



Improving Food Safety Control for Suppliers



Introduction

Food safety should be the cornerstone of any food related business.

The food we consume has often come on a fairly long journey and over the last couple of decades this journey has increased quite dramatically. We need to make sure, as Environmental Officers, Food Safety Consultants, suppliers and business owners, that every stage of that journey is controlled, so that the end point is a safe product for our consumers to eat.

This white paper follows a webinar discussion featuring a panel of food safety experts which included manufacturers, HACCP Consultants, Procurement Officers and a food safety technology provider. We've brought together all of the experiences and ideas shared during this webinar to look at how the food industry has changed, some of the pressures that food suppliers are under and what they can do to more effectively deal with these pressures

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Webinar contributors

Martin Nash

Martin is the Product Manager for Checkit, Elektron Technology's wireless food safety monitoring solution. Checkit consists of a range of fixed sensors and handheld units that allow businesses to migrate away from a paper-based systems and apply more control. It helps businesses ruggedize their food safety processes with automated data collection and ensures that records are always up-to-date, secure and ready for inspection



Sarah Daniels

Sarah is an Environmental Health Officer by background, but for the last 15 years she's been running The RedCat Partnership. The team is based in Norwich and advise and trains both catering and manufacturing businesses on their Food Safety Management requirements.



Sarah Pettegree

Sarah runs a small business making really delicious pork pies on the Norfolk coast. They make their pies in a converted flint barn on the North Norfolk coast and recently featured on Heston Blumenthal's Channel 4 show in a section on 'Britain's top pie makers'. Bray's Cottage has also taken an interesting approach as to who they will supply in that they will only deal with independent outlets.



Nicola Badley

Nicola is the Environment and Procurement Officer for Blue Sky Leisure, a family owned group of leisure businesses in Norfolk with brands of Zaks American Diners, Kelling Heath Holiday Park, Woodhill Park and Imagine Spa at Blofield Heath. They work with over 400 suppliers, including Sole Traders and SME's.



How the supply chain is changing

The food business supply chain seems to be going two distinct ways.

On the one hand, we're seeing a return to smaller, independent food businesses that use ingredients from people they know and have a relationship with. This is largely being driven by consumers themselves, with a recent study from Defra suggesting that 72% of shoppers actively seek to buy British seasonal produce.

On the other side of the spectrum, we're seeing some very long chains and it's often very difficult to trace ingredients back to their source. The result of this is that we don't always know what's in our food – and this was highlighted extremely prominently during the horsemeat scandal.

Perhaps the only positive thing to have come out of the horsemeat scandal was that consumers now expect companies to do more checks on their products and such scandals won't be able to go unnoticed any longer.

What do food businesses look for in a supplier?

In her role at Blue Sky Leisure, Nicola Badley is highly involved with the company's decision on whether or not to work with a new supplier. She explains that the journey usually starts with either a chef or a retail manager spotting something in the market that they'd like to add to their shelves or put on the menu. That person is responsible for the initial conversation with the supplier, which includes questions around everything from product price, delivery schedules and their food safety management.

Following this, the company would then seek to gather some more detailed information on food quality and safety, which includes information such as any food safety training their staff have undertaken. Blue Sky has an in-house Safety Officer with a lot of expertise in this and they've uncovered some interesting claims in the past. For instance, there have been occasions where suppliers claim they have accreditation or that they supply major supermarket chains, but with a little investigation it's apparent that something doesn't add up. It's very easy for a business to say "yes, we do all of these things", but you have to be robust and you have to check their robustness.

Retailers will also have preferences as to whether they use large or smaller, local suppliers. Having used both, Nicola has found one advantage of local suppliers to be their ability to match their supply and demand. One of Blue Sky's brands is a holiday camp, which has a very busy

6-week period and quieter periods, so they need to find suppliers that match their needs in terms of minimum order quantities and delivery frequencies rather than leaving them storing large volumes of food that needs to be temperature controlled.

