Embracing Technology for Recall Preparedness

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Food companies are no strangers to the world of product recalls. Most modern companies have a detailed, yet very manual process in place for handling a recall scenario. The objective of a plan is to ensure that any suspect product is quickly removed from commerce, as well as to help the company manage specific customer requirements and International Organization for Standardization (ISO) guidelines.

Mock exercises and written plans help, but a fast response time is most essential for removing questionable products from the supply chain. Those who invest in technology when building a recall plan are best able to limit the impact of the situation.

Product recalls are not going away. They are not just limited to serious health and safety concerns. In many cases, recalls might be due to misrepresentation of product performance or ingredient composition. The foundation of a product recall may stem from a wide variety of issues, including improper labeling, under-processing, cross-contamination or inadequate plant safety. Regardless of the scenario, the impact of a prolonged product recall can have crippling effects on a brand or supplier.

An event as simple as an accusation can also pose a serious threat to commercial food suppliers. If a patron or consumer becomes sick after eating in a restaurant, the wariness will extend to the restaurant’s supplier. A company thought to be responsible for producing a suspicious ingredient found in a finished product can also create cause for alarm. Suppliers must implement a means for tracing their

products within the supply chain so they can recall, or at minimum isolate, any suspicious product until the source of the issue has been definitely identified.

Food companies realize that product recalls or threats for recalls are inevitable. Addressing the odds that one may occur sooner or later and taking a proactive stance can substantially reduce the impact should a recall take effect. Preparedness is more important than ever before. Updating the old, manual methods for instituting a recall is no longer a sufficient option for food processing and manufacturing.

The ability to start, track, stop and even prevent a recall is crucial for maintaining credibly among customers. New developments for prevention, identification, notification, removal and replenishment have evolved tremendously over the last few years. Today, companies who invest in new technology and embrace a more effective means for managing the aspects of a product recall are best positioned to weather the storm.

The capability for tracing the source of problem is fundamental to managing the outcome of a product recall. The technology responsible for tracing the source of a recall must be ingrained throughout all aspects of the business and supply chain. Trace capability is a critical insight extending beyond the measure of where a finished product was sent. It must provide a complete picture — full visibility from raw materials to individual batches, all the way to the semi-finished or finished products that are supplied to the customer. Steps such as purchasing, manufacturing, shipping and fulfillment are all important for tracing the process throughout the supply chain.

Taking advantage of the improvements found within graphic user interfaces is just as vital to the recall scenario. Ideally, this enables an easily accessible view for the ‘story’ of a company's products. There are excellent tools available for graphical lot tracking, which can help pinpoint a specific item or element as it exists in the lifecycle. For example, a specific lot that might contain questionable raw materials can immediately be detected and allows users to view the finished products that were produced from the materials. This type of tool can also help determine the location of the finished products, whether they are in the warehouse or have been shipped to a customer.

Adopting new technologies can alter the way that businesses approach and handle a product recall. Modern systems can help increase the speed and accuracy for pinpointing potential problems. Companies that use integrated lot-tracking systems cannot only view their products by lot, but also pull only those of potential concern. This greatly minimizes the likelihood for a product being out of stock and lessens the likelihood of their customer being impacted by the recall.

Companies that lack this access and visibility are often forced to recall many more products than necessary until a source has been pinpointed. Investing in a best-of-breed system can keep products on the shelves and sales moving by keeping the cost of a recall down.

While identification and removal aspects are a critical part of recalls, embracing technology that will help prevent recalls is even more important. In the food industry, the variability of raw materials requires continually reformulated label claims. Ensuring that any potential allergens are not present is vital to avoiding a potential recall.

The ‘technology’ for formula management for many companies continues to be Excel spreadsheets. This is not the best practice. There are product lifecycle management solutions that cannot only help manage formulas, but also ensure performance and label requirements, as well as help flag any potential allergen or other contaminations that could results in a recall.

Managing formulas on spreadsheets and manual lot tracking can no longer serve as the last line of defense for suppressing the fires of a product recall. Embracing technology to address all areas of recall preparedness is essential.

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