

Execs exchange ideas, practices at Food Safety Symposium

By Peter Romeo and Alan J. Liddle

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — How do you convince management to commit more time, money and effort to preserving food safety when the ideal return on the investment is nothing?

That irony — the more you do to protect guests and a brand's reputation, the less you can expect anything to happen — was one of the issues addressed by the 30 quality-assurance and purchasing executives who gathered here recently for the first Nation's Restaurant News Food Safety Symposium, a three-day forum on the challenges of preserving the safety of restaurant fare.

The conference, sponsored by Ecolab, convened as the extent of the foodborne illness outbreak prompted by E.coli-contaminated spinach was coming to light in the national media, injecting a real-world sensibility into the discussions of ideal strategies and tactics. Participants pressed one another for details about the unfolding situation and openly sought advice on such matters as whether their brands should pull appetizers made with cooked, frozen spinach.

The information sharing underscored the assertion of keynote speaker Steve Grover, vice president of food safety, quality assurance and regulatory compliance for Burger King Holdings Inc., the Miami-based parent of the 11,400-unit quick-service chain. "Food safety is not a competitive issue — we should never compete on food safety," said Grover, who formerly headed the National Restaurant Association's health and regulatory affairs office. "I'll share my ideas. We all sink or swim together on this issue."

He and other attendees voiced appreciation for the opportunity to compare notes on the problems commonly faced by restaurant quality-assurance executives, not the least of which is a lack of appreciation within some departments at company headquarters.

"We're striving for nothing to happen," and to have nothing to show for the quality assurance department's efforts, Grover said. "What kind of a return on investment is nothing?"

As a result, "five, eight years down the road, the budget starts getting cut," Grover continued. "People start thinking that nothing happening is the norm."

Yet, he stressed, if a company bets incorrectly that rigorous preparation is unnecessary, "you may not survive."

Grover cited findings that it

takes 19 minutes for an incident to become worldwide news. "If you're not proactive," Grover said, "you have 19 minutes" to resolve the situation and protect your brand.

He and other attendees stressed the imperative of planning ahead — of having a detailed, comprehensive strategy drafted to avert that 19-minute-to-disaster scenario.

One of the specific recommendations offered was using simply worded but precise contracts that spell out fundamental standards with suppliers. Having such contracts on file also can put restaurant companies in a stronger position from which to deal with insurance companies after the outbreak of a foodborne illness, according to attorney Tim Pickwell, a panelist at the symposium.

But at the same time, attendees agreed, a brand needs to have a crisis management plan in hand, in case the worst happens despite their best efforts. The plan should extend to such details as having weekend telephone numbers for suppliers' emergency contacts, or knowing ahead of time which headquarters executive will serve as spokesperson in the event of a food-contamination catastrophe.

Many attendees also emphasized the need to make that defensive strategy a true action plan by securing buy-in from all levels of the organization, from the chief executive down to unit-level managers and staffers. Yet few of those stakeholders appreciate the importance of food safety until there's a breach, attendees contended.

"We have to sell this to our executives," Grover said. "We need to tell them, 'If we do this, chances are you won't be in court; you won't be on TV.'"

In a concluding session, attendees broke into teams to hammer out practical solutions to common problems. Among the recommendations was adding crisis management training to the curriculum for managers-in-training. The group also advised the creation of unit-level programs for dealing with food allergies.

Although unit-level training was mentioned several times as a key to preserving food safety, symposium attendees acknowledged the difficulties of getting hourly workers to follow even the most basic of prescriptions, particularly

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Left: Jack Quinn, vice president of industry relations for Ecolab, which sponsored the Food Safety Symposium, welcomed attendees.

Below: Karl Guggenmos, dean of culinary for Johnson & Wales University



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Above: Steve Grover, vice president of food safety, quality assurance and regulatory compliance for Burger King Corp., delivered a keynote address.

Right: Tim Pickwell, an attorney from Pickwell & Associates provided tips on negotiating purchasing contracts.



Left, from left, bottom row: Linda Gilardi, senior director of quality assurance for Compass Group North America; Anne Munoz-Furlong, founder and chief executive of the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network; Colista Yates, director of quality assurance and food safety for Carlson Restaurants Worldwide. Top row, from left: Alan J. Liddle, managing editor/technology and conferences for Nation's Restaurant News; Sarah Knust, director of sales for EcoSure; and Andrew Hoxie, a professor at Johnson & Wales University

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frequent hand washing. Several attendees cited contests that reward kitchen workers who cleanse their hands. Others recommended creating educational games and constantly harping on the importance of the safety step.

Yet, Grover said: "I'm constantly amazed at the creativity employees show in getting around the rules. If you base a product's safety on 100-percent execution, then you're going to have a problem. You have to ask yourself, 'Where are the employees going to take a shortcut?'"

