

# Food safety certification – the GFSI and retailer requirements

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The whole area of food safety certification often turns out to be a bit of a minefield for food manufacturers as they pick their way through the plethora of standards and requirements that food buyers demand. These buyers, or specifiers, can be anything from the major multiple retailers to small fast food chains to individual wholesalers and distributors.

In the ever increasing global nature of the food business, the number of specifiers that each manufacturer now supplies has increased over the last 20 years or so. With this increase in geographical footprint comes new sets of food safety requirements. It is a major factor that has to be taken in to account before considering whether to supply certain specifiers.

Can yet another variation of food safety standards be accommodated within the business or is the cost of implementation uneconomic in relation to the size of the potential market?

There are now a good number of third-party food safety standards that exist around the world, which are specified by different retailers and buyers. The BRC standard still predominates in the UK, IFS is the standard of choice around much of the key markets in Europe, SQF is

becoming the main requirement in the USA, and variations of the ISO22000 standard have their flag-bearers in certain parts of Asia and Scandinavia. All of which leads to inevitable confusion and additional cost for food suppliers.

The GFSI was set up to simplify the process and attempt to benchmark standards against a common set of criteria, with the aim of making benchmarked standards acceptable to all around the world.

## GFSI's vision

The GFSI vision is 'once certified, accepted everywhere', meaning that if a food manufacturer achieved certification to one of the benchmarked standards (currently, BRC, IFS, SQF2000, FSSC22000, Dutch HACCP, Synergy22000, Global Red Meat Standard, Global Aquaculture Alliance), it would satisfy any buyer who specified any one of them.

Unfortunately, there are many vested interests around the world, and most of the third-party standards are 'owned' by organisations that want to further the claims of their own specific standard. Add this to the growth in second-party standards, and the GFSI has been unable to achieve its aim. Nevertheless, standard owners are keen to ensure their standards are benchmarked, so there is still some kudos to be

gained by being associated with the GFSI.

Whilst most retailers and specifiers around the world subscribe to the idea of the GFSI, most will take an individual approach to food safety.

It used to be that a food manufacturer in the UK could obtain certification to one or two key third-party food safety standards (usually EFSIS or BRC) and then be able to supply to almost any specifier. Retailers in Europe followed suit and the IFS was born, but even then, certification to the BRC and/or IFS was usually sufficient.

Today, things are very different. Retailers have become increasingly frustrated with the variable quality of audits to third-party standards around the world and have looked to develop their own requirements and to train and monitor auditors themselves. This has led to an increase in second-party audits (those undertaken directly to a specifier-specific standard). Examples would be audits to McDonald's and Tesco standards.

Amongst the UK retailers, Tesco and M&S have operated an independent second-party audit programme for all of their private label suppliers for some time now. The other main UK retailers are also running or setting up second-party programmes for specific sectors, but the Tesco PIU (product integrity unit) is the

most sophisticated of these programmes and operates globally. Tesco place exacting demands on the auditors of this programme and oversee all training and approval personally.

Despite this move towards second-party approval, there is still a place for third-party certification as many retailers will rely on BRC or IFS certification for low risk products. Smaller retailers and other specifiers are unable or unwilling to operate their own programmes, so a third-party standard such as BRC does give a level of confidence to retailers and also satisfies due diligence requirements.

## A look to the future

Second and third-party audits will continue to co-exist as both have their place in the market. Both the BRC and IFS have launched new versions of their standards for implementation in January 2012, but the growth in second-party audits is set to increase around the world, meaning that food manufacturers will probably have to resign themselves to receiving an ever increasing number of audits if they want to expand their business globally. The GFSI will continue to offer a measure of compatibility between the varying standards, but it is unlikely that its key aim will be realised soon. ■