

THE MECHANISTICS OF SELLING FOOD SAFETY

BY LARRY KEENER

Integrating food safety into the manufacturing supply chain is a dynamic process.

Selling food safety? What a strange and peculiar notion. In a corporation whose principle source of income is derived from the manufacture and marketing of human food, one would assume that food safety is of paramount importance. Not so. I once worked with a fellow who held a position of considerable importance in a large food company who proclaimed publicly that he did not believe in food safety. What he meant was that he did not believe in food safety as a function, as a cost center or a department. He would correctly say that food safety was everyone's job. What he did not comprehend was that while food safety is a part of everyone's job, there needs to be a unit charged with the responsibility of developing, overseeing and executing the task required to achieve food safety. I was compelled to find a mechanism for convincing him and the other decisionmakers within the corporation of the importance of food safety. I also needed to confirm that developing and executing a robust, science-based food safety strategy requires specialist skills.

Why is it necessary to sell food safety in the first instance? The reasons are the following: food safety is a new and emerging discipline; food safety science is not very well understood by human resource professionals and other senior management; food safety curricula are not offered by most major universities; and food safety is often taken for granted by

the people who run the corporation.

Food companies have always endeavored to make and market safe products, but food safety as a discipline within the industry is a reasonably new development. In his early writings on food safety, Dr. Bauman, the father of Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP), described the necessity for a dedicated "food safety officer" within the corporation. Unfortunately, HACCP was generally ignored by industry and government for nearly 30 years. Ten years ago, I conducted an informal poll of some of the largest U.S. food companies and found that less than 10% operated formal food safety departments.

It is prevalently assumed within the industry that quality assurance is also doing food safety. It is also conventional to house food safety under the quality umbrella. However, it should be understood that food safety and quality are different propositions. Quality is negotiable; food safety is not. To be effective food safety must enjoy the same level of visibility in the corporate structure as do research and development (R&D), quality assurance, purchasing, or finance. The specialist skills required of the product safety officer are at least as demanding as are the skills required of other business functions. Moreover, a catastrophic food safety failure will portend devastating economic consequences and cause irreparable harm to the business.

In the context of arguing against food safety programs, a frequent point made is that everything must be just fine as is—"We haven't had any complaints from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and our consumer complaint data does not give us cause for concern.." A company that waits for its customers, FDA or

the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to point out that it has a food safety problem, truly has a problem.

WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO OFFER, OR WHAT ARE YOU SELLING?

Food safety infers far more than HACCP. HACCP is a single tactic in a broader, more comprehensive program directed at ensuring the safety of a company's products. Do not confuse a strategy with a program. You are selling a great deal more than HACCP. You are selling strategies for identifying and managing food safety risk throughout the entirety of the manufacturing supply chain. You are also selling greater protection for the company's brands, reputation, consumers and earnings.

You are also selling confidence to those charged with growing the business and meeting the expectation of the corporation's shareholders. Confidence that will enable innovation and increase the speed to market with new products and technologies. Confidence that will permit expansion of the supply chain into new markets and a lowering of manufacturing costs. Confidence that consumers will have confidence in your brands. It is this confidence that enables business growth and increased earnings.

ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

To begin down the path to selling food safety, some consideration must be given to the organizational dynamics within the company. No matter what the corporate culture is (cowboys, collegial, risk averse, bunkered down in functional silos, staid and conservative), the politics of and within the company will impact your ability to successfully sell food safety. It is

far easier to adjust your approach for the existing culture rather than attempt to change corporate culture.

Examine both the past and present culture. Has the corporation gone through a reorganization or restructuring? Are the key players and decisionmakers new to the business or are they long-term employees? What are their views on food safety? What was their track record on food safety in their previous position? What were the results of past efforts to sell food safety? Who were the proponents? Identify the voice of the opposition.

It is also imperative to know the rules of engagement, corporate etiquette and protocol. While every CEO has an open door policy, you must know the people with the keys to get into his anteroom. Do not derail your sales effort by a simple breach of corporate etiquette or protocol. Observe the rules and know the pressure points within the organizational structure that must either be avoided or embraced in order to achieve your goals.

Corporate organizational dynamics, politics and culture will ultimately identify your stakeholders, delimit your sales approach, and influence the success or failure of your efforts to sell food safety.

WHO ARE THE CUSTOMERS?

Your customers are managers, technicians, vice presidents, technical specialists and engineers. They work on the line, in R&D, accounting, purchasing, maintenance, quality control, the warehouse, or marketing. Your customers are all those company employees involved with the manufacturing supply, the whole of the company. These people have a vested interest in the safety of the company's products. In fact, their jobs depend on it.

A stakeholder is anyone who justifies or pays for the food safety programs, defines the needs or wants of the business, evaluates or uses the results to drive the business—or thinks they have the right to. Know your stakeholders, but understand from the outset that all stakeholders are not equal. Is the stakeholder supportive, or is it someone that wants to derail your program? Does the stakeholder have a special interest in your success or failure? Does he or she have insight into why previous efforts to sell food safety have

