Adherence to basic food safety standards is the key to a healthy and successful store

**By Michel Mack**

"South Africa is 10 years behind in terms of hygiene and food safety," says Deléne Koekemoer, director of PHT-SA. Legislation exists in abundance but enforcement and level of controls leave a lot to be desired, requiring the market to regulate itself for the most part. The Consumer Protection Act (CPA) levelled the playing field between retailers and suppliers, and retailers need to enforce strict procedures to minimise the risk of product contamination and its disastrous consequences.

**Shared responsibility**

Food safety refers to safe practices in all facilities where food is manufactured, processed and sold. Shortfalls can lead to bacterial contamination of the produce, as well as work spaces being infested with pests and rodents. Increased globalisation and the large increase in imported and exported food items stress the importance of adequate local and international standards, as well as control mechanisms. "Retailers often find that inspection practices and interpretation of SA food legislation are inconsistent. In addition, legislative responsibility is very fragmented," says Ronel Burger, head of the Food Safety Initiative at the Consumer Goods Council South Africa (CGCSA).

The Consumer Protection Act (CPA), was implemented last year and helped to balance the responsibility between the different elements of the chain. "In the past, retailers tended to leave hygiene responsibility to the manufacturers. Now with the CPA, responsibilities are levelled and we are seeing major retailers exercise a large amount of pressure inward and outward towards the strict adherence to procedures," says Koekemoer.

An aspect that often receives insufficient attention is the consumer responsibility. Consumers should be knowledgeable about correct behaviour in-store, as well as their responsibility to extend the cold chain. "It is found that consumers often abuse food in retail stores, such as damaging packaging and products, and leaving cold chain dependant products in other areas. Food safety as a subject in primary school will not only change consumer behaviour but will also assist in food security and less food being wasted," says Burger. Retailers also need to educate their customers and monitor their behaviour in-store to ensure food security and avoid significant wastage.

**CPA influence**

"The CPA strengthens consumer rights and gives the consumer advantages when dealing with suppliers. It has brought about relevant changes to the food industry," says Burger. It requires suppliers to disclose more information on product labels, and ensures that consumers are informed and that products are safe. The R146 regulations, implemented earlier this year, define all requirements in terms of food labelling and advertising. Consumers also receive a platform to elevate their complaints if not dealt with satisfactorily by the retailer or supplier. "The Act has placed the focus on due diligence and liability more than ever before," Burger continues. Each link of the food chain has to ensure that all records relating to the verification of all processes within the supply chain are readily available as the consumer has the right to ask for them. The CGCSA is still involved in the consultation process with the Department of Trade and Industry (dti) to ensure that all codes and regulations relating to food safety and the CPA are clear and relevant.

"The legislation framework is all there but mostly, retailers and other outlets only face inspections and controls when an actual complaint has been lodged. As long as they 'stay out of trouble', they are not subjected to outside monitoring. The CPA has now started the process of changing that and gave the legislation teeth," adds Koekemoer.

**Legislative responsibility**

South Africa has three regulatory bodies with the legal mandate to ensure manufacturers, suppliers and distributors in the country adhere to all necessary legal requirements. The Department of Health’s (DoH) Directorate of Food Control is mandated to regulate all the regulations under the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act 54 of 1972. Amongst others, these regulations include additives, contamination, the use of pesticides and the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system.

The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) Sub-Directorate of Agricultural Product Quality Assurance is mandated to enforce all regulations under the Agricultural Products Standards Act 119 of 1990. This relates to food hygiene, quality, packaging, labelling, law enforcement and microbiological standards. The National Regulator of Compulsory Specifications (NRSC) – part of the South...
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African Bureau of Standards (SABS) – again is ensuring the safety, quality, composition, packaging and labelling and facility requirements of canned meat, canned fish, frozen fish, frozen rock lobster, frozen shrimps, langoustines and crabs, as well as smoked snoek.

"By-laws of the 52 different municipalities complicate matters even more. The aim of all these legislations is to protect consumer health. Regulations should be interpreted as a whole, not in isolation, and within the context of the above mentioned acts. Alignment between the regulatory bodies is required to ensure loopholes are closed and confusion eliminated," comments Burger.

