

20/20 Foresight: 5 Proactive Strategies



Thanks to widespread adoption of HACCP, many practices for managing food safety risks have become standard operating procedure in responsible foodservice kitchens. But there are some practices that are not so common. As education increases and commitment strengthens, proactive approaches to managing risk are emerging. Indeed, just as they do with their concepts, menus, marketing and human-resource initiatives, the industry's best and brightest operators are taking food-safety and QA up a notch.

This special report takes you behind the scenes with five industry leaders for a look at some of the unique strategies they're most proud of. As part of comprehensive food-safety programs, the strategies highlight just a few of the specific ways in which food safety is coming into sharper focus across the industry.

By **DANA TANYERI**

MOCK INSPECTIONS KEEP STAFF ON THEIR TOES

Union Square Hospitality Group, New York

Unannounced health department inspections can unnerve even the most fastidious foodservice operators. On a good day, they're interruptions that have to be dealt with, generating nervous jitters among management and staff. On a bad day, they can have a serious impact on both the day's operations and crew morale. If the results are unfavorable, the effect will be much more far-reaching.

Union Square Hospitality Group (USHG), the multi-concept business headed by award-winning restaurateur Danny Meyer, takes no chances when it comes to inspections. The nine-unit group has concepts ranging from the renowned Union Square Café and Gramercy Tavern, to Tabla, serving "New Indian" cuisine, The Modern, serving French-American cuisine, to Shake Shack, a "roadside" burger and frozen custard stand. Management puts all

of its kitchens through mock inspections monthly.

"They're done on a surprise basis," says Ron Parker, USHG's operations manager. "If we find anything wrong, the restaurant can correct it quickly. A big benefit of the program is that when the Health Department does come, the staff is used to the experience. They welcome them with open arms and say, 'Come on in, let me show you around. Thanks for being here.'"

Parker says he's surprised more restaurants don't do similar drills. "The chef and kitchen crews get immediate feedback after the audit in the form of a report that follows guidelines used by health inspectors," he says. They appreciate the fact that management is doing its part to ensure that they are complying with all food-safety requirements, he adds.

Managing Risks

COMPETITORS INVITED TO BENCHMARKING PROGRAMS

Jack-in-the-Box, San Diego

Since suffering a devastating E. coli outbreak in 1993, QSR burger giant Jack-in-the-Box rose from the ashes in part by making food safety its No. 1 operational priority. Supplementing the chain's comprehensive HACCP program are a number of initiatives that position it solidly as a food-safety leader. Most—from an aggressive hand-washing system (a chime rings in the kitchen every hour, reminding employees to wash their hands) to ultra-strict supplier compliance systems—affect operations within the company's own "four walls." But one initiative, launched a decade ago, is unprecedented in that it extends well beyond the bounds of Jack-in-the-Box proper to reach out to the entire industry.

"We established a benchmarking program. It's essentially an open invitation to any restaurant company to come in and learn about our food-safety systems," says Dr. Dave Theno, senior vice president, quality and logistics. "We have at least one company in every month. Even our most direct competitors have come in. Our stance is that food safety is too important to make it a competitive issue. Food safety problems hurt not just one operator, but the whole industry."

Operators who take Jack-in-the-Box up on its "sharing" program visit the company's new Innovation Center in San Diego for a half-to full-day workshop in which Theno and other food-safety team members present information on the company's systems and address questions and topics brought in by attendees. Content ranges from supply-side



Audits and mock inspections ensure food safety compliance

issues and setting safety-related specifications, to evaluating distributor capabilities, food-safety training, and general HACCP systems to how the company responds to specific issues that arise in the stores. "Even though we're sharing our systems, which we feel are the best of the best, it's a two-way dialog," Theno says. "We might not change based on what we learn, but it does enable us to continually think through our systems and enhance what we're already doing."

He adds that communication between Jack-in-the-Box and companies that participate in the benchmarking program doesn't end with their sharing session. "There's a lot of ongoing communication between the food safety and tech teams," he says. "They keep in touch with each other and it's become a little industry working group." Attendees also are asked, upon departing, to follow Jack-in-the-Box's lead and share their systems with other operators. "Several companies have done just that," he says, "and that feels good. If we can give back and make a difference through programs such as this, we know it's the right thing to do."

DOCUMENTATION LEAVES NOTHING TO CHANGE

*Sodexo USA,
Gaithersburg, MD*

As the leading provider of food and facilities management in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, Sodexo employs more than 12,000 people and, like any organization of its size, faces significant training challenges. One way the company is meeting those challenges is by tapping technology to help standardize operations, make it easy for employees to succeed and ensure that food-safety requirements are met. After four years in development, Sodexo has begun rolling out its Culinary Data Assistant™ (CDA), a hand-held device that's preloaded with complete menu and temperature guidelines.

