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Protect Your Guests, Your Company

A (not so) funny thing happened on the way to writing this month's column. I saw the reminder on my computer and had an idea for a topic when, out of nowhere, I fell down—literally.

Let me explain. It was a hectic weekend, with our oldest daughter back from college and multiple events with the kids. There was lots of running around, and I rarely crossed paths with my wife. Given this schedule, we shared takeout from a local restaurant for dinner.

The next day, as we were getting ready to take the kids out to a play, it hit my wife: sick—very quick, very violent and very painful. A few hours later, it was my turn. It seems both my wife and I got food poisoning from this local, independently owned restaurant. It was the only thing we had eaten in common over the preceding few days.

This is only the second time in my life I could confirm that it was not the flu. While not a comforting fact, it did make me think about local restaurants, their levels of expertise and processes for food handling, training and sanitation. Even though they are inspected twice a year, the mom-and-pop restaurants typically do not have the resources of larger chains.

What about our industry? Many smaller companies are launching food programs. As offer complexity increases, so does the amount of literal touch points, where care must be taken to prevent contamination and foodborne illness.

I am not a sanitation expert, and this is not meant to be exhaustive advice on the subject. Rather, it should spur you to ask questions in your organization.

'Hot Food Hot': Not Enough

When I was at Wawa, we began formal ServSafe training, almost 25 years ago. Back then, keeping hot food hot and cold food cold and washing your hands were the key messages. Today, with the expansion of delis, burgers, pizza, chicken and commissary foods in our stores, there's more to worry about, such as cross-contamination, infectious diseases and issues with food supply.



► Are your food handlers—not just your managers—certified in ServSafe? You need a documented, certified program in place. For instance, ServSafe is a widely recognized, very good program. There are others you can use, and several companies that can help you get started. Local municipalities often conduct these classes, too. HACCP training and certification is another area to investigate, depending on your local or state requirements.

► What type of vendor certification is in place? All vendors that prepare and deliver food to you should have their own processes for HACCP and food safety. Are they certified by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI)? Some companies will not even talk with suppliers unless they are GFSI-certified.

Your suppliers must also have systems in place for quality control, recalls, testing and compliance with their own vendors. Ask questions and check documentation.

► Do you have processes in place that check the critical control points? Track temperatures of hot and refrigerated foods and document them. I recommend keeping logs and taking temperatures of key areas a minimum of every 2 hours, more frequently if required by local regulations. This includes the cold line, hot table, walk-in—anywhere food is held. Documentation can also help if there is a suspected issue with a product.

Being proactive and not relying just on semiannual audits will improve your ability to keep your food safe. Ensure you identify and address the critical control points to prevent and identify issues.

► How is the distribution system monitored? Are you checking product temperatures as they are delivered? Does your distributor monitor shipments through to the store? With distribution out of your sight and control, there are many places where the system can break down.

As more companies get into foodservice, they may not understand they are relying on others, and that a supplier's issues can quickly become their issues. Audits, certifications, monitoring and verification are all part of the due diligence you should do on any foodservice supplier or distributor.

I can't detail all of the important areas in one column. The bottom line: Food safety should not be taken lightly. It is a matter of protecting your guests—and your company's reputation. ■