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Pundit's Mailbag — Sprout Doubt... What Constitutes A Direct Link?

Jim Prevor's Perishable Pundit, May 15, 2009

Our piece, [Alfalfa Seed Company, FDA, USDA And Supporting Cast Comment On Seed Withdrawal](#), featured several interviews, including one with Lyle Orwig, a principal with [Charleston/Orwig](#), who was acting as a spokesperson for Caudill Seed Company, the firm whose seed has been implicated in the [outbreak](#) related to alfalfa sprouts.

We found the interview troubling both substantively and because we could find no verification for many of the claims made in the interview. We decided to run it and give the seed company its say, but did add editor's notes and commentary to point out some of the more problematic areas.

We also questioned the whole notion that a PR agency is the one best able to speak on behalf of a company when food safety is the issue:

Lyle Orwig genuinely tried to help us and we appreciate it. However, he works for a prominent PR agency, [Charleston/Orwig](#), and it is difficult to be both an expert on public relations and an expert on seed and food safety. We are all in favor of hiring professionals but we consistently find it a mistake to simply abandon the job of representing your company to PR professionals. Far more effective is utilizing outside agencies to coordinate interviews and to arrange for your own people, genuine experts in what they do, to talk to the press.

As a result of this "knowledge gap" there are several points made in the interview we question. We noted a couple with editor's notes and left a few for readers to draw what conclusions they will.

One claim Caudill Seed made in the interview referred to an alleged failure on the part of the FDA to "conclusively tie" Caudill's seeds to the outbreak. One well-read Pundit reader pointed out that this doesn't seem to be an accurate characterization of the situation:

Regarding the claim by the Caudill Seed Company spokesperson that there was a lack of a "smoking gun" tying Caudill seed to the recent Salmonella Serotype Saintpaul outbreak that had been epidemiologically traced to alfalfa sprouts, the [May 7 MMWR \[Morbidity and](#)

[Mortality Weekly Report](#) issued by CDC mentions:

"Alfalfa sprout irrigation water collected on March 10 from a growing facility in Wisconsin grew Salmonella St. Paul indistinguishable from the outbreak strain. These sprouts also were grown from a seed lot identified with prefix 032 received from seed company B."

My understanding is that an "indistinguishable strain" is comparable to a fingerprint, and so constitutes a direct link to the 032 seed lot code from Caudill Seed Company.

We are not certain what standard of proof Caudill Seed would be persuaded by, but this tie appears rather solid.