According to Mike Dunn, director of product quality assurance, the beauty of the system is its simplicity. Nothing is left to chance or to employees' judgment. "A thermometer is attached to the device, so readings go directly in with no manual input needed," he says. "The employee simply inserts the thermometer into the selected food item and the reading tells its temperature and if it's a pass or fail based on specifications. If it's a fail, the device gives the employee the corrective actions to be taken."

All information gathered by the CDA device feeds directly into a main database, and once data is logged in it can't be changed; it's time- and date-stamped. "Most typical HACCP programs in the industry require extensive numbers of documents for critical control point documentation on cooking, cooling, holding, etc.," Dunn says. "With our system, such documents are replaced by the pocket PC. If there

is a system breakdown, we always can revert to paper documentation, as the information is backed up electronically in a major database.”

Dunn says the system ventures into a “whole new world of tracking and management.” While not currently mandated, he says some 130 operations already are on board with CDAs—mostly healthcare, college and university operators. “We find that users enjoy collecting data with this device,” he says. “It eliminates paper, it’s web-based, very fast and easy-to-use. We are actually collecting significantly more data than when employees have to write down the information. Thus, we get more temperature data, not just the minimum required. This, in turn, helps us to create some statistical reports on our website and to identify critical control point areas that need improvement.”

THIRD-PARTY AUDITS HELP FRANCHISEES

Moe’s Southwest Grill, Atlanta

Moe’s Southwest Grill is a fast-casual chain ranked as the 11th fastest growing company in America by Inc. Magazine. Fun, frivolity and fresh-made Southwest fare are specialties of the house. Menu items sporting names like Joey Bag of Donuts (a burrito), The Other Lewinsky and The Ugly Naked Guy (specialty tacos) help define the experience for guests. But when it comes to ensuring food safety, there’s nothing frivolous about Moe’s.

Part of the Atlanta-based Raving Brands portfolio of franchise companies, Moe’s puts serious resources into making sure its franchisees and their employees are trained in and comply with stringent food-safety practices and regulations. HACCP procedures are followed diligently, and, to bolster its own internal program, the company last year began making available a third-party audit program for comprehensive food-safety checks.

“We work with two outside audit firms,” says Dan Barash, director of new product development for Raving Brands. “We’re a franchise company, so it’s not mandatory that

our partners participate, but we highly recommend it. We feel it’s a worthy program to offer to franchisees to help uphold our standards as our brand moves into the next stage of development.”

Approximately 50% of Moe’s 300-plus partners already are participating in the audit program. “Many franchisees were excited about it and signed up right away,” Barash says.

The audits, which take an average of four hours each, are paid for by the franchisee. They’re typically done quarterly. Managers are encouraged to accompany auditors on the walk-through, and recommendations are made for both critical (correct immediately) and non-critical (correct promptly) steps to take to improve food safety. Following each audit, the franchisee, franchisor and franchise support consultants see the report and together analyze the results.

Other key measures taken at Moe’s include intensive training, starting with a sharp focus on food safety during the three-day Raving Brands University that all franchisees and managers complete. “It all starts with training,” Barash says. “We work on everything, down to the proper procedure for employees to follow when they go to the restroom. And we repeat it constantly. Getting the word out day in and day out, and now adding to what we’re doing with programs like the third-party audits, helps us ensure we’re serving safe and delicious foods to our customers.”

ALLERGENS PAMPHLET INFORMS DINERS

Denny’s, Spartanburg, SC

With growing numbers of patrons expressing concerns about allergens in the foods they enjoy away from home, family-dining behemoth Denny’s has committed to making it easy for guests to get questions answered—and for staff to respond knowledgeably to requests for information. The company makes available a pamphlet containing detailed information on common allergens and sulfites that appear in its menu items.



Denny’s pamphlet highlights potential allergens for guests

“We at Denny’s realize that an ever increasing number of our guests need to know if certain ingredients are in our foods, i.e., they may be sensitive to MSG or may have a severe life-threatening allergy to peanuts,” the pamphlet states. “We are providing this information to all of our guests that request it so that they may make informed choices prior to ordering.”

The pamphlet lists nearly 170 menu items and/or ingredients, noting whether they contain hot-button allergens such as wheat, nuts, tartrazine (Yellow #5), soybeans, MSG, garlic, fish/shellfish, milk/dairy, egg, corn hydrolyzed protein, aspartame and sulfites. It even goes so far as to note that Denny’s pancake mix is prepared on equipment that also makes products containing soy, eggs and tree nuts.

The company has just updated this brochure and is working to raise awareness among Denny’s employees about it, according to Debbie Atkins, Denny’s director of public relations. “Restaurant managers review this information with all hosts and servers, it’s included as part of our server/host orientation process, and the pamphlets are placed in a convenient location for hosts and servers,” she says. The information contained in the pamphlet is posted on Denny’s Website, as well.

Proactive strategies not only raise the food-safety consciousness of staff, they also keep managers ahead of the curve in preventing problems. These operators not only have 20/20 foresight, they are putting it to work to manage risk.