

Taking It Back

How hotels handle food recalls—when they can't avoid them.

BY JEFF COLCHAMIRO

Food recalls seem to garner more headlines every year. Scares in recent memory involving tomatoes and spinach now look like minor news events compared to the recent recalls involving peanut products. But whether a recall is large or small, it's still a major concern for anyone serving food to the public, including hotels.

Fortunately for food and beverage managers, supply networks have become more sophisticated, and distributors have plans in place to not only communicate when there's a recall but also to get products out of hotels quickly and efficiently.

"Once a product is identified as having to be recalled it's pretty simple," says Doug Zeif, vice president of food and beverage for the Americas at Hilton Hotels Corporation.

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F&B DIRECTORS MUST BE AWARE OF THE SOURCES OF THEIR FOOD SUPPLY.

"It's out of the hotels, off our plates and out of our coolers. We are basically done with it. It's not a convoluted process where we have any risk or anything to do with the product after that."

When a recall happens, Zeif says supply partners notify the company—usually before the public knows anything about it. The company will then alert the properties through a twice-weekly market brief or, if it's urgent, an e-mail blast. "A local distributor in each market will go into the hotels and work with them to get the products out of use and out of the hotel," he says. The key to handling such a situation is in the planning, and Hilton will only work with companies that are prepared to handle it properly.



BEN HARGROVE, QUALITY ASSURANCE MANAGER AT AVENDRA PERFORMS AN EARLY MORNING AUDIT OF A FOOD DELIVERY PROCESS.

“In order to be a vendor or a supplier of ours, they need to have a recall plan in place, and a sophisticated plan,” Zeif says. “Our supply network is so sophisticated. We go to great lengths to minimize exposure to [food safety issues] in what we buy and from whom we buy it. A big part of all this is knowing where your product is coming from. Knowing where you buy your spinach from and what kind of water they’re irrigating with is very important to your program of food safety.”

He admits that such strict standards make it difficult for smaller vendors to make the cut, but says it doesn’t prevent the properties from using local farms and other small suppliers. “We just have to be very picky about our standards and our spot checks, and the type of farmer or agriculture partner that we pick.”

ALL ABOUT TRUST

While the public is very aware of food safety these days, Zeif says it’s important

for hotels to stick to the facts and not overreact. For example, with the recent scare about many peanut products, some consumers may have avoided all peanut-related products. “We don’t want to end up being alarmist,” he says. “If a product isn’t recalled, we wouldn’t pull it off the shelves.” If people are concerned, he says, they just won’t order an item, even if it’s still on the menu.

Guests are also more likely to trust a brand name such as Hilton than a mom-and-pop restaurant—and with that trust comes responsibility to the consumer and to protect the brand. “Because of the sophistication level of our system of handling recalls, there’s more trust that would be given to us,” he says. “We had bad spinach just like everybody else, but we were able to get rid of it. With all these things, we stay as far ahead as we can.

“The one thing we can’t have is the onset of any kind of food-borne illness at any of our hotels,” he continues. “Our reputa-

tion is too important; our brand is too important. We have too much at risk here to play games with how we source things.”

SOURCING IT RIGHT

The goal for hotels and their suppliers is to never get to the point of a recall. Avendra, which handles purchasing and supply chain management for Marriott, Hyatt, IHG, Starwood and various non-lodging companies, prides itself on checking quality at every level of the chain.

“I talk to a lot of prospective customers, and I always ask, ‘What is the one single thing that will affect your balance sheet faster than anything?’” says Ed Thompson, Avendra’s vice president of quality assurance. “And it’s a food safety issue. I’ll point to the most current incident that either closed a company or a hotel. Tomorrow night you could have zero occupancy in your hotel because it got shut down due to a food safety incident. Nothing else could put you out of business overnight.”

TAKING PROPER STEPS

To avoid such issues, Avendra will not contract with a supplier until Thompson's staff has done an audit of the company. About a third of the suppliers they audit don't pass. For starters, companies must have a recall process in place and test it annually with a mock recall. For suppliers of higher risk foods, such as meat and poultry, Avendra will use a third party to conduct its own annual audit.

Thompson monitors all issues in the food industry, not just suppliers he contracts with, using a variety of information sources. He reviews thousands of recall notices every year and quickly distributes relevant information to all the hotels and other companies he works with. Technically, this falls to the suppliers, but he notes that the process can end up taking several days.

"Legally, it's the responsibility of the manufacturer to notify the first point of commerce they sold it to," he says. "But we find that the supply chain can often

be very long, with multiple companies involved, or it can just take a long time for the process to flow." Using a distribution list of all his customers, Thompson can get a notice out in a couple of hours, so hotels can act quickly to get the product out of circulation.

"Hotels are very responsive with that information," says Thompson. "They'll isolate the product immediately, go back to their first point of commerce they purchased it from and get instructions on what to do." Depending on the product and the issue, it may need to be returned or simply disposed.

Avendra also performs what it calls "meet the truck" audits, where an inspector shows up at a hotel at 5 a.m. and audits every truck that delivers that day. He also does quality evaluations of specific products throughout the year. The truck audits look for the right product arriving in the proper condition. The quality evaluations take a deeper look, going as far as cooking products and performing taste tests.

IF IT HAPPENS

In the event that a guest does get sick from a food product, hotels have to go into crisis-management mode, making sure affected guests are attended to and others are informed of the situation. It's a process any hotel or restaurant would probably like to avoid. "That would be up to the communications department to issue a statement and get the information out there," Zeif says, "but that hasn't really happened—not that it couldn't happen. We put the brunt of it on the suppliers, even though we have the appropriate measures in place."

Thompson agrees such instances are very rare. His company will advise properties on how to handle the situation and send someone to the site if necessary, but he says that happens "not even once a year."

"We put a heavy emphasis on avoiding issues," he says. "It's much easier to handle it at one location if a manufacturer's not doing something right than once it's spread across 5,000 hotels." ■