As a medium-sized business, Nicola is also aware that if one of her suppliers was also dealing with a large supermarket chain, she would probably be quite low on their priority list as they will have a lot of pressure coming from elsewhere. The flip side to that is that if she knew a supplier was supplying a large chain, she may well feel more assured in that supplier's food safety standards. There are advantages and drawbacks to both.

From a food safety point of view, it's the retailers reputation that's on the line just as much as the suppliers and as they are the business that's actually selling the end product to customers, they must be 100% confident in the safety of the products they're selling. Today, retailers need to know where products have come from and know that the suppliers have their own processes in place.

That's also the reason why more and more supermarkets are asking suppliers to ensure that continuous temperature monitoring systems are in place. This is putting businesses that don't yet have that technology in place under quite considerable pressure to either find it or find other business elsewhere.

Suppliers are also coming under pressure to supply seven days a week. Customers now expect food to be available 24/7, which is a significant cultural shift and something that retailers and suppliers alike have to adapt to. If it's a fresh product, it needs to be delivered in the freshest condition possible. There's no such thing as a quiet Sunday anymore and suppliers need to respond to this.

It's important to have all of these conversations right at the beginning so that both sides have realistic expectations of what the relationship will be like.



Accreditations

The food hygiene rating scheme is a very visible scheme and makes it extremely easy to check the safety standards of a food retail business, but it doesn't apply to food manufacturers. As a food manufacturer, you are simply given a "pass or fail".

In order to demonstrate that, as a manufacturer or supplier, you have exceptional food safety standards and not simply satisfactory, one option is to look at accreditation.

Retailers will often ask for accreditations, but with so many different certifications available it's not always clear which one is the most relevant. The result is often that suppliers will be asked to supply a long list of accreditations, which isn't always helpful or useful. Nicola explains Blue Sky's approach to this:

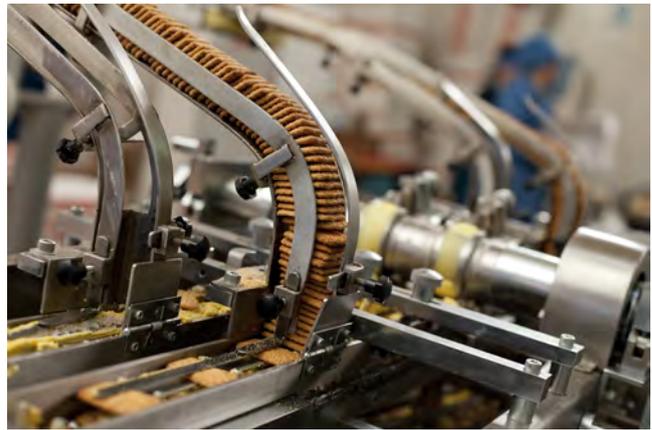
"As there are so many different certifications that suppliers can hold, it would be easy to ask them for a long list or accreditations. Instead, we should find out which one is the most relevant to them and also, which one makes you feel comfortable and secure in the knowledge that they're competent at what they're doing and that there's minimal risk."

There's no doubt that these accreditations can make life much easier for food businesses. Organisations such as SALSA (Safe and Local Supplier Approval) are a big help to smaller businesses and then there are organisations such as BRC, whose Food Technical Standard and Protocol for food suppliers has been adopted around the world. These accreditations give retailers peace of mind and are increasingly important for suppliers.

This seems to be less of an issue with small independent suppliers. Bray's Cottage Pork Pies, for instance, have a very good reputation and because they only deal with independent retailers that they maintain a close relationship with, this has always been reassurance enough. As Sarah Pettegree explains, if there was ever a concern, either from the manufacturer or a supplier, it's easy to pick up the phone or visit them and talk things over and there are very few gaps that can't be filled as a result of that. However, Sarah does acknowledge that were they to deal with larger organisations they would have to strongly consider accreditation.

"When dealing with larger organisations, they're often interested in accreditation. We've registered an interest in SALSA so that if push comes to shove, we can quickly get ourselves audited, but so far it's never been necessary."

