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### **Food Safety: Its Effect on Marketing**

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The subject of food safety has never been so publicized and so sustained. In the last 24 months we have lived through e. coli in packaged spinach; e. coli at Taco Bell; dog food contaminant (found later in other sectors of the animal industries); the pesticide aldicarb found in imported ginger from China; the e. coli beef recall that shuttered Topps meat processor; and the list goes on.

The associated food safety recalls have drawn attention to weaknesses in food security. Individual food industries and the government are working to improve certification programs, testing programs, production practices, and traceability practices. Consumers are asking for transparency and results. But as the industry supply chains become more complex, encompassing greater geographies, farms, suppliers, product formulations, etc., the problems—and the solutions—also become more complex. Outside of very real changes needed in production through retail, what marketing practices can we use *now* to help our business?

#### **Consumer Perceptions**

First, it is useful to know what consumers think about food safety. In a national shopper survey in June 2007, the Food Industry Management Program at Cornell asked shoppers their perceptions about some food safety issues specifically in fresh fruits and vegetables (since this study surveyed shoppers specifically about produce, caution is needed before assuming that the results apply to other industries). A table summarizing some of the results is presented below (Table 1).

**TABLE 1. CONSUMER CONCERNS OVER FOOD SAFETY ISSUES IN FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES**

| Food Safety Concerns   | Percent Responding "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" |
|--|--|
| "I am concerned about pesticide residues on my fresh fruits and vegetables."                                       | 83.8%  |
| "I am worried about germs on my fresh fruits and vegetables."  | 50.2%  |
| "I am concerned about the safety of fresh fruits and vegetables imported from other countries."                    | 72.6%  |
| "I would pay extra for fresh fruits and vegetables certified as being grown under safe farming practices."         | 73.3%  |
| "I believe organic fresh fruits and vegetables are safer than regularly grown produce."                            | 53.3%  |
| "I feel that locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables are safer than produce that is transported long distances." | 66.4%  |

Source: *Inside the Minds of Retailers and Consumers*, McLaughlin, Edward W., Kristen Park, and Debra Perosio. Food Industry Management Program working paper, September 2007.

- A large majority respondents are concerned about pesticides, 83.4% agreed to the question (Table 1).
- About half, 50.2%, of respondents are concerned about germs.
- We also asked a question about imports, and almost 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were concerned about imports. We might guess that the impact of the numerous recalls for products produced in China will last quite a while and that these recalls have shaded opinions about imports from other countries as well. One consumer responding to the Cornell survey said, "Imported produce makes me nervous to the point where I will not buy anything from China for me or my animals."
- Some consumers, 73.3%, say they are willing to pay more for produce certified as "safe".
- Almost 54% of all respondents say they believe organics are safer than regularly grown produce. And some consumers perceive they are paying for "safety certification" in the form of price premiums for certified organics.
- At least some consumers, 66.4%, correlate food safety and the distance food has traveled and feel that "local" is safer. One shopper commented that they feel that anything shipped is somehow "preserved" or treated with hormones. One shopper said she preferred "local" produce because it wasn't "gassed". A focus group participant in the study said, "I feel local produce is safer. It is not packaged with chemicals to make it last longer."

### **Marketing PRO-actions**

Many companies in the supply chain have acted swiftly in response to the recent food safety challenges—most of these efforts are focused on changes in production practices and monitoring and testing for contamination along the supply chain. Traceability needs to be improved significantly.

In general, all efforts are totally opaque to the general public and there is a significant opportunity to tell consumers about efforts made to ensure a safer food supply. THIS is your marketing opportunity.

- Retailers receive their point of sale information primarily from suppliers. Actively engage with your own promotion/advertising group or trade association to provide a well-researched statement of

industry actions in providing consumers with safe food. Proactive information provided in supermarkets—AND OTHER PLACES—about pesticide safety and judicious use might help alleviate or reduce consumer concerns. Certified grower programs such as Integrated Pest Management could be highlighted proactively by retailers to inform consumers about efforts to reduce pesticide usage. At the very least, providing consumers with more information about current food safety practices could not hurt. It could be that reassurance and information is really what the consumer is looking for.

- Major U.S. growing regions, with arguably the best technology and safe growing programs in the world, need major help in communicating this to the consuming public. They are losing the confidence of consumers to local establishments.
- Whether from the farm down the road or halfway around the world most consumers are interested in knowing where their produce is grown. In addition, as people no longer grow what they eat nor have a close connection with where their food comes from, they may feel a loss of control over what they eat. Imported food is a concern for 72.6% of shoppers surveyed, AND “local” is sought by almost 70% of shoppers.

Since consumers embrace local programs and feel that local is “safer”, NYS producers should take advantage of this opportunity to work with markets to establish or expand local, in-store programs. Simultaneously, retailers should only be working with local producers that employ the safest production and distribution practices from farm to store.

- Give consumers the certification that they have asked for. It is up to you to do your best to provide a safe food supply, and there are certification programs available that can help you do this. You can contact Elizabeth Bihn, National GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) program coordinator, at:

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<http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/contacts.html>

Increasing consumer perception of the relevance of local or regional foods and shorter supply chains and the desire to know the source of their food represents a major opportunity for NYS agriculture. The challenge for NY’s agriculture sector will be to seize the opportunity by delivering food with the quality and security that the State’s consumers expect.

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“**Smart Marketing**” is a marketing newsletter for extension publication in local newsletters and for placement in local media. It reviews elements critical to successful marketing in the food and agricultural industry.

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