Common constraints

"First of all, most retailers battle with space constraints," says Mario Pluke, service productivity improvement manager at Rentokil-Initial. This often doesn’t allow them to adhere to proper stacking practices, which again prevents proper cleaning routines. This lack of proper cleaning usually results in pest infestations. “Specialised cleaning is often not utilised enough, as staff mostly limits itself to surface cleaning,” he continues.

"The most important aspect of pest control is maintaining building integrity, as set out by HACCP. No pest control programme will be effective unless systems are in place to prevent pest ingress through gaps, holes and supplier deliveries," says Pluke. Pest control should always be left to professionals, who are proficient in establishing the reasons for infestation, pest lifecycles and the appropriate use of pesticides, eradicating the possibility of chemicals entering any produce.

Retailers need to have systems and controls in place for proper stacking practices, proper stock rotation and dealing with returns. They also need to appoint specialised cleaning teams, who have been trained on correct procedures and understand their vital importance. Recommendations by pest control service providers need to be adhered to constantly. All chemicals used within the service department need to be approved food safe chemicals and applied correctly by competent staff.

Staff hygiene

"Research has shown that in Europe, one out of four people do not wash their hands after going to the toilet. When doing staff training, one needs to bear in mind that 70% of South Africans still don’t live in areas where running water is the norm," says Koekemoer. The key to appropriate staff hygiene is rather simple – hand and feet hygiene, proper clothing and staff awareness. “Gloves are used for the sake of customers, not for better hygiene. Staff members still need to wash their hands regularly and bear in mind that gloves contaminate just as easily as the bare hand and often give a false sense of security,” she continues. Within the food processing industry, gloves are generally not used for this exact reason. Appropriate sanitation must be made available, and seamless and touchless sinks and fittings should be used to ensure minimum risk of contamination through the hand washing basins.

She emphasises that staff must be supplied with appropriate washable footwear and feet sanitation must be made available and enforced. Most bacteria causing food poisoning live in the environment and find their way into the produce through not maintaining appropriate feet hygiene. Regular cleaning of surfaces with appropriate solutions and procedures is very much a no brainer.

"Food safety starts with adhering to the basics such as personal hygiene, medical status and behaviour such as eating, chewing..."
gum, spitting etc. All required personal protective equipment needs to be available and in good condition,” comments Burger.

How not to do it

At the end of April, the fast food chain, KFC Australia was ordered by a Sydney court to pay AUS$8 million to the Samaan family in conclusion of a year long court battle. In October 2005, the family shared a KFC Twister resulting in several family members contracting salmonella infections.

Monica, the seven-year-old daughter, had consumed the majority of the meal and suffered a septic shock, resulting in a six-month coma, leaving her mentally and physically disabled, as well as totally care dependant. Inspections in the months prior to the incident classified the respective outlet as being at ‘breakdown level’, forming part of the judge’s conclusion that Monica’s injuries were “more likely than not” caused by the Twister. KFC Australia has announced its intentions to appeal the verdict.

This obviously rare and unusually severe consequence of a lack of food safety can cause irreparable damage to a company’s reputation and brand image. Incidents like this can be avoided if proper procedures are in place and monitored.

Keeping up

“Through the vast demographic changes after 1994, the market became very deregulated. Recent years brought dramatic improvements in terms of food safety, yet a lot more work still needs to be done.

Constant efforts need to be made in staff and customer awareness. We are catching up to European standards, but vast improvements will still have to be made,” concludes Koekemoer.

Burger adds in conclusion: “Procedures to manage all food safety related risks from receiving of foodstuffs up to point-of-sale need to be implemented and verified. Training and refresher training is recommended to maintain awareness. Discipline should be enforced to ensure compliance with legislative and internal requirements.”

Unfortunately, appropriate food safety is often sacrificed to profit and competitiveness, as following proper procedures costs man hours and money. Retailers taking chances in this area are sitting on a time bomb, which, once exploded, will cause irreversible damage to the very same two things those shortcuts sought to protect.

A clean kitchen makes clean food, and a dirty kitchen? The lack of proper cleaning bears a huge risk of bacterial infections, as well as the ingress of pests and rodents.

Retailers need to ensure that all required personal protective equipment is allocated, worn and in good condition.