

Safeguarding the Supply Chain

New technology and retail-focused audits are among the latest tools for executives to manage the ongoing food safety journey.

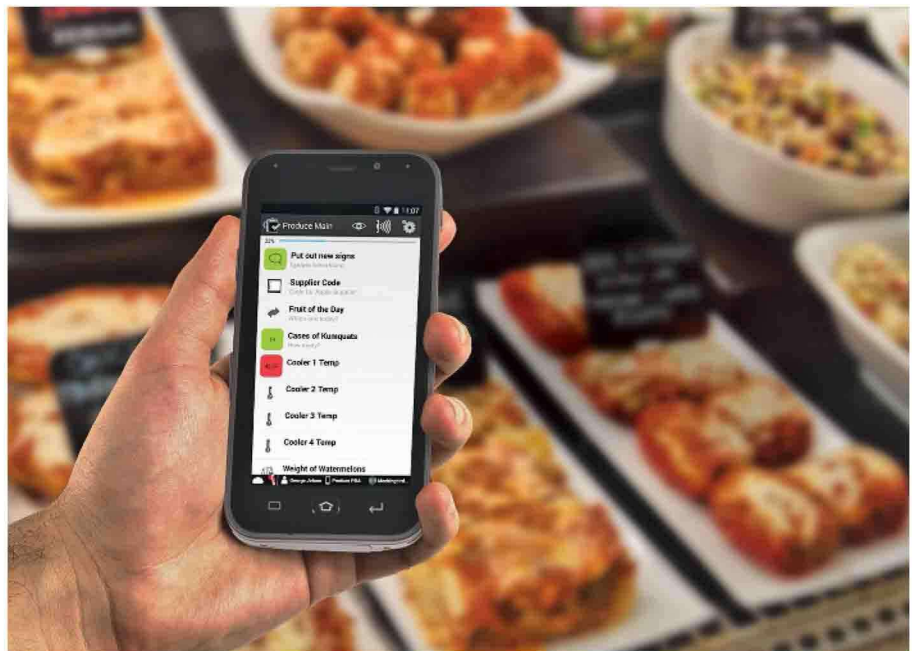
By Jenny McTaggart

It's 10 p.m., and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is knocking on your supermarket's sliding glass doors. Do you know where your cucumbers are from?

This may sound reminiscent of the public service announcements that started playing on TV back in the late 1960s, urging parents to keep track of their children's whereabouts. Nowadays, however, it's a realistic what-if scenario that's keeping many food industry executives up at night as they grapple with deadlines and regulations tied to the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), while also dealing with an ever-growing number of product recalls that have extended beyond fresh produce and meat to include areas like pet food and even the frozen section.

Food safety is now easily one of the chief supply chain concerns for the top brass at supermarket companies, as evidenced most recently by an uptick in attendance at industry food safety trade shows and seminars. At this year's Food Marketing Institute (FMI) Midwinter conference — an annual gathering of CEOs from retail and manufacturing companies — food safety was top of mind, according to Diane Cercle, chief marketing officer at Salt Lake City-based Park City Group.

“Food safety used to not be a huge topic of conversation, but over the last couple of years, it has been,” she says. During FMI Midwinter, a representative from Associated Wholesale Grocers, also based in Salt Lake City, spoke about the wholesaler's experience using services from ReposiTrak, a subsidiary of Park City Group that provides a track-and-trace solution, along with document management.



Meanwhile, at the Global Food Safety conference, hosted by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) in Houston earlier this year, a record-breaking crowd of 1,500 traveled from all across the globe to discuss the industry's most pertinent issues.

LeAnn Chuboff, senior technical director for FMI's Safe Quality Food (SQF) Institute, who attended the conference, says that she was particularly impressed with the CEO panel, which featured Danny Wegman of Rochester, N.Y.-based Wegmans Food Markets, among others. “It was outstanding,” she notes. “They were talking about the continuous building of food safety programs, and how to get your workforce more engaged.”

