

Forewarned Is Forearmed

One of the cardinal principles of effective public relations is “get it over with” when dealing with a problem. Whatever the issue at hand, better to make full disclosure once, apologize contritely and get all the bad headlines over with. Just about the worst thing that can happen is to have a continuous release of bad news. Like the dripping of water on rock, the steady drip erodes public confidence and raises public skepticism. This is why the cyclospora problems are so damaging to the industry.

We can have a scare over Alar on apples, even a panic over alleged cyanide on Chilean grapes, and the industry can recover relatively quickly. Just announce we are banning Alar or that only particular grapes are affected, and as long as there are no follow-up reports of problems, the public is usually satisfied. The question is how does the industry deal with spates of small problems, each one of which affects relatively few people but which, cumulatively, create a sense of unease with the safety and wholesomeness of the commercial food supply, in general, and produce in particular?

This question is all too frequently addressed as a PR challenge, as if some trade association or commodity promotion group is supposed to provide a kind of bulletproof vest to protect industry practices. To put it plainly – this has to stop. Industry members cannot look to protect existing practices but must look at new ways to organize their business to really achieve the goal of ending article after article about people getting sick from eating produce.

The problem is not just one of policy. There is no growing organization, for example, that, by policy, encourages, or even allows, field workers to urinate in a produce field. But many organizations pay workers by the piece and have toilet facilities located relatively far away. Well, if you are a farm worker and a “bathroom break” is going to cost you income because you can’t pick produce while you are walking to a toilet – you may well decide to urinate in the field to maximize your income, and this could well cause food safety problems. So, having the policy is not enough. We have to make sure that compensation programs work to reinforce our policies. Otherwise, as in this example, workers are likely to think that the company talks about food safety but really cares about harvesting productivity – after all, that is what the pay program rewards. Now change the plan – say that every employee will get a bonus but only if he or she

checks in at the toilet facilities every two hours, and the message is suddenly very different and starts to work to reinforce that this company really cares about food safety.

This isn’t just a grower problem. Many of the risks relevant to bacteriological contamination are abetted, or can be mitigated, by the way the product is handled after harvest. Packing facilities, increasingly, are going to have to be more like food processing facilities with a standard of sanitation not previously common. Wholesalers are going to have to be extremely sensitive to issues such as maintaining cold chains, not just for product quality reasons, but to reduce the likelihood of bacterial growth.

Retailers and foodservice operators both have a double set of challenges. First, each industry must take care of its own contribution to food safety issues. Cold chains must be maintained, cross-product contamination eliminated, a hesitancy to dispose of product of doubtful quality must be overcome, and employee contact and cutting of product needs more careful supervision. Just as important, though, is that, ultimately, buyers have to be the force to insure food safety standards throughout the industry. They’re the only industry members with both the interest and the leverage to make it happen. After all, if a consumer falls ill as a result of a product purchased at a particular store or foodservice establishment, it is that chain’s name and reputation that gets dragged through the mud.

Once again, though, the challenge is in testing the sincerity of any buyer’s commitment to food safety. Every chain has policies requiring its vendors to follow safe practices. The question is how those policies translate into actual procurement. If the commitment of buyers to food safety takes the form of grandiloquent policy statements, but procurement is driven by price, then the policy will have little effect. It will only be if buyers start moving toward a “certified supplier” type policy, in which suppliers are first vetted for their food safety practices, that the food safety policies of firms will make any difference.

In other words, just as the field worker may urinate in the field as a rational response to the economic incentives that have been laid before him, so the grower pays the field worker that way in a rational response to the way the buyer pays him. Only if the buyer cares enough about food safety to pay for something more than the tonnage of product



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received will that situation change.

The power of the buyer here is awesome. All over the country, local fresh-cut shops compete with large national shippers – but many of these local shops just don’t make the investment in ensuring food safety that big national processing plants have made. If the buyer buys from the sub-par shops just to save money, the buyer’s message is that for public consumption we care about food safety, wink, wink, but we really care about getting the cheapest price.

Progressive industry leaders, though, see that the era of “buy from anyone” is drawing to close. Want to see a glimpse of the future? Go to Pittsburgh. There rises a new wholesale produce facility being built by Consumers Produce. We may not think of wholesaling as being in the vanguard of new technology but, in fact, this new plant is motivated by all the usual considerations – need for more space, consolidate operations, more efficient plant – plus one more. As Alan Siger, president of Consumers Produce, put it: “The day is coming when large retailers, foodservice operators and service wholesalers simply won’t buy from anyone without a facility that can guarantee proper handling of the product, including uninterrupted maintenance of the cold chain.” If buyers seize their responsibility, Al Siger will be right. And the industry will be better for it. Forewarned is forearmed. **pb**