, he also directly answered the questions he was asked. An effective and human response in line with The Co-op's ethical values. 5/5

**JG:** Marks' comments on Five

Live were reasonable, in so far as he apologised and assumed responsibility for the products that The Co-op sell in their own shops. He said that supermarkets, as opposed to the consumer, should absorb the cost of scrutinising the supply chain itself – a statement that should be commended. **4/5**

**RM:** All hail Marks for stepping up to the media plate, and a particularly strong performance on C4. Standing up and being counted, he couldn't have been more Co-op if he'd had a flat cap and a whipplet. **5/5**



## Sainsbury's

Average score: **4.0/5**

CEO's key media moment: *Justin King on Newsnight*

**JH:** Sainsbury's has been relatively understated, but King did go on Newsnight, which is arguably the toughest media assignment of all. The one criticism I'd make is Sainsbury's has not been as specific as others about what actions they're taking. **4/5**  
**MB:** Whilst they have avoided contamination, King defended the industry on Newsnight, stating that it was its responsibility to reassure customers. King was in a strong position being able to defend his company, but he also made a balanced argument in favour of the industry's response to the crisis, while avoiding being drawn into a debate about the complexity of the supply chain. **4/5**

**RM:** Justin King's seven-minute epic on Newsnight, though probably not viewed by many Sainsbury's shoppers, was calm, serious and confident. Very slightly smug at times – "We have been a little bit ahead of the curve on this" – he nevertheless managed to evoke 144 years of customer care: "It's our job. We value our brand." **4/5**



## Morrisons

Average score: **3.8/5**

CEO's key media moment: *Dalton Philips facing up to the cameras after the Defra crisis summit on 9 February*

**RM:** Well done Dalton Philips, delivering a simple understandable consumer message: get back to basics, keep it simple, a wake-up call for the industry. An assured performance, but that was on 9 February. They should let him out more. **4/5**

**MB:** "Contrary to what No 10 is saying, we haven't all been silent," Morrisons said on Twitter, and it's to his credit that Philips agreed to be interviewed so early. Morrisons has tried to highlight its butchery counters on the back of the crisis. The PR challenge is to do so without appearing to take advantage of others' misfortune when the industry is trying to present a united front. **4/5**

**JH:** Philips has been a fairly prominent figure, and Morrisons have an opportunity to turn the crisis to their advantage because they own their supply chain. The danger is that they might push that message too hard and end up being seen as opportunistic and capitalising on a bad event. **3.5/5**



## Asda

Average score: **3.5/5**

CEO's key media moment: *Andy Clarke speaking to Channel 4 News after the Defra meeting on 18 February*

**JH:** They've been playing it fairly low key, and there is not a lot to see on their website. They've done nothing wrong, but they're just not as visible as others.

A perfectly adequate job, but could be more proactive. **3.5/5**

**RM:** Big bonus points for Clarke actually stopping and talking to Channel 4 News. While the rest of the great and good of British retailing were scuttling off down the street like newly sentenced criminals, he appeared calm and collected. However, claiming an "adulteration issue further up the supply chain" was to blame for everything looked a bit like passing the buck. **3/5**

**JG:** They immediately get extra points for Clarke speaking to Channel 4 News, even if they have been low-key on the matter otherwise. It showed courage and integrity. **4/5**



## Waitrose

Average score: **3.4/5**

CEO's key media moment: *Op-ed from Mark Price in The Telegraph*

**RM:** Very low-key and curiously detached from the media debate, Price's foray into print was bold. "Waitrose is not affected by this scandal," he declared. No, Waitrose had its very own scandal: beef meatballs containing pork. Overshadowed by horse, but in terms of mixing up proteins no less serious. It made the confidence look misplaced. **3/5**

**JH:** They've been proactive in sending emails to customers, but Price needs to be careful not to overplay his hand. Criticising cheap food seems opportunistic: "You need to pay for good food and, guess what, Waitrose is a premium shop." **4/5**

**JG:** Price's point about cheap food was a stupid thing to say.

The message seemed to be that if you're unemployed, you get what you deserve. I can't believe someone would say something like that in 2013. Beyond snobbery. **3/5**



## Iceland

Average score: **1.7/5**

CEO's key media moment: *Malcolm Walker on Panorama*

**RM:** I assume Walker is too powerful for anyone at Iceland to keep him away from the cameras. If not insulting an entire nation, he was patronising Iceland shoppers. Suggesting there might be "dog or cat... or hedgehog" in meat products because "you can't test for everything" is not a confidence-building strategy. British supermarkets may indeed be "the best in the world" and "an easy target" for the media, but now isn't the time to say so. **0/5**

**JH:** The messaging was just inappropriate. Whereas other retailers have been empathetic and accepting, Walker came across as combative, defensive and reluctant to accept responsibility. By introducing the line about local councils driving down food standards, he gave a completely new angle to the crisis rather than defusing it. The antithesis of crisis communications best practice. **1/5**

**JG:** At least Walker had passion and chutzpah, and he came across as honest. Plus, Iceland have been running press ads, so it's not like they haven't been doing anything – they are communicating with people. However, Walker trying to distinguish between horsemeat, horse flesh and horse traces was all a bit complicated. **4/5**

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