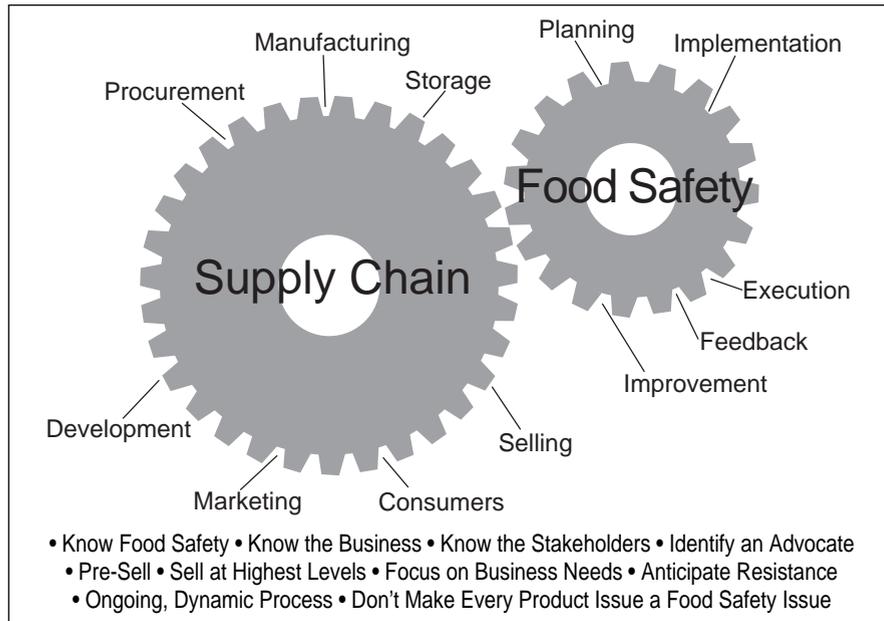


Figure 1. The mechanics of selling food safety.

failed? Importantly, is the stakeholder accessible?

Screen your stakeholders and seek out and actively recruit an advocate. A good advocate is someone who already subscribes to your programs and has influence and power, as well as access to the key players within the corporate structure. For example, the head of marketing, the chief financial officer, or the company's legal council would make ideal advocates. They have the appearance of authority as well as immediate access to the CEO and members of the executive committee. Your chief executive officer is the primary customer and stakeholder. He or she must be sold on food safety in order that your programs will be embraced and supported by the broader business. The CEO must finance and pay for your food safety programs. In the final analysis, the CEO is ultimately responsible for food safety.

THE SALES APPROACH

When developing a sales approach, first gain access to the key stakeholders. This can be facilitated by an effective advocate and through the strategic alliances formed with other stakeholders. In unison with the advocate, begin a program to educate the stakeholders as to the scope of your vision for food safety.

Inform the stakeholders about both internal and external food safety issues facing the business. Benchmarking against

other companies in your category is a very productive exercise. Know the competition's food safety organization, and if possible what they are spending for food safety. Providing information and education are effective means of pre-selling your programs. Pre-selling is crucial to the success of the sales effort. An effective advocate will be able to pre-sell at levels of the organization to which you may not have immediate access. The more individuals on the board that you have been able to pre-sell, the greater your chances of getting approval and funding for your programs. Depending on the organizational dynamics, an outside consultant can be effective in facilitating the pre-sell process.

Prepare to take your message to the top of the house. I have never worked for a CEO that could spare more than an hour listening to a presentation. With this realization you should prepare a clear, concise, one-hour food safety presentation. The objectives of the presentation are two-fold: first, to broadly introduce your vision and view of food safety; second, to obtain initial buy-in and support for your programs. Focus the presentation on a key food safety issue facing the business. For example, depending on the needs of the business, you might focus on allergens, crisis management, alternative sourcing strategies for sensitive materials or procedures for assessing novel foods and

technologies. Do not attempt to sell the entirety of your food safety program in one short presentation. However, in the context of your presentation do introduce the fundamental elements of your vision and view of food safety. The presentation must also convey to the CEO and members of the board that you are knowledgeable of the business and that your view and vision of food safety consider key business issues.

Communicate your knowledge of food safety. Show that you understand the benefits to the business of a comprehensive, science-based, food safety program. Do not make the fatal mistake of attempting to label all business issues food safety issues. Make sure that you leave a sense of your personal motivation for taking on the task of selling food safety. It is imperative that you come across as genuinely concerned about food safety and convey that your primary motivation is to preserve and grow the business.

In the course of the presentation you must also anticipate questions related to the cost of food safety. I do not have a stock answer for this question. Clearly, the costs of food safety will vary by company. Those companies with well-developed Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) programs, training, sanitation and purchasing programs, and crisis management procedures will incur a lower initial cost. In companies where these fundamental programs are lacking or underdeveloped the cost of food safety will be greater.

It is also possible answer the financial question by showing the potential savings associated with effective food safety programs. For example, speed to market with a new product or technology can potentially save the corporation millions of dollars. Similarly, food safety programs will permit expansion of the manufacturing supply chain in to new markets and result in savings due to a lowering of manufacturing costs. Work with your alliance network advocates and outside consultants to get at the real dollar savings associated with these food safety activities.

One last observation concerning the cost of food safety is that the costs of not funding food safety are absolutely prohibitive.

CONCLUSION

To be successful in selling food safety requires that the seller have the following:

- An in-depth knowledge of food safety.
- An awareness of the business and key business issues.
- An appreciation of the needs and wants of your customers and stakeholders.
- A fundamental awareness of the organizational dynamics, politics and culture of the corporation.
- An advocate and well-developed alliance network
- An effective and compelling presentation to the CEO and executive committee.
- An understanding of the costs of food safety.

Selling food safety is a dynamic and continuous process. As the business changes, so too must your food safety programs change. A successful sale will result in an integration of food safety into the manufacturing supply chain and an appreciation of the value of food safety by the broader corporate structure. 

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Keener has nearly 20 years of experience in the food processing industry, holding positions in private industry, with the State of California and at the National Food Processors Association (NFPA). Keener has worked extensively in the development and implementation of food safety programs around the world. Prior to founding IPSC, Larry served as the director of Product Safety and Regulatory Affairs for Van Den Bergh Foods, Unilever's largest food products company worldwide. He was a member of Unilever's external affairs committee and was heavily involved at the national level in dealing with a wide range of food industry issues. He can be reached via e-mail at lkeener@aol.com.