The Food Safety Disconnect

Hank Lambert, General Manager, UL Food Safety

Underwriters Laboratories (UL) recently released a study entitled “Navigating the Product Mindset,” which compares consumer and food manufacturer perceptions on issues such as food safety. *Food Manufacturing* spoke with Hank Lambert of UL Food Safety about the study’s findings and what they mean for consumers and food companies.

Q: What are consumers’ main concerns regarding food safety?

A: When it comes to food safety, this study demonstrated that consumers are primarily concerned about contracting a foodborne illness from fresh food and the safety of chemical additives found in processed food. They are also concerned with the cleanliness and sanitary conditions and freshness for both fresh and processed foods.

Q: What is the disconnect between processors’ view of product safety and consumers’ perspective of product safety?

A: The majority of manufacturers believe they are ahead of or at the curve when it comes to food safety. In fact, only 2 percent believe they are behind the curve as it relates to product safety. Consumers on the other hand feel that the safety of food products has remained static or only slightly improved over the last couple of years. Moreover, consumers in China believe that the safety of the food supply has worsened over the same time period.

Q: Who should be held accountable for a food product’s safety?

A: In this study, more than 80 percent of manufacturers felt it is their responsibility to ensure and communicate product safety information to consumers. Looking at the broader picture however, food safety is ultimately the responsibility of multiple stakeholders from food producers, processors and manufacturers across the food chain, retailers, regulators, third-party auditors, laboratories and even consumers.

Q: Only 2 percent of food manufacturers feel their company is behind the curve in product safety, yet 70 percent of consumers do not think fresh food manufacturers conduct thorough testing before introducing new products to the market. Why do consumers suspect that food products are not tested thoroughly enough?

A: When one looks at the frequency of recalls and outbreaks of foodborne illnesses, the recent Listeria outbreak in cantaloupes and the E. coli outbreak related to sprouts in Europe, it is easy to understand the concern among consumers. The reporting of these issues is also more readily available to the public. These outbreaks resulted in a significant number of illnesses and deaths heightening the general public's concern and awareness and are primary reasons that consumers suspect that food products are not tested thoroughly enough.

Q: How can food manufacturers best demonstrate their commitment to food safety to boost customer confidence?

A: Manufacturers have an opportunity to better communicate and educate consumers about what they are doing to ensure the safety of their food products. For instance, more than 75 percent of consumers find it difficult to locate safety information for fresh meat and fish and almost 50 percent of consumers find performance and quality information difficult to locate. Manufacturers can combat this by making it easier for consumers to find safety information related to their food product. At the end of the day, the more the global food industry, regulatory and third-party stakeholders come together and collaborate in such a way that incidences of foodborne illnesses are significantly reduced, the more confidence consumers will have in the safety of the food supply.

Interview by Lindsey Coblentz, Associate Editor, Food Manufacturing

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