

Terror in aisle one

By Jenny Summerour - 01/02/2002

Food Supply May Be Terror Target

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Virtually every American saw headlines like this one after the events of Sept. 11. Consumer fear was high, and the safety of every facet of American life was open for debate. As President Bush and top U.S. officials urged all Americans to be vigilant and report anything suspicious to local police, an extraordinary thing happened in supermarkets. Consumers began panicking at the sight of sugar by the coffee stand, crumbs by Pop Tart boxes, even baby powder under diaper changing stations in bathrooms. Supermarkets found themselves being closed down, sometimes for an entire day, fielding calls from anxious news reporters and trying to calm harried customers.

Not since the Tylenol tampering of the 1980s have food retailers dealt with such a widespread national threat. In the same way the Tylenol scare changed drug packaging forever, the new threat of terrorism in America is dramatically changing the way businesses think about safety and risk assessment.

If any industry is prepared to deal with a major crisis, supermarkets are, many observers note. After all, in addition to the Tylenol scare and numerous product recalls, they've weathered controversies ranging from pesticides on produce to

produce misters linked to Legionnaire's disease to deli slices tainted with salmonella. But terrorism—people intentionally inflicting harm on other people—draws up an entirely new list for supermarkets to assess. Instead of waiting for government agencies to hand out guidelines, security experts warn, retailers must be proactive in looking for new risks or threats raised by the prospect of terrorism.

For example, who would have thought a year ago that retailers might need to make lists of every item in their stores that might contain a powdery substance? That's what the New Jersey Food Council's bio-security task force decided to do as its members faced numerous anthrax scares. The Trenton-based group realized immediately that it needed to update protocols and put together a resource not only for New Jersey's food retailers, but for law enforcement and regulatory agencies unfamiliar with the supermarket business. The council worked diligently and had a new Protocol Guideline and Resource Handbook completed by November.

"We met four or five times with members from the Department of Health, state police, U.S. Postal Service, and anyone else we could think of who had involvement with anthrax and other issues. We went down this path together," says Mike Ambrosio, manager of quality assurance for Wakefern Food Corp. and chairman of the New Jersey Food Council's bio-security task force and food safety committee. The handbook includes a response protocol guideline, including emergency phone numbers to use on weekends and holidays, as well as sample member protocols, guidelines for media inquiries, and an incident report form. It incorporates statements from suppliers about products that might contain white, powder-like substances, such as candy and even frozen turkeys, which often are tinged with a crystallized residue left over from the brining process. Vendor protocols were formulated for direct-store-delivery people who pack items on shelves that may be dusty.

Several new issues came out of the meetings, among them some unique challenges for convenience stores, Ambrosio notes. "Because c-stores are 24-hour operations, when the police came in and shut them down no one had the keys."

Other state grocers associations took action, too, among them the Columbus-based

Ohio Grocers Association (OGA) and the Sacramento-based California Grocers Association (CGA). OGA sent out a one-page piece to members with a flow chart showing what the state is prepared to do in a threat or episode of tampering. "The key is to have something in place," says OGA president and CEO Tom Jackson. "You know about it and read about it in the newspaper, then all of a sudden you have an anthrax scare in aisle 3. And then it's like 'Judas priest! Now what do we do?' But it shouldn't be that way. It's much more professional to have a checklist and know what you're going to do."

Sometimes even after they have a program, the biggest task for retailers is to make sure their employees understand the process and its importance, notes CGA president and CEO Peter Larkin. California was able to work with its emergency preparedness program already in place from disasters the state has faced. And food safety was a priority for a task force put together by Gov. Gray Davis.

New Jersey's Ambrosio points out that protecting the food supply is an industry-wide problem that goes beyond geographic boundaries. "What happened on the East Coast was, unfortunately, planes running into buildings. What can happen anywhere else as far as the food supply is concerned is something else," he says. "Whether you're a supermarket chain in California, Arizona, or New York City, everybody's in the same boat."

Following the anthrax scares in the mail, several government officials were quick to suggest that food could likely be the next target. Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), a former surgeon, offered a bill with Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) to provide \$1.4 billion for bioterrorism preparedness. The White House asked Congress for \$106 million in emergency spending for food and agriculture security. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson lobbied for more food inspectors. Lawmakers looked closely at the safety of imported foods, particularly produce.

The safety of the food chain has been scrutinized by virtually every media outlet from CNN to Time. Reporters alluded to a 1980s Oregon case in which a cult

poisoned salad bars with salmonella bacteria, sickening 750 people.

In December the Washington Post reported that food industry leaders were blocking or diluting government proposals to strengthen federal policing of domestic food processors and imported food. Lobbyists argued that the industry already has the right systems in place to deal with terrorism. Many in the industry wrestled with the ongoing issue of whether to consolidate food inspection agencies, or at least appoint one with more authority than the others.

Agroterrorism and bioterrorism were the main topics addressed at the October symposium of the World Food Prize Foundation, which presents awards to individuals who improve the quality, quantity, or availability of food in the world. The agenda of the Des Moines, Iowa event was chosen well in advance of Sept. 11, says foundation president Kenneth Quinn, a firsthand observer of terrorism who notes that global pandemics have long been among his concerns. The former U.S. diplomat and ambassador to Cambodia dealt with several hijackings in the Middle East and, when he returned home, found himself in the habit of scouting out vulnerabilities.

