



# For **safety's** sake

BY CRAIG LEVITT

Retailers, suppliers, trade associations and government agencies are working side-by-side to ensure the safety of the food supply.

**F** ARM TO FORK... HOOF TO HOME... CROP TO CONSUMER. No matter which organization uses which slogan, the message is the same: The prevention of food-related illnesses is a responsibility that must be assumed throughout the entire food chain.

Even with stringent monitoring and testing, over the past 18 months there have been more than 900 product recalls in categories such as ground beef, chicken, produce and frozen pizza. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that each year approximately one-quarter of Americans suffer from some type of food-related illness. While the numbers have remained relatively constant over the past several years, consumer confidence in the safety of the nation's food supply ebbs and flows with every recall. According to the Food Marketing Institute's *2008 U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends*, 81% of consumers are confident that the food they buy is safe,

up from 66% the previous year.

"It was surprising how consumer confidence went down so dramatically last year," says Jill Hollingsworth, group vice president of food safety programs for Arlington, Va.-based Food Marketing Institute. "One of the things I take from that is consumers are very much affected by what they see on the news. Maintaining consumer confidence can be difficult for retailers sometimes because they have to work not only within their own stores and the environment they control, but also with suppliers to try and make sure the foods brought in are as safe as they can be."



As the last link in the food chain before foods reach the consumer, retailers have the best opportunity to assuage any consumer concerns. One idea that is gaining momentum is the concept of marketing safety. Though insiders say that safety has been a useful promotional tool for farmers' markets and the like, most larger grocers and

supermarkets have yet to adopt the strategy. Richard George, Ph.D., professor of food marketing at Saint Joseph's University based in Philadelphia, says that's antiquated thinking.

"Now we need to talk to people," says George. "There is no food and water supply in the world as vulnerable as ours. We have forgotten about informing consumers about food safety. The industry needs make sure that consumers understand what we are doing. Some of it can just be symbolic, but we have to have a dialog with consumers."

George recently visited an Irish supermarket that had huge signs in the meat and fish departments telling employees that they must wash their hands. George asked if the employees had sanitary problems in the past. He was told the sign was really for the customers so they knew the precautions the employees were taking. "Its things like that," says George. "We have to communicate to consumers how we do things. We know what we are doing but I'm not so sure the consumers know we are doing it."

While FMI's Hollingsworth agrees that promoting safe retailer practices is a step in the right direction, she stresses that it is important that food safety should not become a competitive issue. She says the goal should not be selling food safety, but rather focus on selling safe food. "We want consumers to feel that as an industry, supermarkets are doing all they can to make sure the food they sell is safe," says Hollingsworth. "We don't want a consumer to feel that the food they buy in one place versus another is any more or less safe. We want them to feel confident that as an industry we are working with the whole food chain to deliver safe food. We also see that retailers play a big role in educating consumers."

#### OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION

A study conducted by the Washington, D.C.-based Partnership for Food Safety Education revealed that 64% of adults indicated that it is 'very important' to follow safe food handling procedures. However, less than 60% are correctly following important safe food handling practices. The organization's research shows that despite the fact that a majority of adults feel confident that they understand and follow food handling procedures, a sizeable number do not consistently follow certain safe food handling practices.

To get the message across the partnership employs its Be Food Safe platform, designed to encourage retailers and suppliers to remind and educate consumers on the importance of safe food handling practices. Retailers participating in the program can use the graphics and other consumer outreach vehicles to inform their customers of the four core messages of food safety—clean, separate, cook and chill. Currently nearly 40 retailers,



representing approximately 6,000 supermarkets have volunteered to deliver the Be Food Safe messages to consumers.

“What better way to reach consumers than at the point where they are purchasing food?” asks Shelley Feist, executive director for the Partnership for Food Safety Education. “Working with retailers is a fantastic way to reach customers. All of the materials are meant to complement each other and a number of retailers have taken the Be Food Safe program and run with it.”

Big Y Foods has been providing educational materials to consumers for years and is a big proponent of the Be Food Safe program. The Springfield, Mass retailer reproduces Be Food Safe flyers for use as bag stuffers, runs materials

in its weekly circulars and created a web page that emphasizes the Be Food Safe message.

“It is very important for retailers to educate consumers,” says Cas Tryba, director of food safety for Big Y Foods. “Our company has treated food safety as a high priority for the 15 years that I have been here, so I think [educating consumers] is just an extension of that. Food safety is vitally important and we have specific food safety criteria in place. Things like independent third-party auditors for our suppliers, as well as strict in-house policies and procedures. That safety carries over to our customers who prepare our food, so I see it as it is all linked.”

Big Y’s use of third-party auditors is an approach that many industry observers encourage retailers to employ to ensure their products

are safe. Following the E. coli outbreak in 2006 the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement was created by the California Department of Agriculture in order to certify the safe handling, shipment and sale of leafy green products. The organization has nearly 120 members which accounts for 99% of the California leafy greens volume. FMI manages a certification program called Safe Quality Food that provides independent certification that a supplier’s food safety and quality management system complies with international and domestic food safety regulations.

FMI also puts a lot of emphasis on employee training, offering a training program which many retailers send managers and staff. The program, called SuperSafeMark, is a comprehensive food training and certification course, which can be taken in a classroom setting or online at [www.supersafemark.com](http://www.supersafemark.com). Upon completion of the managerial level course the enrollee becomes a certified safe food handler. A more basic level course is available for store associates who just need to know a few key safety issues, such as the proper way to wash hands.

