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CONSUMER DRIVEN FOOD SAFETY

Chet England
Burger King Corporation

Sometimes those of us in industry, academia and, yes, even government must admit that perhaps, just maybe, we don't know everything we should know about food safety. What's that you say? How can all of these PhD's and credentialed professionals not know what's best for the protection of consumers? What could possibly be missing from our understanding of the principles and practices of consumer protection?

Actually, we should start by asking ourselves one basic, fundamental question: who has the most at stake with regard to food safety? I think that an honest answer to that question will clearly show that it's the consumer who has the most to gain or lose. In terms of gain, it is, or should be, a total confidence in the safety of the foods they eat or feed their families. With regard to loss, in the case of a catastrophic failure of one of our sophisticated scientific safeguards, consumers stand to sacrifice their health and well-being or, worse, their lives. Given this, should those of us in the food industry listen to consumer concerns? Yes, I believe so. Should we act on those concerns, incorporating our consumers' product safety needs and wants into the basic design of our products? To do less invites failure in the marketplace and, perhaps, in the courtroom, as well.

What do consumers want, anyway? Well, we won't know if we don't ask them, so a top-notch food safety program must have connection to consumer research, either sponsored by the individual companies, or conducted by outside organizations. We must ask them if they are eating more or less of our product than they did five years ago? One year ago? Why? Are there food safety related reasons for their answers? For the restaurant industry, over the past eight months or so, there has been a decline in consumer traffic for many operators. When the industry asked consumers about the reasons for this, we were given a number of responses: a soft economy, concerns about diet and nutrition and many said they just preferred to stay home¹. The good news is that relatively few restaurant patrons are concerned about food safety: only about 20% of polled consumers are "extremely/very concerned" about getting sick in a restaurant due to pathogenic bacteria such as Salmonella and E. coli¹. The bad news is that 20% of our consumers are significantly concerned about food safety risks in restaurants. Is this acceptable? It isn't to me and I hope it isn't tolerable for the rest of our industry, either.

How about a comparison between consumer confidence in the safety of foods purchased from a supermarket versus in a restaurant? Overall, 64% of consumers feel that supermarket food is safe, while 48% agree that restaurant food is safe¹. Is this difference significant? Statistically, I'm not sure, but I'm not happy about a 16 point gap in perception, especially considering that we in the restaurant industry cook most of our products before we serve them to the customer. And, in general, I don't think that any of us in the food business should be satisfied with 1/3 to 1/2 of our customer base either feeling that the food they buy is unsafe or being unsure about its safety.

“The customer is always right.” Is this true? Is it always true? I believe it’s true in the sense that, when the customer knows what they want, we should stand ready to provide it. The caveat comes in when the customer either is unsure about what they want or they have been misled into believing that they want something when, if they had all of the relevant facts, they would actually want something else altogether. As we all know, there are advocacy groups out there whose primary mission is to scare or entice consumers to buy or not buy certain products because of various alleged risks or benefits. In many of these situations, facts need not apply. How do we handle these circumstances? Information and choices: give consumers enough (true) information and enough (valid) choices and they’ll do what’s right for themselves. In that respect, “the customer is always right.”

What incentives do we have to “get it right” with regards to consumer food safety? In the first place, in a wonderfully competitive economy such as ours, consumers do have choices. Disappoint them too many times, e.g. by making them sick, and they will go elsewhere. None of us “owns” our customer trade. Secondly, unhappy consumers can make their presence known, sometimes painfully, through adverse publicity, litigation and even through the political process, instigating regulatory and/or legislative solutions to their real or perceived grievances.

In conclusion, as a global retailer, we see millions of consumers every day in our restaurants. They come in all shapes and sizes, young and old, with differing tastes and desires. But they all have two things in common: they have the money and they have to eat. Beyond that, consumers have many choices and, if we want them to choose us, we had better pay attention to what they want from us and be prepared to give it to them - first and foremost, a safe and secure food supply.

¹NPD Foodworld Food Safety Monitor (2/6/02-2/13/02)