

## Safety First

The more important foodservice becomes to the convenience store industry, the more important food safety becomes to retailers By Angela Hanson

**FIFTEEN YEARS AGO**, La Crosse, Wis.-based Kwik Trip Inc. had just begun to transform its foodservice offering from a roller grill-based program to a full-fledged initiative, which would eventually be honored as *Convenience Store News*' Foodservice Innovator of the Year in 2015. From the onset, Kwik Trip CEO Don Zietlow pinpointed a potential occurrence that could have devastating effects on the convenience store chain: a foodborne illness.

That early foresight led Kwik Trip to build a culture of food safety that incorporates training at all levels of the organization — something every convenience store that offers prepared food should imitate, according to industry experts. When it comes from the top, safety is more likely to be a key component and not an afterthought.

dles training and staff promotion. All employees receive computer-based training, and those who are ready to move up the management ladder get the opportunity for hands-on development. Instead of moving directly up to shift leader, they are moved into the role of foodservice leader, in which they take responsibility for the kitchen. Experience with food and food safety is a fundamental part of the leadership journey at Kwik Trip, not an alternative path.

Individuals who pursue multi-store leadership roles, such as district roles, get even more food safety training on a broader level. Through a combination of classroom study and hands-on training, future leaders learn to audit stores from a safety perspective, and they go through ServSafe food safety training and certification.

The result is a cadre of leadership with extensive food safety knowledge, according to Putz.

### Size Doesn't Matter When It Comes to Safety

While the training needs of small operators and single stores in the convenience store industry may not need to be as complex as Kwik Trip, size doesn't make a difference in a retailer's ability to build a safe, trustworthy foodservice program.

"It's not necessary to be a large corporation or have a multitude of financial resources to create a food safety culture," said Francine Shaw, president of Food Safety Training Solutions Inc. "It begins with a desire to serve safe food."

Shaw recommends that c-stores with more limited resources prioritize creating a personal hygiene standard for employees and implementing a pest management program. They should also develop standard operating procedures for purchasing, receiving, storing, cooking, cooling, reheating, holding and serving food; cleaning and sanitizing equipment; and cleaning the facility's interior and exterior.

"When your CEO says this is an issue that could destroy our company, it puts it high on people's radar that we need to follow food safety principles and food safety programs," said Marty Putz, director of food safety and quality assurance for Kwik Trip, operator of 600-plus stores.

To instill food safety knowledge at all levels, Kwik Trip re-examined how it han-

C-store retailers of all sizes should also be mindful of the fact that in 2015, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration began shifting its food safety focus from reaction to prevention, holding retailers accountable for compliance with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA).

"The FSMA calls for food retailers to establish preventive control systems modeled after HACCP [Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points] guidelines to help prevent foodborne illnesses," explained Jordan Anderson of



ParTech Inc., a provider of restaurant and retail hardware, software and services. “It also mandates that the FDA has access to at least two years of documentation showing adherence to this new protocol. If you are a food retailer and the FDA comes knocking at your door, what do you have to show them?”

**Setting Safety Standards**

One of the most impactful ways of achieving food safety is also one of the simplest: Employees must be diligent about washing their hands.

“One of the most common food safety-related issues is personal hygiene. Don’t misunderstand me; some organizations do a fantastic job of training their team members. Others just don’t seem to understand the importance. Personal hygiene is so very basic, yet so very essential,” Shaw said.

She recommends implementing a double handwashing policy. “Wash once in the restroom and again when returning to the work station. After all, employees are touching the doorknobs that everyone prior to them touched and who may not have washed their hands,” she pointed out. “Did you know the average door handle has about 360 types of bacteria on it?”

On the opposite end of the complexity spectrum, advances in technology are making it easier to avoid safety lapses — or to identify them once they occur. Wireless technology now enables continuous monitoring of coolers, freezers, and heating units. Digital records make it easier to access and organize crucial food safety information. There are also solutions that cater to the changing needs of foodservice operators.

ParTech developed its SureCheck solution to automate food safety and task management operations through a combination of mobile app, multi-mode wireless temperature-measuring device, and a cloud-based enterprise configuration and reporting server application.

While some retailers prefer pen and paper records because that’s what they’re comfortable with, industry experts warn that this method has major drawbacks, such as increased risk of personal error and inefficiency of data that can’t be searched or easily manipulated.

“Paper records are easy to use (though sometimes they are difficult to locate in emergencies) and change is a process — it takes time,” Shaw said. “However, major industries, including c-stores, should embrace technology to elevate the way they track inventory, manage machines,

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### Preparing for a Crisis

Even after investing in the best safety protocols and the most thorough training, it's possible a retailer will still face a safety incident, such as exposure to a foodborne illness that can be traced back to their store. How they respond could make or break consumers' continued trust in the brand.

The most effective response involves appropriate public messaging, as well as taking the proper steps to determine how the incident happened and how it can be avoided in the future.

Shaw recommends creating honest, authentic and apologetic messaging that describes the situation and explains a solutions-focused plan for moving forward. It is in the retailer's best interest to be straightforward with the media in identifying what happened and where there was a breakdown in safety, whether it happened on the vendor side or at the store, she said.

“It's important that someone in a position of authority monitors social media and responds to negative and/or

erroneous comments. Don't get defensive and don't get sucked into toxic, negative message spirals,” Shaw advised. “Stay on message, remain positive, and explain how the company is working to fix the situation.”

Meanwhile, the retailer should re-train employees on safety protocols, change vendors if necessary and, above all, stay calm. Once the crisis has passed, it's time to discuss what went wrong, how it could have been prevented, and how it can be prevented in the future.

Kwik Trip's Putz encourages working with regulatory authorities that are responsible for public safety, as their concerns go hand-in-hand. On a store level, Kwik Trip requires employees to report any symptoms they exhibit. This information is entered into an electronic log.

“It is still self-reporting, but it's a way to exclude [employees] and get them out of the kitchen and away from food when they're high-risk,” Putz said.

Kwik Trip views food safety as an ongoing activity with a continual improvement process. The retailer is always asking: What can we improve on next? What can we get better at? **CSN**