Stalking Better Food Traceability

By Krystal Gabert, Associate Editor

Last week, while I was meandering around the web seeking interesting videos, I came across a video that I found somewhat interesting. When the narrator—who looked to be about my age and was wearing a t-shirt from my favorite band—mentioned that he lived in a nearby town, I decided immediately that we were to be best friends for life. I used his name and city to uncover the following: his date of birth, alma matter, date of college graduation, job title, current employer, street address, phone number, girlfriend's name, her job title and employer, names of now-defunct bands he was in, a cache of his personal photographs, his blog and about half a dozen newspaper articles quoting him. Since I had to get back to work and had never actually intended to dig up this guy’s whole life—some facebook privacy settings go a long way is all I’m saying—I abandoned the project pretty quickly.

But this foray into internet detective work was not an isolated incident. I once told an old employer that I didn't understand how life worked before the internet. "I use it for everything," I said, "When I need directions, or to know what time a business closes, when I can't remember the name of that one actress in that one movie, to look up historical dates I can't remember... how did everybody live before?" He told me, "Krystal, we just knew *less stuff*. We just didn't remember an actress' name. Then we moved on with our lives." I find that this answer is likely true but deeply unsatisfying.

I’ve come to take for granted the immediate availability of any information I could ever want. And with the advancements in “farm-to-fork” traceability software flooding the market (and my email inbox), it seems like food manufacturing companies are hungry for this kind of at-your-fingertips knowledge as well.

Most of the software of this type that I’ve seen allows manufacturers to

electronically catalog all the raw ingredients as they arrive in the plant and then track those ingredients by batch number as they make their way into various products. Then, basically, you're left with a finished product that has a barcode containing the sourcing information for all the ingredients included in the product. This way, in case of source contamination—like the peanut butter recall last year—manufacturers are able to know exactly which products are at risk and recall those products only.

Such a specified recall is good for consumers and good for manufacturers. When processors are able to instantly pinpoint exactly which products may pose a health risk, they can get them off the shelves immediately, reducing consumer exposure. Processors can also leave on the shelves the products that are not affected, preventing the wasted time and money involved in recalling and disposing of perfectly viable product.

In a world where uncovering a mountain of useless detail—like the life story of some kid in a YouTube video—takes mere minutes, it seems obvious that the compulsion to catalog information could be put to more useful purposes— like tracking our food supply. Many plants have already installed the software and machinery required to accurately trace the source ingredients of their products. The industry-supported Food Safety Modernization Act that is now working its way through congress may impact the traceability requirements imposed on the food industry and encourage other manufacturers to implement this technology as well.

Many of the doubts recently expressed by consumer groups about the safety of our food supply may be quelled once food is really farm-to-fork traceable on an industry-wide scale.

What is your facility doing with regard to traceability? Let me know: krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com *[1].*

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