Education, training and getting to know your suppliers are key to building a food safety culture in your store

By Simone Armer

The meat scandal that rocked South Africa in March showed food-labelling standards were not up to scratch, and more worryingly, that not all regulatory requirements were met. The Consumer Protection Act (CPA) is now an invaluable avenue for shoppers to educate themselves and challenge retailers who compromise on food safety. So what can suppliers and retailers do to ensure they are not implicated?

The matter of food safety

Retailers that were ‘named and shamed’ in the meat scandal responded by attributing the traces of DNA found in the study to cross-contamination. The Consumer Goods Council of South Africa (CGCSA) supported these claims, arguing that it is not uncommon for meat products to contain animal DNA of other species in minute quantities. DNA can be carried over by contact from one species to another. The CGCSA claimed that it was not a food safety issue, but rather a labeling issue. "Multiple meat sources in a product might not pose a risk to consumers, but that’s not the point – if the processor doesn’t know by verification what species the meat is, how can they be sure of the source of the raw material and whether there is full traceability of the provenance of the meat? For example, did the raw material go through the required procedures of control and verification in line with food safety requirements and practices?" says Donna Crockart, GM of business assurance at Intertek.

Food specialists in the industry disagree, however, arguing that incorrect labeling can definitely be a food safety issue. "Multiple meat sources in a product might not pose a risk to consumers, but that’s not the point – if the processor doesn’t know by verification what species the meat is, how can they be sure of the source of the raw material and whether there is full traceability of the provenance of the meat? For example, did the raw material go through the required procedures of control and verification in line with food safety requirements and practices?" says Donna Crockart, GM of business assurance at Intertek.

In April, European supermarket chain Asda recalled its range of budget corned beef, after low levels of the veterinary pain killer phenylbutazone, known as bute, were detected. Bute is banned from global human food supplies, as it poses a health risk if consumed.

"Abattoirs have to be registered to slaughter certain species. We don’t have abattoirs that are registered to slaughter donkeys, so where does that meat come from and under what circumstances were these animals reared, inspected and slaughtered?" says Adele Krogh, business manager of The Food Safety Network.

The Stellenbosch University research report, the catalyst of the scandal, found that nearly 60% of 139 products tested contained traces of donkey, water buffalo, goat and pork.

The blame game

Abattoirs implicated in the scandal have argued that although they spend millions...
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to ensure the safety of their products, once the meat leaves their gates, it is out of their hands.

The meat saga has shown that traceability in the supply chain is virtually non-existent. If a processor unknowingly receives ‘beef’ that is not actually beef, without controls and verification in place, it is sold on to a supermarket or retail chain and both will be none the wiser. “The issue of deliberately adulterating product for financial gain cannot be ruled out,” says Krogh.

Ensuring that contaminated products do not end up on supermarket shelves is more difficult to control in franchise stores, as franchisees often source products independently. They may therefore not necessarily follow the corporate procedures which would involve supplier quality assurance approval.

It is not enough for one element of the food chain to ensure that procedures are followed and that high food safety and hygiene standards are maintained. “The lack of actions taken by one party in the chain can tarnish the reputation of the entire industry,” says Dr. Jim Gorny, VP of the Food Safety & Technology Produce Marketing Association.

“When the Listeria scandal broke in the US, it didn’t just affect one grower or party in the chain. It affected everyone in the industry,” he says. In 2011, there was an outbreak of Listeria monocytogenes food poisoning from contaminated cantaloupes linked to a farm in Colorado, killing 33 people and causing one miscarriage. The outbreak is considered the worst foodborne illness outbreak in the United States.

Food safety should not be a competitive issue, but a fundamental to which every consumer has a right. Transparency and publicity allows consumers to make educated choices in this regard.

Ethical issues

In addition to being a health concern, the mislabelling of food products also causes ethical and religious problems. Certain religious groups may have unknowingly consumed products containing pork, for example, which is a serious contravention to their beliefs.

Several supermarkets refrained from releasing a statement to the public following the meat scandal, but silence is not the answer. “Transparency is becoming increasingly important. Suppliers and retailers who are doing the right thing need to talk about it,” says Krogh.

Some companies, for example, advertise and promote their food safety standards. “This is not an ideal scenario, as food safety should not be a competitive issue, but rather a fundamental that every consumer has a right to,” she continues. “Although transparency and publicity in this regard allow consumers to make educated choices,” adds Crockart.

Economical issues

The economy plays an important role, because supermarkets who are trying to find compliant suppliers are still trying to keep their prices as low as possible. This in turn puts pressure on suppliers to deliver low-cost goods to supermarket chains.

If there was more emphasis on local supply, the food chain would be easier to control, but sourcing from global suppliers also has its advantages. It gives traders a diverse supply of seasonal goods and

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produce and, if there is a problem in one area, these can be sourced from another.

Accountability
"We have a great set of published regulations regarding food safety, but the problem is enforcing them," says Crockart. "The impact of the CPA has seen a lot of retailers self-regulating to avoid becoming the target of consumer complaints," she says.

Mandatory regulations, as set out by legislation, are implemented by local authorities, but a lack of resources affects the level of enforcement.

If food safety measures are not properly controlled, it can have disastrous consequences.

Food poisoning
In April the Gauteng Health Department reported that a seven-year-old schoolgirl died at an Ekurhuleni boarding school, as a result of food poisoning. Samples collected at the scene were taken to be tested, but the results have yet to be released.

"Someone needs to be held accountable for her death. This is a child we are talking about," emphasises Krogh.

Food poisoning might be more prevalent than we think, says Crockart. "What most consumers refer to as 'gastro', or 'stomach bugs' are almost always incorrectly self-diagnosed. In reality, the patient is likely suffering from food poisoning," she says.

Consumers do not associate these 'self-diagnoses' with food poisoning, so samples are rarely sent to labs for testing. Even in rare cases where a patient might request testing, it is virtually impossible to trace the contaminated sample back to its source. This is because we do not have functional reporting structures in place to monitor this in South Africa.

Food poisoning is an issue that receives little attention, but as consumers become more educated about their rights, they will become more and more prepared to take action.

Approaches to food safety
"Food safety measures should be proactive and preventative. Retailers need to ask growers and suppliers what they are doing to ensure the safety of their produce and products," says Gorny.

Training plays a huge role in this. The health and hygiene of workers, for example, goes a long way to ensure the safety of food products, but the necessary training is not always done in the correct way or at the correct level.

“What trainers do not realise is that, if done correctly, trainees can take the knowledge of food safety and hygiene back to their families and communities,” says Krogh.

Suppliers and retailers
Education is key and the CPA is playing a big role in this for consumers. Suppliers and retailers, however, need to take a more active role in this process.

"Suppliers and retailers should educate consumers about why product A is more expensive than product B," says Krogh.
"Consumers will be willing to spend more money on a product if they know that the reason for the increase is because the company is implementing rigorous food safety and quality management systems," she says.

Supermarkets should not be afraid to conduct public recalls. In Europe and the United States, it is a common activity to recall products, but in South Africa these are largely done in-house. Supermarkets should inform consumers why they are taking a product off the shelf.

Krogh concludes: "At the end of the day, it's about promoting a food safety culture. We shouldn't wait for disaster to strike before we wake up."