

CASCADE - food communication at its best

The overall aim of the CASCADE Network of Excellence is to bring together scientific experts from different disciplines in a collaborative action to identify and study the effects of food-borne environmental pollutants. CASCADE consists of 24 research groups from nine European countries. Between 2004 and 2010, more than 200 senior scientists, post doctoral and PhD students worked on CASCADE's programme of research, risk assessment and education concerning endocrine-disrupting chemicals in food. The overriding objective of CASCADE was to 'spread excellence' via the effective dissemination of the research results generated by the network to a target groups in order to make the results accessible and to build external alliances for continued and increased excellence. The ultimate outcome of CASCADE's joint efforts is to return the results to the European consumers by providing consumers with reliable information on health risks which are associated with exposure to chemical residues in food. For this to be successful, CASCADE understood from the outset that effective stakeholder involvement, engagement with the media and the public were prerequisites. CASCADE has actively established the network as an internationally well known and respected brand that reflects quality and excellence. The very specific CASCADE solution to challenges in food communication is described below.

Making research useful

CASCADE aimed to provide new information on the mechanism of action of food-borne chemical residues and contaminants that interfere with hormone signaling, and to make this information useful in the development of mechanism- and disease-based test methods and in the risk assessment and benefit analysis. From the very beginning, CASCADE has had a dynamic communication plan at the very core of its activities to ensure the effective dissemination of results.

CASCADE's communication plan

CASCADE's communication plan established the strategy for realising the ultimate aim of the project to provide European consumers with reliable information on health risks that are associated with exposure to chemical residues in food. With CASCADE being an international collaborative effort of 24 research groups, the establishment of an internal as well as external communication strategy was of paramount importance. The internal communication strategy ensured that appropriate communication structures were created and nourished in order to create a common view of CASCADE's aims and message, to create a strong sense of ownership and motivation amongst the partners and to direct the research and education activities of the network in a common direction.

The external communication strategy ensured that the network would use clear and synchronised messages in well defined communication channels to explain the role and the research results of CASCADE. With CASCADE having a number of spokespersons, and numerous stakeholders, it was important that messages were coordinated and that the communication was carried out in well organised manner and integrated across the consortia and research disciplines. The communication plan established the information policy for the network with a specific media crisis policy.

Reaching the target audiences

The focal point of CASCADE's dissemination activities are European consumers who could be reached through CASCADE public events, authorities and consumer organisations. A key function of the network was to channel relevant scientific information to consumers, and to authorities for implementation of new scientific evidence into legislation concerning food safety. In addition, the dissemination of CASCADE's research activities was also aimed towards other stakeholders and the key target audiences were:-

- European and national authorities
- Consumer organisations
- Industry
- Scientific community

CASCADE's activities are multidisciplinary and transnational and have generated complex scientific information. Different channels were needed to reach different target groups. For each of the target groups, CASCADE's communication plan defined the most suitable channel, how to use it and the expected outcome.

Implementation: Communication challenges and CASCADE-solutions

CHALLENGE 1: The first and most obvious challenge was that communication and dissemination would be given a lower priority than other activities in the network, such as research, education, risk assessment or administration.

THE CASCADE-SOLUTION To avoid this, CASCADE immediately employed a full-time Communication Manager and through all six years there has always been one full-time employee to manage and coordinate the dissemination and communication tasks. Also, CASCADE realized the benefits of regular training for the Communications Manager and realized that communications managers in different EU-funded research projects probably faced the same challenges. For this reason, CASCADE took the initiative to establish CommNet – an informal network of communication managers from more than 30 EU-funded food projects. Since its establishment in 2005, CommNet participants have met at least twice a year to exchange best practice, which has enhanced the communication quality in all the projects involved.

CHALLENGE 2: To effectively reach the end-user - the European consumer

THE CASCADE-SOLUTION As well as targeting consumer organisations, CASCADE looked for a more direct channels in television, radio, web and printed press to reach the European consumer. To facilitate this, media training was arranged for all group leaders within CASCADE, making sure that all partners are able to communicate effectively with

the press. A press contact to represent each country was appointed and a common press-kit was developed for all partners. CASCADE has also established proactive relations with science journalists both on national and European levels. As a result, CASCADE has often been the authority consulted when there have been news items on chemical contaminants in food. Education has been a key network activity which has reached young people in academia through CASCADE courses. CASCADE has reached young non-scientists have been reached through the use of social media, such as Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube.