"I'm concerned that something could be done. Once you have the first cases and you call into question whether certain crops or products are safe, it can spread very rapidly," he says. "Terrorists want not only to spread mass terror, but to bring the United States to its knees economically. I think these groups are very focused. I don't know what's in their plan, but I could easily imagine that they would see American agriculture as the soft underbelly that could be easily attacked."

Quinn is not alone in that assessment. "Agriculture is one area that stands as a glaring exception to our country's focus on infrastructure protection," said policy analyst Peter Chalk at the World Food Prize symposium. Chalk, who works with RAND, a Washington, D.C.-based think-tank, noted that terrorism isn't just confined to large-scale damage, as many Americans believe. "Many groups have undertaken secondary campaigns of so-called infrastructure terrorism in order to undermine the economic well-being of their primary target," he said.

Numerous food industry experts, however, hold that terrorism in the food supply is highly unlikely. They contend that the food system isn't really centralized, so it would be difficult to hit the whole country with bacteria. "The food supply is called an easy target because it's complicated and has all these steps for each commodity to get to the consumer, but I think the complexity is to [the food industry's] advantage. It would cause limited damage," says Doug Archer, professor of food science and human nutrition at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

Archer notes, too, that terrorists would have to be extremely sophisticated to develop toxins. "With my laboratory and all the labs in the building, we'd be hard-pressed to make a gram of some of these purified toxins," he says. "Where are they going to get the capability to do it?"

Likewise, Fergus Clydesdale, head of the department of food science at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, feels safe about the food supply. He says food manufacturers are already making efforts to handle bacteria. GMA spokesman Peter Cleary has said that manufacturers are ramping up in-house security and looking at every step from manufacturing through delivery.

"Retailers may have to be a little more careful with fresh commodities and material that isn't packaged," says Clydesdale. "They can tell consumers to peel items and wash them well."

Archer says his primary concern is agroterrorism, more specifically, attacks against commodities, whether it be citrus canker or foot-and-mouth disease. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman told Republican lawmakers in October her worry was that terrorists would contaminate a big feedlot with the virus that causes foot-and-mouth disease. She assured them that protocols were in place should the USDA see anything suspicious.

Most supermarkets know their suppliers and have written agreements in place, so they know what they're purchasing, Archer notes.

"I think there's a greater degree of care and thought than most people would think. Since Sept. 11, farmers are thinking about this, too. I was at a meeting the other day and could see that several of the large farmers here in Florida have really thought things through, from locking up nitrate fertilizers to doing background checks on employees," Archer says.

The United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association formed a Food Security Task Force only weeks after the terrorist attacks. President Tom Stenzel says the industry wants to take a farm-to-table look at how terrorism could affect food security, and to make sure the food supply won't be interrupted. One of his particular concerns is transportation. "We move a lot of product by ship, air, truck, and rail, and you want to make sure there's security for that," he says.

The Food Marketing Institute has taken the issue seriously as well by keeping members educated on its password-protected Web site. "The industry has been partnering with its suppliers, law enforcement, and appropriate government agencies to review all the procedures in place and see which ones might need to be revised or enhanced," says FMI senior vice president Karen Brown. The focus has been on three key areas: in-store monitoring; securing transportation systems; and restricting access to manufacturing facilities, distribution centers, and sensitive areas of stores.

In particular, employee screening is being assessed more closely than ever before. Some retailers are more readily using systems that check immigration violations, notes Brown.

"The industry is taking a hard look at background checks," says Ambrosio.

"Especially when you have people involved in sensitive positions of management, you will have to do a more thorough background check. You just can't be cavalier about these things today."

For now retailers should focus on educating employees and consumers, observers

say. Just having more associates on the sales floor will make customers feel more at ease and secure. Workers should be more aware of their surroundings as well. "You have to talk to your associates and make them understand the importance of being vigilant. If you see a box of cereal where the top is popped, take it off the shelf and bring it to the manager's attention," says Ambrosio. That one simple step could avoid a store closing.

Associates can encourage customers to wash and peel products. And they should be prepared to tell consumers that they're taking steps to promote safety.

"I think proactive retailers see their role as not only ensuring food is being kept safe in the store, but also educating consumers about how to handle food, proper cooking temperatures, and looking for product tampering," says Daren Williams, senior vice president at Fleishman-Hillard, Inc., a Kansas City-based communications firm and crisis management counselor. "After all, they are the closest link to the consumer."

Likewise, associates need to take any customer concern very seriously, even if it seems blown out of proportion. "We are in an industry where our customers come in on a daily basis, and we are providing for them something that is necessary for life and health. We want it to be wholesome and safe, which is paramount," says FMI's Brown. "So we have to treat everything as if it's the real deal, even when we know there's probably little chance that it is."

Having proof that terrorists will strike in the aisles isn't the issue. Regardless of what the government or food safety experts say, Sept. 11 has changed the way consumers think and, as the marketing gurus say, perception is reality. And so terrorism becomes one more—albeit big and bold—entry on the food retailer's already lengthy checklist.

Associate editor Jenny Summerour can be reached at jsummerour@progressivegrocer.com.

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