Sarah Pettegree, Bray's Cottage Pork Pies



Choosing who to supply

Whilst retailers need to have confidence in suppliers, suppliers are also increasingly concerned about who is selling their product and how it's being sold. It has an impact on the perceived quality of them as a supplier, so it's in their interest to ensure that it's being received, stored and sold correctly.

Sarah Pettegree highlighted a particular example of this that directly affects her business – retailers wrapping her pies in cling film. To ensure they don't sweat they need to be stored in breathable bags, so cling film negatively impacts the quality and, in turn, the reputation of the business.

To ensure any issues like this are easily resolved, they try to maintain personal relationships with all of their stockers, even ones that aren't local to their business. Because of this, they've taken the decision not to supply major supermarkets, and instead they supply a network of independent businesses that they regularly communicate with, either in-person, over the phone or using social media.

"If you spent a lot of time and hard work getting your product right, you want the customer, the end customer, to have them in the best possible way. And that includes food hygiene, but it includes a lot of other things about it as well."

Sarah Pettegree

Whilst supplying to large supermarkets "can be your key to fame and fortune", it can also be a very different experience as well. Large supermarkets can almost dictate when you supply them and exactly what you supply them with. Another point to consider is that some independent shops won't buy a product any more if it's being sold in the supermarkets.

For small suppliers it's something of a trade off. Do you want your product on a big shelf or more products and more independent shelves with retailers you have a close relationship with?

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Food safety technology for manufacturers and suppliers

There's an increasingly complex range of tests and checks that are needed to be done on food products at different points in the process. And obviously, some checks, like DNA or looking for particular allergens, can be more difficult for the manufacturers to do themselves without investing a lot in specialized technology.

But when it comes to the more rudimentary checks, such as hygiene checks or temperature checks, technology can help businesses to automate and standardize checks and the data collection process, saving both time and money. Critically, the data is robustly captured and secured, so it offers increased traceability and security.

As a supplier, it's extremely important that you're able to trace back any problems. If a problem was found with a particular product, is it possible to identify when the product was made and what batch it came from? Is it possible to review the data from that day in order to prove compliance?

This kind of technology is infusing into the food industry all the time and a lot of it is scalable. Checkit, for instance, is designed to operate in everything from a small food business right the way through to multi-national supermarkets. You can add or remove sensors or features as you need to.

Instant alerts and temperature control

One of the checks that food suppliers should be monitoring continuously is temperature.

Even a very small business needs to know instantly if a walk-in cooler or other storage unit goes down. It could easily contain £10,000 or £20,000 worth of stock and for a small business, that's a critical loss. New technology means that business owners or managers can be made instantly aware if there is a problem as the system will send an automated email or text if the temperature falls out of a defined range.

When asked about the systems in place at Bray's Cottage Pork Pies, Sarah also emphasized the importance of contingency planning. Do you have backup space available? If so, then if it's just one unit that fails, it shouldn't pose a risk as long as the problem was discovered before the temperature had been out of range for too long.

The food has to be kept at the correct temperature right through the supply chain, from the manufacturer to the retailer and every stage in between. It has to be a seamless change and we have to have confidence that the food is as safe as it can be at every stage of the journey.

How trustworthy is written paperwork?

The authenticity of written paperwork is a big issue in many businesses. As an experienced food safety consultant, Sarah Daniels has seen a lot of examples of this. She highlighted one example from a business she was recently auditing. They were using a Safer Food Better Business pack and she noticed that the records for Friday, Saturday and Sunday were already fully completed – despite the fact it was only Thursday.

As an auditor an event like this gives you **zero confidence in staff**.

It's by no means the case that all paper based systems are fabricated or cannot be trusted. In fact, Blue Sky is an example of a company that maintains paper based food safety records and is extremely confident in those records. They say that the key to this is doing a lot of training with staff so that they know their goals and responsibilities. It isn't just a check that they need to do – they understand the reason it needs to be done.