Indeed, CEOs are more concerned than ever before with the security of the grocery supply chain, and for good reason. Not only do they have FSMA regulations to contend with, but they're also dealing with safety concerns — not to mention potential liability — involving a larger array



PALM READER
Many retailers are moving from paper to the cloud to comply with regulatory requirements.

Cracking the Code

Food retailers now have a new tool in place to help them become more proactive in their food safety efforts. The Safe Quality Food (SQF) Institute at Arlington, Va.-based Food Marketing Institute has just launched a farm-to-fork code specifically for retailers, which will allow them to earn “gold standard” certification in food safety.

Under the new retail/wholesale grocery code, which is part of SQF’s edition 8 code, auditors will be looking at things like storage, handling and proper hygiene, according to LeAnn Chuboff, senior technical director at SQF. “What’s nice about the retail code is that it’s not just looking at the store,” she notes. “The emphasis is on management commitment. So we’re looking at corporate policies and procedures, and how that trickles down to the store level.”

As of early March, SQF already had retailers lined up to try the new program.

Chuboff says that all of SQF’s programs are now better designed to be preventive rather than reactive. “We’re trying to get away from that checklist mentality of an audit,” she explains. “Rather, let’s look at the company’s organizational commitment to food safety.”

When she trains SQF auditors, Chuboff reminds them that

when you go into a facility, “that’s that facility’s best day. They know you’re coming.”

In fact, Chuboff finds that unannounced audits are the most successful

way to ensure that corporate leadership is fully committed to food safety. “We decided to instill a mandatory unannounced-audit requirement, in which one out of every three audits would be unannounced,” she notes. “What we found is that the scores didn’t really change much, but management commitment changed: the perception [of] having to be prepared 24/7, 365 days a year. ... That perception, and the pride it causes people to take in their facility, is really something else.”

Other new programs at SQF include an ethical sourcing code that looks at social and environmental responsibility, as well as a gluten-free program that’s allied with the Allergen Control Group (ACG) certification program. Meanwhile, the company is working on developing a foodservice code with the National Restaurant Association.

Coming up in November, the 2017 SQF International Conference will be held in Dallas Nov. 7-9. “We’re currently looking for speakers who want to talk about the additions in the SQF code, so that we can provide solutions for the people who attend,” says Chuboff.

At the end of the day, “food safety is a journey,” she concludes. “With food safety, there’s no destination. Just because you’ve finished an audit, you’re not done. Just because you have that certificate, you’re still not done. It’s a continuous-improvement journey.”



of produce and other fresh product from around the world, as well as the unique sanitary considerations of foodservice operations; a growing register of suppliers from the United States and abroad to keep track of; and smarter, more demanding consumers who will likely bring the need for supply chain transparency full circle in the not-too-distant future, thanks to the power of technology that allows anyone to access information at any time.

“You really have to be on top of your game today,” observes Michael Ambrosio, VP of quality assurance at Keasbey, N.J.-based Wakefern Food Corp. “Regardless of what type of systems you have in place, it’s more about validating the accuracy of that information. Somebody could say a product is certified ... but by who, and how do you validate that? It gets really intense.

“You have to have a good infrastructure in place, you have to have good people working for you, and you have to pay so much more attention,” he adds.

On the Track

Companies like ReposiTrak have been a major source of help as retailers sift through the regulations and aim to up their food safety game to stay on top of recalls.

ReposiTrak, which has an exclusive endorsement from FMI, has been tracing products through the supply chain for 20 years, but the company added an automated document management system more recently, when FSMA legislation was still in the preliminary stages.

ReposiTrak’s solution has been particularly helpful to the growing number of retailers that are involved in acquisitions, notes Cercle. “Their legacy systems can’t be merged easily, so their documentation had been very manual,” she points out. “Our system helps not only automate the collection of these documents, but it also keeps them current. It’s all exception-based reporting, and it sends out alerts. Our technology can even read inside the documents to guard against fraud and misrepresentation, which helps save dollars and resources associated with human review.”

