

10 WAYS TO SAY FOOD SAFETY

A blogger documented his experience at a national bagel chain: "...I witnessed a staffer making a ham and cheese bagel, separating the ham with her plastic sanitized gloves and, after making the sandwich, going to the bagel bin and, with the same gloved hand with ham juices on it, mixed all the bagels in the bin. She didn't take the gloves off. I asked her why and got a dirty look...I told the manager, who seemed to understand what I was getting at...Better training on sanitation and food preparation needs to happen at this particular unit." He included the name and address of the unit.

How many eyes spotted that blog? Maybe hundreds, maybe thousands. All the fancy ads, glossy signage and slick marketing campaigns won't overcome the image created by one customer's observations about such sanitation infractions

Food safety initiatives in purchasing, preFood-preparation and holding are absolute operational necessities, but savvy operators are catching on to the fact that extending safety-related strategies into the dining room can turn operational fundamentals into impactful marketing. Why? Because everything that happens in the front-of-the-house takes place in view of guests and shapes their perceptions. When it comes to

By **DANA TANYERI**

deciding where to spend dining dollars, perception is reality.

With multiple incidents of foodborne illness related to restaurant meals over the past year alone, customers crave reassurance in this area as much as they may crave your signature menu items. In part because of media coverage, they're smarter about recognizing food safety risks. They have greater access to information and, thanks to the Internet, infinitely greater access to sharing information.

Bottom line: What customers see can hurt you. But it can help you, too, particularly when food safety is treated as a marketing opportunity. Here are 10 simple, surefire ways to help sell the safety message.

1.

KEEP TABLETOPS SPARKLING

Tabletops not properly wiped, linens that are worn or stained, spotted or improperly cleaned flatware or glassware, dirty table tents, salt and pepper shakers crusted with food – all erode customer confidence. In fact, a recent study conducted by Harris Interactive for Nice-Pak Foodservice found that 63% of more than



Single-use disposable wipes are a more sanitary alternative than multi-use rags for tabletop cleaning.

2,000 adults surveyed feel it is absolutely essential that tabletops be spotless when it comes to determining whether they'll patronize a particular restaurant.

Food safety consultant Jeff Nelken, of food-safetycoach.com, says too many operations simply spread germs and debris around on tabletops with improper cleaning procedures. "You see a lot of employees giving tabletops a quick wipe with an over-used rag," he says. "At the other end of the spectrum, is employees using spray bottles of sanitizer at the tables. The smell can be offensive and there can be concern about chemicals getting into other guests' food."

One effective alternative is single-use disposable wipes. In the Harris poll, nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents said they consider such wipes more effective than multiuse cloths, and 55% said they'd be more likely to eat at a restaurant that cleans tables with disposable wipes as opposed to reusable cotton cloths.

2.

OFFER SPOTLESS MENUS

An operation's menu is among its most powerful marketing tools, but menus that aren't kept clean and in good condition are an immediate turn-off. Menus with wipeable covers should be checked and cleaned before each shift – even mid-shift during busy periods. Where menus are printed in-house, staffers should discard soiled, spotted menus and print clean ones prior to each shift. Hosts or other front-line personnel should be trained to routinely pull dirty menus out of circulation.



3.

EXPECT AND INSPECT STAFF HYGIENE

Clean, professional-looking uniforms, clean hands, long hair tied back, gloves and hats or hairnets on food handling personnel send subtle but strong signals to guests. Conversely, dirty aprons, spotted and/or wrinkled uniforms and disheveled-looking staffers can foster guest concerns about cleanliness elsewhere in the operation.

Ensuring that employees tow the line on this issue is an ongoing challenge, and one that must be clearly addressed in employee training manuals and at regular shift meetings. Todd Orlando, general manager at Old Chicago in Broomfield, Colo., says it helps to up the ante with incentives for employees who show up for work looking exceptionally clean and professional.



Clean, professional-looking uniforms send a strong signal about overall operational cleanliness.



Chick-fil-A has developed a safety-procedures brochure to include with catering and other takeout orders that won't be consumed immediately.

4.

USE GLOVES PROPERLY

Disposable gloves worn by food handlers have become ubiquitous and they can be powerful marketing tools. A consumer perception survey done by NPD Foodworld for one supplier shows that 61% of customers are "much more likely" to revisit a restaurant where workers wear gloves; 77% would select a restaurant using gloves over one that did not; and 70% of customers said they're willing to pay more to eat at a restaurant whose employees use gloves.

The challenge with gloves is ensuring they're used properly. FoodHandler, a leader in the segment, offers guidelines: Hands must be thoroughly washed before and after wearing or changing gloves, and glove use should be task-specific. Food contact gloves should never be worn continuously or used for non-food tasks, such as handling money, garbage removal, cleaning, etc.

5.

SHOW HAND WASHING

There is perhaps no greater weapon in the war against foodborne illness than frequent hand washing. Installing hand sinks at wait stations, in display cooking areas, behind prep lines or in other areas within view of guests gets this message across.

Proper hand washing requires soap, warm water and a minimum of 20 seconds scrubbing, preferably with a nail brush, before rinsing and drying. (For information on a new 2007 Kitchen Innovations Award-winning nail brush product, visit www.SanJamar.com/KleenBrush.)