Of course, there is still the potential for something to go amiss and even with the best intentions it's not unheard of for paperwork to be lost or damaged. This is another appeal of technology, as electronic systems ensure that records are

time stamped, user stamped and cannot be tampered with or filled out in advance. As an auditor, you know the records are genuine.

There's also the advantage that electronic records can be accessed at any time from any location, so a Food Safety Manager is able to view and compare the records of any of their sites without having to physically visit that site. This can save a great deal of time and money travelling, but also makes it much easier to compare the records of multiple sites and to view records in real-time.

Staff training and turnover issues

One of the reasons that fraudulent records are such a big issue in the food industry is that there is such a high level of staff turnover. Every time you take on a new member of staff, you have to train them in the procedures and ethics of the business. If they see food safety records as just a tick in a box and don't understand the reason the checks are necessary in the first place, it's easy to see how standards can slip.

They also need to know what to do if something is not right. In the past there have been examples of staff seeing that a fridge is operating at 12 degrees, writing it down and then leaving it. They need to know that if the fridge is operating at 12 degrees they need to tell someone, not just record it.

You need to trust your staff, but staff in the food industry are notoriously fickle. Once you've taken the time to train them up, they may well turn around and decide to work for a competitor down the road.

"Staff turnover and staff training are massive costs for many food businesses. If we run a level two training course, by the time we've processed and delivered the certificates to the client they'll often turn around and say, actually, half of them have already left".

Sarah Daniels

Although it can't solve the issue of staff turnover, it is an advantage of wireless food safety systems that if a member of staff conducts a check and something isn't right, the system will prompt them as to what corrective action needs to be taken.

It's a great way to ensure new staff know exactly what they need to do, but having such a system in place doesn't negate the importance of staff training. Staff still need to understand the reasons checks are done and downward delegation is a great way of ensuring this happens. Instead of telling a member of staff just to do something, you need to give them the understanding and responsibility and once they take it on as their task, staff will often get incredibly serious about it and actually take pride in it.

"If I just wondered around with a clipboard, checking things off, it wouldn't be as effective as other people in my team coming and saying to me, "I've got a concern about xyz". Because they have that understanding in place, they've internalized it and they're proud of what they're doing."

Sarah Pettegree

If staff don't understand the science behind temperature controls, they're not going to understand the risks of bacteria multiplying. Without the right attitude, this can get to dangerous levels and the business is suddenly faced with a food poisoning outbreak.

This is down to the training and the caliber of staff, as well as the culture within the business itself.

Standardising food safety in multi-site businesses

One issue for larger, multi-site businesses is trying to ensure consistency when they're using suppliers across different locations. Nicola highlighted one of Blue Sky's brands – Zaks – which is a franchise with a number of different locations.



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In this instance, they use a mixture of what they refer to as ‘family’ suppliers and ‘neighbourhood’ suppliers. The family suppliers are the ones that supply all the locations. So, the burgers for instance, are a special recipe produced just for Zaks. They’re all produced in exactly the same way before being safely transported to their location.

Neighbourhood suppliers, on the other hand, tend to be local to the particular franchise. To ensure consistent standards Blue Sky has a supplier manual containing a check sheet of minimum requirements that they ask of their suppliers. An important part of having a franchise relationship is ensuring that location managers always contact the franchise head office to ask for advice. The head office should be able to give them advice on getting supplies and provide them with a supplier vetting process they can use.

One of the reasons it’s quite hard to manage all of this centrally is that Environmental Health Officers, rightly or wrongly, aren’t always consistent from district to district. There can even be differences in the law, especially when businesses cross state or national borders. For instance, Scotland has much higher cooking temperatures and slightly different fridge temperatures than England.

For that reason, the ultimate responsibility for food safety needs to come from the people on the ground, but when one location can easily jeopardise the reputation of an entire organisation, it’s important that a central headquarters or Food Safety Manager has visibility over what is happening at different locations.