For now, document management is taking center stage, but Cercle predicts that once FSMA compliance is fully underway, a focus on track-and-trace will come back.

Another company that’s heavily involved in traceability and FSMA compliance is Durham, N.C.-based FoodLogiQ. The company grew out of a consulting project between its parent company, Clarkston Consulting, and the Canadian government to develop a strategy for tracking cattle after the outbreak of mad cow disease in 2003. After the food industry was hit again with spinach- and jalapeño pepper-related E. coli outbreaks in 2006, FoodLogiQ was born to meet the need to help



keep the food supply chain safer.

“We specifically work with grocers to manage their suppliers and track products across their supply chains, from grower to distribution center to retail locations,” explains Dean Wiltse, CEO of FoodLogiQ. “Food retailers use FoodLogiQ Connect to build an online supplier community, onboard their suppliers all at once, and stay on top of supplier audits, assessments and documentation. They also use our platform to manage quality incidents, report them directly to their suppliers or distributors, and recoup the cost of stock withdrawals. And with our lot-level traceability visualization tool, they can see exactly where product is at all times, especially when it matters most — during a recall or investigation.”

‘Responsibly Grown’

One retailer client of FoodLogiQ that has been particularly proactive in monitoring its vendors’ supply chains is Austin, Texas-based Whole Foods

Market, according to Wiltse.

“In 2012, we began working with Whole Foods, their growers and other experts on the Responsibly Grown program, which launched publicly in 2014,” he notes. “With this program, prospective suppliers seek approval by entering data about their products, supply chain and certifications into

the Whole Foods supplier portal, using FoodLogiQ’s platform. Once approved, the system surveys its suppliers on Whole Foods’ standards around growing practices, pesticide use and waste management, among other things, and then qualifies them for the listing of Responsibly Grown. Whole Foods stores, in turn, print identifying labels with the designation and place them on floor signage by the products.”

New Hartford, N.Y.-based ParTech Inc. is another technology provider that’s helping retailers enhance their food safety. Minneapolis-based Lund Food Holdings began using ParTech’s SureCheck Advantage technology a little more than a year ago to support the food safety program in all of its Lunds & Byerlys stores throughout the Twin Cities area.

The difference that the technology has made for the retailer has been indisputable, according to Chris Gindorff, senior manager of quality assurance and food safety at Lund Food Holdings. “ParTech’s SureCheck technology has allowed us to truly focus



SAFETY CHECK
An employee of Lunds & Byerlys uses ParTech’s hand-held device to measure the temperature of fresh bakery items.

on our many compliance areas,” he says. “It has given us the ability to review our food safety programs at an extremely granular level. It offers us flexibility to measure and review whatever we choose, while providing cost savings in both labor and materials. And the best part is that it’s so simple to use.”

The company has since installed and used SureCheck technology in almost every component of its retail locations and operations. “We employ the

technology in asset protection to assist in keeping our operations safe, in operations maintenance to aid in monitoring equipment performance, and, of course, in food safety and quality to help meet or exceed regulatory compliance,” notes Gindorff. “This provides us with greater confidence that we provide fresh and safe products for our customers every day.”

In addition, Lunds & Byerlys recently installed ParTech devices in one of its manufacturing facilities and plans to introduce more into a second facility, he observes.

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Having such crucial information available at retailers’ fingertips is certainly coming in handy, just in case FDA comes knocking. Further, looking to the future, this type of technology will likely prove invaluable if consumers keep demanding more information about the products on supermarket shelves.

Notes Park City Group’s Cerclé: “In a world where you can see everything on your phone and track virtually anything anywhere, I think consumers are going to eventually demand to see that path in the supply chain. That will force retailers and wholesalers — all participants in the supply chain, really — to deliver that transparency.” **PG**