At Sardine, a bistro in Madison, Wis., hand sinks are part of two custom-designed service stations, one positioned in the center of the restaurant separating two dining areas, the other near the bar dining area. Co-owner John Gadeau says, "We use the stations for water, bread and coffee service, as well as for storing supplies. Because food is handled there, we wanted the sinks to be integral to the design. And it's good for guests to see employees washing their hands before handling food."

6.

OFFER HAND SANITIZERS

Experts agree they're not a substitute for hand washing, but sanitizers are another tool in the battle against foodborne illness. From a marketing standpoint, making hand sanitizers available signals awareness and proactive commitment.

Atlanta-based Chick-fil-A recently partnered with a supplier of hand sanitizers to do



just that. The company now offers complimentary hand-sanitizing wipes in children's play areas, as well as to drive-through and counter customers. "This is a positive step to encourage customers to clean and sanitize their hands before eating," says Hal King, Chick-fil-A's manager of food safety.

7.

GUARANTEE CLEAN RESTROOMS

One of the toughest front-of-the-house challenges busy foodservice operations face is maintaining clean restrooms. From a marketing standpoint, however, doing so is critical. A survey conducted by Cintas, a Cincinnati-based manufacturer, found that 75% of respondents said they would not return to a restaurant if the restrooms were not well kept.

Keeping rest rooms stocked with plenty of soap, clean towels (or electric hand dryer) and toilet paper is important, as is ensuring that rest room sinks offer hot water for hand washing. Floors and counter-tops should be kept dry and clean.

At Shaw's Crab House units in Chicago, strong emphasis is placed on hand washing in the restrooms. The Lettuce Entertain You operations have posted signs in restrooms, educating guests on the importance of washing hands in the fight against spreading ill-

ness. Disposable towels are offered, and a sign invites guests to use the towels not only to dry their hands, but also to open the door on their way out to avoid re-contamination.

Some manufacturers now offer towel dispensers designed to be mounted near restroom doors, along with touchless waste receptacles, to encourage this practice.

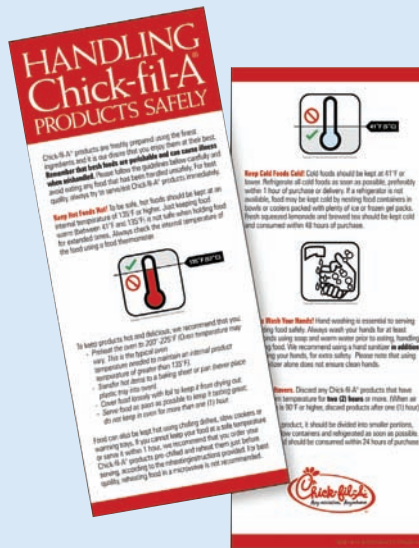
8. TAP THE WEB

Virtually every foodservice operation today has a Web site, but few utilize theirs to tout a food safety commitment. Recent visits to sites of the 50 fastest growing restaurant chains, as identified by Technomic, turned up only one that makes obvious reference to food safety. Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers, based in Baton Rouge, La., has on its homepage a section titled "Raising Cane's Commitment to Food Safety." Visitors can click through for information on the chain's purchasing practices and safety strategies, with particular attention paid to avian flu concerns.

Among larger chains, Taco Bell covers the topic in Q&A format in a section titled "Our Food: Food Facts." There, the company touts its commitment to providing the highest level of safety from farm to table.

Jack in the Box offers similar assurances in a Web page titled "Quality & Safety." It says: "From selecting ingredients to preparing your order, we follow the strictest guidelines to ensure the highest food quality and safety."

Among independents, Tristan Restaurant in Charleston, S.C., uses its Web site (www.tristan-dining.com) to actually 'take' visitors into its virtual open kitchen. A "chef cam" worn on the chef's lapel provides close-up, live-action sights and sounds of the kitchen and employees at work, carefully following food safety protocols.



Chick-fil-A has developed a safety-procedures brochure to include with catering and other takeout orders that won't be consumed immediately.

9. INCLUDE TAKEOUT TIPS

Operations that offer takeout or package leftovers for guests to take home have a great opportunity to help ensure that food is handled safely and at the same time market themselves as proactive on the food safety front. "Something as simple as a label to stick on bags or packages works well," Nelken says. "It should note the date the food was prepared, that it should be refrigerated promptly, instructions for reheating and a suggested discard-by date. Such education helps protect guests and supports a quality message for your brand."

Chick-fil-A is tapping this opportunity. "We have developed a food safety brochure to include with orders not intended to be

consumed immediately," King says. "We felt we needed a tool to communicate to customers their responsibility to maintain the food properly once it leaves the restaurant."

As far as packaging those leftovers, Nelken suggests containers be brought to the table for guests to package their own. "You often see servers taking plates of unfinished food back to the wait station or kitchen to be packed up," he says. "This creates the risk of bacteria and viruses the guest may have added to that plate now moving in a reverse direction back toward the kitchen."

10. CELEBRATE SUCCESS AND SPREAD THE WORD

When your operation scores well on inspections, it's time to celebrate and spread the word. Internally, staff incentive and recognition programs are important morale boosters; externally, spreading the word gives customers another great reason to feel good about visiting your establishment.

Providing local media with information on positive results can pay off in positive publicity. Issue your own press release, and make it easy for reporters to pick up the story by offering details about your commitment to food safety.

Post information about your safety track record on your Web site, and hang framed copies of positive inspection certificates and certified food handler certificates where guests can see them.

Market your successes!