Technology now enables this, as it’s possible to see the status of checks at each site from anywhere in the world. If you’re managing a multi-site business, you can satisfy yourself that the staff at each location are doing those checks and that the temperatures are within the required specifications.

This can also help to identify trends – such as whether a specific location requires a bit more training.



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The future of food safety

Over the next 5 or 10 years, one of the things that both food enforcers and food businesses have to get to grips with is food fraud. We know that horse meat has been entering the food chain and it’s believed this may have been happening for a significant period of time.

From a small producers point of view, Sarah Pettegree has highlighted the need to see more consistency amongst Environmental Health Officers. In particular, they need to be able to deal with the increasing number of unusual products, such as unpasteurized cheese and charkuteri.

It’s a bit of a tug of war – people want more interesting food all the time, but they also want safer food. This is a real challenge, particularly given how stretched the EHOs and budgets are at present. At some point there are going to be some tough decisions about funding and increasing the resource available for this, otherwise we may well end up with restrictions on the public’s choice, the availability of products, or we will see continuing problems with enforcement.

We’ve already seen some major outbreaks as a result of inspectors being too stretched. The John Barr E. coli outbreak is one such example. We can’t rely on businesses to comply by themselves, so we need enforcement officers to check on behalf of the public to ensure that the food we eat is safe.

Visibility for inspectors

As well as making life easier for the food businesses themselves, electronic systems can also help inspectors. It makes it extremely easy for them to view all records for any given date range and it’s very reassuring for them to see that various checks are completed automatically and that manual checks are all up-to-date. On the flip side of this, if checks have not been completed or temperatures are regularly falling out of the required range, it also makes that extremely visible to anyone viewing the records.

In other words, if you’re performing well it will make that extremely visible, but if a food business is not performing well it will also make that apparent.

It’s not unrealistic to think that in the next few years enforcement officers will even be given access to these records even before they visit the location.

Visibility for customers

As well as increased visibility internally and for inspectors, experts also envisage more visibility for customers.

We can expect increasing pressure from customers to have more information on menus or on product labels and suppliers are going to have to supply a lot more information on where food is coming from.

To an extent it's already happening. For instance, Nicola Badley has been doing a lot of work on allergens and ensuring that their staff know what's in their food. People are craving more information and they want to know what they're getting and whether it represents value for money.

Customers are also demanding more access to food safety data. For instance, in many countries it's already compulsory for food businesses to display their food hygiene rating and, in the UK, all restaurants and food stores have their hygiene rating published online.

"I think food safety for me has always been a journey. It's a cliché. It starts at the farm and ends up at the fork. We need to make sure that that journey is as safe as it possibly can be. And I do think provenance, authenticity, the integrity of the food business are going to be key things for the next couple of years."

Sarah Daniels



Conclusion

The food industry has and is continuing to change dramatically in the wake of the horsegate scandal. Food fraud and traceability are known and growing challenges and supply chains are becoming increasingly complex, whilst at the same time customer expectations and awareness has also increased.

In order to meet these new demands, traceability and food safety records are becoming increasingly important. Suppliers are having to provide more rugged and readily accessible evidence of due diligence to support the supplier audit and supplier selection process. In order to meet these demands, scalable technology is needed and is becoming increasingly available to support the entire food chain by offering a rugged, affordable means by which to comply.

Technology solutions can offer a number of distinct advantages over and above conventional pen and paper based systems, many of which have been discussed in this white paper.

In particular, one aspect that would benefit all food businesses is the increased ability to identify a problem before it becomes a serious situation. On top of this, it becomes much easier to look back through data and you have much more confidence in that data. It also gives a greater level of security, knowing that all the businesses food safety records are up-to-date and safely stored in the cloud. Those records cannot be tampered with or filled out ahead of time, and they cannot be lost, illegible and if they are not complete then specified members of staff will be instantly alerted.

We can expect cloud based technology systems to play an increasingly important role in food manufacture and processing businesses in the future.



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