

Written Representation 33

Name: NTUC Fairprice Co-operative Ltd

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BACKGROUND

With the increasing use of social media and, over the past 2 years, FairPrice's share of being featured in fake news included the following:-

- i) Halal Pork
- ii) Plastic rice
- iii) Gift vouchers for participating in surveys
- iv) Fake Chin Chow *

* Subsequently determined to be caused by improper storage conditions.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

It is clear that the primary purpose of fake news is the deliberate fabrication and dissemination of false facts to mislead the public. The danger is that many may not be able to spot fake news or take the trouble to double check the facts. Worst still, they circulate the fake news and this can be dangerous for the following reasons:- If unchecked, it might cultivate a culture of lying;

- i) If *perpetrator* of fake news are allowed to get away with it, they will get bolder and continue on a wider scale with impunity;
- ii) If *fake news itself* is not challenged, it will create a situation of people believing them and this could destroy a person or even an institution.

IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS

Although fake news can be detrimental to the targeted person or persons/organisation, the consequences will be more severe if it relates to food products; it will be very detrimental to the manufacturer and retailer concerned because people tend to be very careful and, hence, would err on the side of caution and stop buying. The consequences are likely to be the following:-

- i) Economic losses through loss of business;
- ii) Reputational risk; and
- iii) Deterioration of customers' confidence, goodwill and trust

In the above cases, FairPrice was affected in the following manner:-

Halal Pork case

The image of the Pasar Fresh Pork product with the Halal sticker from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) first started circulating on the Internet in 2007 via email and was posted on various local blogsites and online forums. A police report was made and a statement was issued to local media to inform on the falsity of the image. MUIS also conducted an investigation and exonerated FairPrice of any wrong doing. The statement and issue were widely covered in local print, broadcast and online media, online forums, social media and alternative local online news sites.

This image resurfaced again in 2011, and 2014 on social media, where FairPrice had, on each occasion, made police reports and activated various communication platforms including social media, web portal and traditional media, to correct the misinformation.

Plastic Rice

In January 2017, an image of FairPrice Jasmine Fragrant Rice along with a message alleging that a friend, who is a chemist, confirmed that the rice was made of plastic was shared via messaging platforms and social media. The message went on to claim FairPrice has since withdrawn the product. This generated widespread concern and FairPrice's Facebook page and customer hotline were inundated with queries on this matter. The story was also picked up by local media.

A statement was posted on FairPrice's Facebook page and issued to local media to inform about the falsity of the message and caution the community to be mindful of sharing unverified information. Customer notices were also placed at all FairPrice stores. The Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) also conducted their own investigation and publicly announced that the product was not made of plastic. The story on this hoax was widely covered in local print, online and broadcast media, online forums, social media and alternative local online news sites.

Gift Vouchers for participating in FairPrice surveys

The gift voucher scam first appeared in 2014 where people were invited to participate in a survey to win \$1,000 in FairPrice vouchers. The online site also used FairPrice's logo to legitimize the survey. Customers who participated in the survey would subsequently visit FairPrice stores to claim their vouchers. FairPrice reached out to the media again and posted a message on Facebook to inform about the unauthorised use of its logo and that it had not endorsed nor commissioned the survey. A police report was made as well.

This ruse resurfaced in 2017 on at least 5 different occasions and 3 times between January to February 2018. Statements were issued to local media and posted on FairPrice's Facebook page each time this occurred. Reports were also made to the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore (SingCERT).

Fake Chin Chow

In May 2017, 2 separate videos were shared on social media on “Tan Soon Mui Grass Jelly”, which appeared to have a spongy texture. One of the videos alleged that the product was made of plastic. Netizens posted queries on this matter on FairPrice’s Facebook page. Investigations revealed improper storage can affect the quality of the product and the allegation it is made of plastic is false; the manufacturer also lodged a police report. FairPrice posted multiple statements on its Facebook page and issued responses to local media to clarify the issue. FairPrice also advised the public not to circulate unfounded or unverified information which may cause unnecessary public alarm. AVA also issued a statement to media to clarify that the product is not made of plastic and is safe for consumption.

Articles on this issue were published widely in local print, online and broadcast media, online forums, social media and alternative local online news sites.

SUBMISSIONS

Given the increasing use of social media, and the likelihood of a corresponding increase in fake news, it is timely to look at the areas to protect the innocent victim(s) of fake news. Hence, the following recommended:-

- i) Enact laws to punish perpetrator (s) of fake news;
- ii) Consider the setting up of a regulatory body, with investigation and enforcement powers, to deal with fake news; perpetrator(s) of fake news would then be liable for criminal proceedings. Such criminal proceedings, if any, would not preclude civil proceedings taken against them. This is the same scenario for trade mark infringements, which has a regulatory body with investigation and enforcement powers (i.e. Intellectual Property Office of Singapore – IPOS). Infringing party will be liable for both civil proceedings as well as criminal prosecution;
- iii) In addition, the AGC should also consider taking such perpetrator(s) to tasks by charging them with criminal defamation under Section 499 - 502 of the Penal Code.