Linda Gilardi, senior director of quality assurance for Compass Group North America, the food-service contractor based here, said her organization tries to push a food-safety sensibility down to line employees by directing managers to conduct five-minute training sessions on fundamentals. One installment might focus on hand-washing or proper glove use, while another might remind staffers of the proper way to use thermometers.

Many of the executives in attendance asserted that the safe-

ty of a chain's food would be enhanced if their departments were involved in more aspects of the operation, particularly menu research and development and purchasing. "It needs to be involved, from the very beginning," in everything from sourcing to product considerations, said Kevin Kelly, senior manager of risk and safety for the Los Angeles-based Sizzler USA steak chain.

That immersion also should aim to temper the sense of ownership that a chain's R&D department might feel for a possible new product, Kelly added.

"We need to change the perception of QA, from a black-and-white, yes-no group, to another consultative force in the process," said Sarah Knust, the chain quality assurance veteran who now serves as director of sales for EcoSure, Ecolab's third-party safety-auditing operation. "We have to ensure that the left brain works well with the right brain."

"I stick my nose under everybody's tent," Grover said. "I wage a constant battle with the financial guys [over purchasing]."

Yet extending the reach of a

quality assurance department can be challenging when manpower and other resources are already in extremely short supply. "I'm a department of one," noted William Moore, director of safety and security for Eat'n Park Hospitality, the Homestead, Pa.-based parent of the Eat'n Park family-restaurant chain.

Nevertheless, many speakers offered evidence that food safety could be compromised before a chain even takes possession of supplies and suggested that quality assurance officials have to extend their scrutiny upstream accordingly. The group met not long after many areas of the country had suffered through long stretches of high temperatures, when sky-high gas prices might have prompted truckers to think twice about running their rigs' refrigerators during delivery stops. Grover cited an unidentified chain that found 90 percent of its supplies had "suffered temperature abuse" en route to restaurants.

QA workloads would likely be eased by new technology that is coming within financial reach of even small chains, said Aftan Romanczak, director of research

and development, purchasing and quality assurance for the franchised Norcross, Ga.-based Steak-Out delivery chain. He cited devices like a "sniffer," a hand-held artificial "nose" that can detect bacterial contamination in foods at a high speed, making it feasible for peak kitchen production periods.

Others noted the salutary effects of sanitizing food sprays and rinses. Larry Taylor, chief supply officer for the O'Charley's casual-dining chain, said his Nashville, Tenn.-based company has reduced the risk of E.coli or salmonella contamination by 99 percent by spraying meat before it is ground in the company's central commissaries. In nine years of using the citric acid and sodium chlorite spray-on antiseptic, Taylor said, O'Charley's has

detected only one contamination, and that "presumptive positive" proved on further examination not to be an actual infection.

Zero tolerance is the only acceptable standard when it comes to food safety, BK's Grover had observed earlier in the conference as attendees nodded in agreement. "We all have a tolerance for breakdowns," he said, noting that rare is the restaurant operation that functions along the lines of an operations manual. But, "there's no tolerance here," he added. ■

promoe@nrn.com
aliddle@nrn.com

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Left: Jennie Stenback, director of marketing communications for Ecolab



Right: Kevin Kelly, senior manager of risk and safety for Sizzler USA, participated on the Best Practices in Crisis Management session.



Right: Jim Guarino, purchasing and quality assurance for Rock Bottom Restaurants



Above: Brad Ritter, president of Ritter Communications, presented a workshop on ways to handle the media in a crisis situation.



Right: Food Safety Symposium attendees gathered at the Charlotte, N.C., campus of Johnson & Wales for a three-day program, presented by Nation's Restaurant News and sponsored by Ecolab.

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Left: Bob Burdick, quality control chef for Universal Studios; David Brdar, director of food and beverage training for Interstate Hotels & Resorts; and William Moore, director of safety and security for Eat'n Park Restaurants



Above: Deborah Page, executive director of quality assurance and technical services for Applebee's International

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Right: Aftan Romanczak, director of research and development, purchasing and quality assurance for Steak-Out Franchising, participated in the Best Practices in Supply Chain Management session.



Above: Larry Taylor, chief supply chain officer for O'Charley's, participates in the Best Practices in Supply Chain Management session.



Above: Katherine Swanson, vice president of food safety for Ecolab spoke to attendees about successful supply chain management practices.



Right: Lisa Fullington, risk manager for Fuddruckers, joined her fellow attendees to help prepare the evening's dinner at Johnson & Wales University.



Below: Peter Romeo, executive editor of Nation's Restaurant News/Online participated in roundtable discussions at the event.