

Reflections from the Global Food Safety Initiative

The Global Food Safety Initiative hosted by The Consumer Goods Forum was held at the beginning of February in Washington DC and attracted some 675 delegates from 39 countries.

In this overview of the conference we will highlight the key issues covered and consider how the food industry can recover consumer confidence following a series of high profile food safety incidents that have shaken it to its roots.

J. P. Suarez of Wal-Mart Stores highlighted that the Global Food Safety Initiative was only as good as its participants and that the initiative should not be an expensive luxury that only the biggest companies could afford. He stressed that we need to reach the smaller suppliers and figure out how to make GFSI relevant.

Consumers not to blame

Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition and food studies at New York University, felt it was inappropriate to shift the responsibility for food safety to the consumer but she acknowledged that there could be improvements in consumer education on cooking and food storage.

She highlighted that focusing on consumers as the weak link in the supply chain ignored the fact that the most recent outbreaks of food-borne illness in the USA came from pre-cooked, fresh or ready to eat products.

Research from Nielsen showed that consumers also place the primary responsibility for safe food on manufacturers and producers. In a recent online poll of consumers in 54 countries, 68% of consumers said that manufacturers had the main responsibility for the production of safe food. Some 23% believed the onus was on governments to regulate, inspect and enforce policy, while only 8% blamed retailers.

Respondents prepared to pay for food safety were clustered in the developing markets, while those least willing to pay extra for food safety were in developed countries.

The rapid spread of supermarkets

in China has been good for food safety and, according to China's Dr Junshi Chen, despite some incidents, food safety as a whole in China has improved. This is due to new actions taken by government, new tougher legislation and the development of a single mandatory food safety system which is soon to be implemented.

The expansion of supermarkets is to be encouraged as it is good for food safety – China's problem is rooted in the sheer number of very small producers who slip through the government's net and can not be adequately controlled. Ethics and honesty is a challenge!

When foreign companies are sourcing from China Dr Chen said they should insist on government certificates but, he added, government assurances are not enough and they should get their own information.

Mark McKinley from ISO said that his organisation provided a bridge between multiple stakeholders and governments and there should be discussion on how to improve implementation rather than a debate on past differences!

Karen Hulebak, chair of the Codex Alimentarius and chief scientist at the Office of Food Safety, USDA agreed. "The aim of safe food is important. It is not the standard that matters – it is how it is put in place," she told delegates.

Getting the best return

In another session, Cory Hedman from Delhaize, USA talked about getting the best return on store audits. The foundation of success is training. People generally want to get it right but they don't always know the right thing to do! This theme was shared by speakers from Lloyds Register, McDonalds, Publix Super Markets and Darden who proposed that recognition of people's excellence, whether in store or in the supply chain, helps to get a return for investment from auditing.

Xiaowei Shi, the director general of China's National Council for Certification and Accreditation was



warmly applauded for stating that, "When it comes to global food safety – we must not be antagonistic – we need to have more trust in each other. Whether it is with the growers, the processors, the food service sector or the retailers, we need a common approach. Let's take action, not just talk, and let's do it all together!"

On another front, Terry Babbs, global ethical trading director from Tesco, highlighted that 158 million children aged 5-14 work and 614 million people work excessively long hours and that Tesco and 29 other companies had created the Global Social Compliance Programme.

In the session on this subject one question was highlighted and that related to auditor competence and methodology. Compliance is necessary but real change needs to be based on shared values and the right incentives to change behaviour, while respecting cultural differences.

Increasingly complex supply chains have greatly increased the challenges associated with monitoring food processing. This session stressed the importance of placing more focus on the process rather than product microbiological testing to verify food process controls.

There needs to be improved efficiency in the analysis of results and users of food microbiology results should examine data trends over time to better assess process controls, rather than just assess each batch of product.

Interesting market research showed that in recession shoppers felt store hygiene was less important

than price. Various speakers highlighted how a clean store went hand in hand with food safety and that the keys for success included a commitment to a food safety culture at the top, training and motivating staff to adopt correct practices.

Looking to the future

The closing session looked to the future. There was general agreement among retailers, manufacturers, governments and NGOs that the most important food safety issue in 2020 would be dealing with microbiological problems and that the source of such problems would be farms and factories. Food safety will be part of the challenge to find sustainability.

Bob Gravani, professor of food safety at Cornell University, USA urged the building up of food safety cultures within organisations and building supply chain partnerships that push for harmonisation of standards to drive best practice.

Interestingly, Michael R. Taylor, deputy commissioner for foods at FDA, acknowledged that his agency was working with an outdated legislative framework, but promised change. Legislation currently in the USA Congress will give the FDA a mandate and the legislative tools to update. "We will invest resources and effort to build a truly national, integrated food safety system," he stressed. However, the FDA will not succeed working in isolation. Surely, this is the case for all organisations at all levels of the food chain? ■