CHALLENGE 3. To engage effectively with consumer organisations and industry.

THE CASCADE-SOLUTION To reach out to consumer organisations and industry CASCADE has arranged annual Open Forums where these groups and their umbrella organisations were invited to learn more on CASCADE research results. The themes for these meetings have included “Chemicals in food”, “Endocrine Disruption – Present health threats and future research needs” and “European Food Science Day – Bringing back the results to the consumers”. These meetings have attracted hundreds of participants from industrial organisations (e.g. CIAA), consumer organisations (e.g. BEUC), regulatory authorities (e.g. EFSA) and NGOs. The Open Forums have informed thousands of stakeholders on food contamination issues. After the events the the impact of these events has been multiplied by broadcasting the outcome via television, on-line video news releases (“[CASCADE at YouTube](#)”), press items in printed media, opinion papers, debate articles and information on websites and in e-newsletters.

CHALLENGE 4. To reach out effectively to regulators and policy makers with relevant scientific findings.

THE CASCADE-SOLUTION Via lobbying campaigns, position papers and opinion papers, CASCADE has succeeded in influencing decision makers in several important issues. The uncertain future of the Networks of Excellence was highlighted during the lobbying campaign “Support research NoEs”, which concluded in the signing of an opinion paper by over 60 Networks of Excellence, an Open Forum and a Parliamentary lunch debate. At the time for voting on REACH regulation, CASCADE published an article about REACH-implementation in Financial Times. WWF and CASCADE jointly developed a “Detox-campaign” and CASCADE’s collaborations have also involved successful alliances with US-EPA and OECD. After one CASCADE Open Forum, more than 800 researchers from 20 different European countries jointly stated in a position paper the actions required to fill the knowledge gaps in endocrine disrupting chemicals-research. The outcome has been new chemical regulations (i.e the REACH-regulation) and new calls for proposals for research on endocrine-disrupting chemicals.

Outcomes and Measurement of success

It is widely acknowledged that ***CASCADE has managed to establish the network as an internationally well known and respected brand that reflects quality and excellence.*** The objectives of the network’s communication goals have been successfully achieved and may be measured through the following outcomes:-

- CASCADE has a popular, updated website with 140 000 hits/year and 5000 unique visitors ranked at number two on Google search
- Use of social media – CASCADE is active on Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, Cordis, AlphaGalileo, EurActive, EC DG Research, Research*eu and more than 20 other web sites and web communities.
- The CASCADE magazine – an attractive and easily available presentation of CASCADE for the public – was launched in 2008. The magazine has today been distributed to more than 3000 journalists, policy makers and industry representatives throughout Europe.
- Exceptional media coverage -16 press releases and hundreds of reports
- Production of a multitude of information materials, including nine newsletter editions, press invitations, position and opinion papers and monthly Internal Updates;
- The results of the network have been presented at more than 1100 meetings, conferences and workshops at regional, national and international levels. CASCADE has arranged 19 meetings for the dissemination of research results to identified target audiences.
- CASCADE has participated at EuroScience Open Forum (ESOF) two years in a row. ESOF is the largest scientific event and public exhibition in Europe and CASCADE has proactively engaged with hundreds of consumers who are interested in further information on food contaminants.
- The developments of a contact database with more than 1000 names and contact details of journalists, industry representatives, policy makers and others interested in the field of hormone disrupting chemicals. This gives CASCADE a unique opportunity to quickly and effectively contact a large number of stakeholders with the latest research news, the Newsletter, information about Open Forum, course information.
- CASCADE has produced more than 200 scientific publications in peer-reviewed journals, 151 manuscripts, 182 abstracts for oral presentations at meetings and 351 abstracts for poster presentations at meetings, 46 theses, 21 reports, 25 book chapters and hundreds of posters.

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