Mini-Case: The Killer Banana Rumor

A rumor, circulated both on the Internet and via e-mail, claimed that bananas from Costa Rica were infected with “necrotizing fasciitis,” or flesh-eating bacteria, and that the entire Costa Rica monkey population had been wiped out because of the bananas. It warned the public to stop eating bananas and to seek medical attention if they had eaten a banana and had come down with a fever. The bacteria, it said, could “eat” 2 to 3 centimeters of flesh per hour, making amputation likely and death possible.

The message, like most e-mail rumors involving food, said the message could be confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Rumors tend to carry an expert’s name to make the outrageous rumor seem believable. When contacted, a spokesperson for the CDC said, “This is a false report.”

APBNews.com reported on the incident, saying a trade group was trying to squelch the rumor. Tim Debus of the International Banana Association (IBA), an organization directly affected by the rumor, called it “Just another case of Internet terrorism like the recent hacker attacks on popular Web sites.” The National Necrotizing Foundation, which researches such diseases and offers support and education services, said it was not possible for the disease to spread in the way the hoax claimed (Noack, 2000).

Debus indicated that the IBA, concerned that the prank could disrupt the economy, made efforts to get the word out that the allegations were false.