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Industry Viewpoint: Retailers' responsibility in the food-safety chain

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Retailers are uniquely positioned as the point of contact for consumers purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables. They also have the final say on what products make it from the farm to their store. If something goes wrong with the product, they face the consumer head on.

While retailers may have specific concerns as the brand consumers recognize most, food safety is everyone's responsibility all along the supply chain. Retailers need to recognize the responsibility they have to educate themselves about food-safety risks in their own operations and the opportunities they have to influence the entire supply chain. They need to ask suppliers the right questions about produce safety programs, set expectations and develop true partnerships with suppliers to ensure a science-first and beyond-compliance approach to food safety throughout our entire supply chain.

One clear indicator of the quality of a suppliers produce safety program is their approach to training and education. I like to differentiate between the two because training is about what you have to do and how to do it, but education is about why it's important. We know that we're only as strong as our weakest link. Sometimes what shores up a weak link is if workers understand why they are doing something and that what they are doing really matters.

It's important for retailers to create their own produce safety training and education programs for their own operational staff. It is also important to know what to look for when they're talking to the suppliers to make sure their employees are getting the right level of education and training on how to handle the products safely across the supply chain.

I have been involved in produce safety training and education for many years, and there are four points that all suppliers should consider, and all retailers should be thinking about when they set expectations:

1. Use produce safety education and training programs that are developed with real produce industry examples. We need to reimagine training. Employee training and education is a real opportunity to leverage emerging technology. Online training can be geared toward people's attention spans of learning in short bursts as opposed to day-long lectures. It permits oversight of the training of your teams; engagement by the participants in virtual scenarios and it can be more affordable. It also presents opportunities to update content should the science evolve.

2. Food safety is everyone's responsibility. It's not just the food-safety professional, the farmer or even the harvest crews or processing plant workers that need to be trained. Everyone in an organization should be knowledgeable about the company's produce safety program. If you are a sanitation person, you need to understand how that fits into the company's produce safety program and why what you do is critically important. If you are a salesperson at a desk, you need to be able to explain your organization's produce safety program to your buyers to give them confidence in your program. On the retail side, it should be your expectation that your produce buyers understand your corporate expectations about produce safety, can communicate those to suppliers and then reward those that demonstrate produce safety achievement with purchase orders.

3. Make education and training part of your comprehensive, risk and science-based produce safety programs. Identify operational vulnerabilities and then focus your education and training resources on those functions and measure improvements in performance. This often will take you beyond compliance with federal regulations or customer specifications and bring you to a produce safety program that does what you need it to do; protect your business.

4. Remember, regulations and specifications are often generalized to one-size-fits- all approaches. The land, surrounding environmental features, agricultural inputs, labor quality, the commodities, growing practices, equipment use and postharvest practices are all things that differ from one growing operation to the next and one region to the next. Your company's produce safety education and training program needs to reflect the variability in production and help employees see how to connect what they are learning to actual production situations.

These four observations are important for retailers to consider internally and externally with their suppliers. True partnership with suppliers, in depth communication, joint understanding and information sharing are the best ways to protect retail brands and forge relationships that ensure produce safety is effective from grower to retailer.

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