For retailers performing in-house training of store-level associates, Gary Ades, Ph.D. and president of G&L Consulting Group, based in Bentonville, Ark., says it is best to keep it simple and make sure the associates have the right tools to work with. “It’s the common sense stuff that gets you,” says Ades. “Food safety is not rocket science, it is just an understanding of what causes the problems - which are pretty defined, keep hot food hot, cold food cold, don’t cross contaminate—and then figuring out what the solutions are and making sure they are followed.”

With the intent of eliminating the possibility of cross-contamination, Sterilox Food Safety, a division of PuriCore, offers a solution that replaces normal crisping water with electrolyzed water, which is a combination of salt and electricity. Tom Daniel, senior vice president and general manager for the Malvern, Pa-based company, says that in addition to elimi-



nating bacteria and preventing cross-contamination from case to case, the solution extends the shelf life of the product.

"We also tie into the misting system," says Daniel. "We put a small amount of solution in the mister to keep bacteria and algae from growing on the mist head as well as prevent the occurrence of slime on the wet rack. We have another system in the seafood department which removes bacteria and a floral application as well."

Retailers can buy or lease the Sterilox equipment, which is chemical free and received a food contact notification from the FDA more than a year ago. They also recently became organically certified by the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI). This month Sterilox launches a new system that will double the output of the current system and according to Daniel is just as easy to use as existing models.

"The beauty in our equipment is its simplicity," says Daniel. "You can have the greatest piece of equipment in the world but if it is too complicated for a retailer and the employee turnover a retailer experiences, then it doesn't really matter what it does. Our system is user friendly, put salt in and push a button. If you don't put salt in you get a visual and audible alarm and a message is sent through an e-mail system."

To emphasize the importance of maintaining temperatures, the Division of Food Safety for the Ohio Department of Agriculture has begun spot checking temperatures in cases. In some instances those that don't comply with the guidelines—hot holding temperatures at 135 degrees or above and cold holding temperatures at 41 degrees or below—the cases are being shut down and product discarded. For retailers that means fluctuating temperatures in cases can become costly. AHT Cooling Systems offer an array of cold cases designed to minimize fluctuation of temperature, thereby minimizing risk.

"With our equipment the idea is maintaining food quality and safety," says Howell Feig, director of sales for Hanahan, S.C.-based AHT. "Our multi-temperature cases can be changed from frozen to refrigerated and once they are set will hold temperatures to plus or minus one degree, which minimizes bacteria growth on fresh products. All a retailer has to do is plug it in."

Other important associate level safety issues are hand and surface sanitation. Several super-

markets have replaced the food prep bucket with sanitizing wipes and have made it mandatory for food handlers and food prep people to use sanitizing wipes as well. Many industry observers believe that sanitizing wipes are better equipped at preventing food-borne illness than the other existing methods. Some supermarkets have taken to using sanitizing wipes at the checkout counters as well as on the floor for consumer use to prevent cross-contamination.

"We have a study that shows hand sanitizing wipes are three times more effective than gels," says John Luposello, a certified food safety trainer for Orangeburg, N.Y.-based Nice-Pak. "In addition to the obvious benefit of improved health code compliance there are other benefits. Shoppers see associates using wet sanitizing wipe products and are visually reassured that the supermarket is going to the fullest extent to make sure consumers are shopping in a safe environment."

#### TRACK AND TRACE

As product recalls continue to add up, the tracking of food up and down the supply chain has become an industry wide concern. Big Y Foods works in close concert with its suppliers in order to keep tabs on where its food products are coming from, something industry observers emphasize all retailers should do. Observers note that even though there are excellent safety mechanisms in place, there is always room for improvement.

Many industry insiders believe that the technology is now available to modernize the nation's food safety systems. Not only to defend against dangerous outbreaks but agro terrorism as well. In addition to significantly decreasing the number of food-borne illnesses in the U.S. each year, insiders hope to be able to stabilize the wavering public confidence that the food they eat is safe.

"For a grocery store trust is everything," says Elliott Grant, chief marketing officer for

YottaMark. "Consumers really look towards the grocer to be their arbiter of trust. They don't trust the government as much as they trust the grocery store. That's why it so important for the grocer - for their brand, their reputation - to be known as a company that brings safe food to the aisle."

The Redwood Calif.-based YottaMark's HarvestMark electronic traceability solution uses secure codes printed on labels or packaging to identify products on a case and item level. The technology also allows for the tracking of a temperature history as well. While the instantaneousness of the information can be an effective way to quickly trace transactions in response to a suspected food-borne illness or recall event, there are other advantages. According to Grant, putting identification information at the item level allows consumers to access any information the grower or the retailer want to give. The point being, he says, is rather than just saying an item is safe, you can show that it is safe.

No system is perfect however, and contaminated food is inevitably going to find its way into the food chain. In order to minimize the damage and keep consumer confidence high it is imperative that the industry as a whole and retailers specifically respond in a timely, calm and effective manner. Designed to assist with that process is FoodTrack. The Wellington, Fla.-based intelligence company monitors world wide information—in real time—from such sources as company press releases, newswire feeds and federal and local regulatory agency notices. When an event with a potential effect on the food industry occurs the information is immediately distributed through multiple channels, depending on the importance of the event. Information is primarily disseminated via email, text messaging and voice and fax broadcasting. According to FoodTrack president and CEO Robert Waite, a desktop alert system is in the works as well.

"When a retailer receives a message from FoodTrack they are in a position to take proactive measures," says Waite. "We are in quite a different food safety climate than we were just five years ago. There is a new trend on the retail end where retailers need to be on top of all food safety issues, not just the ones that directly impact them." □