

HOW TO FIGHT BACK! PEER-TO- PEER CONSUMER GROUPS PROVE THAT THE PUBLIC CAN WIN

The Shift

By KEVIN ROOSE

Several national chain restaurants have been the target of complaints on IWasPoisoned.com since the site began in 2009. Ali Asaei for The New York Times

Dan Laptev, an electronics analyst, was making his way through the Charlotte, N.C., airport this month when he stopped at Starbucks for a light dinner — a ham-and-cheese sandwich and a cup of hot chocolate. He ate, drank, boarded his flight and got home. And that’s when the trouble started.

Mr. Laptev spent much of that night hunched over the toilet with a violently upset stomach. Suspecting his Starbucks meal as the source of his ills, he sent a complaint through the company’s website, but got only an automated form email back. So he did the next best thing: he logged on to his computer and went to IWasPoisoned.com, a website that allows users to post reports of food poisoning, and submitted his saga.

“I wanted to let people know to stop eating at Starbucks,” he told me.

This is the era of internet-assisted consumer revenge, and as scorned customers in industries from dentistry to dog-walking have used digital platforms to broadcast their displeasure, the balance of power has tipped considerably in the buyer's favor.

This is especially true of IWasPoisoned, which has collected about 89,000 reports since it opened in 2009. Consumers use the site to decide which restaurants to avoid, and public health departments and food industry groups routinely monitor its submissions, hoping to identify outbreaks before they spread. The site has even begun to tilt stocks, as traders on Wall Street see the value of knowing which national restaurant chain might soon have a food-safety crisis on its hands.

Not everyone is happy about the added transparency. Restaurant executives have criticized IWasPoisoned for allowing anonymous and unverified submissions, which they say leads to false reports and irresponsible fear-mongering. Some public health officials have objected on the grounds that food poisoning victims can't be trusted to correctly identify what made them sick.

"It's not helping food safety," said Martin Wiedmann, a professor of food safety at Cornell University. "If you want to trace food-borne illness, it needs to be done by public health departments, and it needs to include food history."

Rating your Uber driver or Airbnb host is one thing. But when it comes to matters of public health, is there such a thing as giving too much power to the people?

IWasPoisoned.com. The site has become influential, despite some critics' complaints that it doesn't verify reports of illness.

Patrick Quade, IWasPoisoned's founder, told me that he started the site in 2009, after, he said, he got food poisoning from a B.L.T. wrap he bought at a Manhattan deli. At the time, Mr. Quade, now 46, was working as an interest rates trader at Morgan Stanley. He figured that other people might want a place to report food-borne illnesses quickly and anonymously, without the ordeal of filing a complaint with the local health department.

At first, the submissions trickled in, mostly from diners who had meals at small local restaurants. But national chains like McDonald's, Subway and Starbucks popped up as well. Dunkin' Brands, the parent company of Dunkin' Donuts and Baskin-Robbins, saw its stock fall 2.4 percent last July, after traders on Wall Street circulated reports of a food-poisoning incident at one of the chain's stores, according to the financial news site [Benzinga](#). (The stock quickly recovered, and no widespread food-safety problem was ever confirmed.) Other national chains have also started their own investigations after reports appeared on the site, according to Mr. Quade.

No restaurant chain has felt the IWasPoisoned effect more than Chipotle. In 2015, users of the site began posting reports of food poisoning from a Chipotle location in Simi Valley, Calif. Eventually, it became clear that they were part of a larger norovirus outbreak, one of many food safety issues that

would [haunt Chipotle](#) for the next couple of years, cutting its stock price in half and eventually forcing the resignation of its chief executive.

“I could tell that Chipotle was a problem brand,” Mr. Quade said. “The rate of reporting was averaging nine or 10 times higher than other brands. It was a really powerful leading indicator.”

After the 2015 Chipotle incident drew attention to the site, Mr. Quade realized that IWasPoisoned could become a real business. He quit his job at Morgan Stanley, and began to work on the site full time. He now has three employees, a handful of remote contractors and a makeshift office at a co-working space in Manhattan. The company makes less than \$20,000 per month in revenue, but Mr. Quade expects that to grow. Soon, he plans to release a mobile app, which will alert a user when walking near a restaurant with an active food poisoning complaint.

As it has matured, IWasPoisoned has developed an unusual business model that reflects Mr. Quade’s Wall Street roots. Power users — like, say, a hedge fund that can profit from knowing about an E. coli outbreak at a major restaurant chain ahead of the rest of the market — pay up to \$5,000 a month for real-time alerts whenever a new report is posted to the site. (Free alerts are also available, but they come only once a day.) Only a handful of clients pay for the premium service, but more have expressed interest in signing up, Mr. Quade said.

A Chipotle restaurant in Manhattan. Users of IWasPoisoned.com began posting complaints about a Chipotle location in California in 2015 that tied it to a norovirus outbreak, haunting the company for a couple years. Ramsay de Give for The New York Times

“The investment community is more attuned to food safety than ever before,” he said.

Health officials and restaurant executives are also using the site to spot early signs of trouble. According to Mr. Quade, public health agencies in 46 states and representatives from more than half of the top 50 restaurant chains in America subscribe to the site’s daily email alerts. More than 25,000 consumers subscribe to the emails as well.

On average, the site now receives 150 complaints a day, and every new report is manually reviewed by a staff member before posting to make sure it is at least plausible. The site weeds out obvious hoaxes and joke submissions, and uses technology like IP tracking to help stop users from submitting multiple reviews of the same restaurant.

“With every report, our promise is to make sure it’s a real person who believes they have food poisoning,” Mr. Quade said.

One of those words — “believes” — is perhaps the food industry’s biggest problem with IWasPoisoned. Food safety experts told me that food poisoning victims are prone to what epidemiologists call “recall bias.” A person who gets a violent stomach bug will naturally attribute it to the last thing they ate, especially if it came from a restaurant with a history of food-safety issues. But often, given the slow-developing nature of many food-borne illnesses, the culprit is something they ate days ago, or something entirely unrelated.

“A web page like this doesn’t ask what disease you got, or the timing of it,” Professor Wiedmann of Cornell said. “All of that gets lost.”

Mr. Quade conceded that point, saying, “We don’t go out and conduct medical tests” on submissions, and that users’ accounts might not always be reliable. The site allows restaurants to appeal a report, he said, if it has evidence that a customer is lying or mistaken, and that it pulls reports off its website after 30 days to limit their reputational damage.

But he said that the site’s reports were still valuable as data points to consider in context. And, he added, users want a place to complain.

“They’ll do it, whether we exist or not,” he said. “If we’re not there, they’ll just go to Twitter or Facebook.”