

Tracing food safety

Produce packaging is seen not only as a barrier for stopping harmful foodborne illness, but also as the vehicle for tracing the origin of an outbreak

By Lance Jungmeyer

Packaging is playing an increasing role in food safety and traceability, two issues that have been brought to the fore by outbreaks of foodborne illness in recent years.

Retailers have well considered the effects of ongoing food safety issues, judging by their answers to an online Produce Pulse survey.

About 44% of retailers said that ongoing food safety concerns will result in a 25% increase in produce packaging. Another 12.5% think that produce sold in packaging will increase 25-50%.

About 44% think the food safety climate will have no bearing on the proportion of produce sold in packaged form.

Some produce, such as salad in plastic boxes, is sold with tamper-evident packaging in the form of a plastic seal around the lid.

But don't look for such product features to be a boon for sales, in and of themselves.

About 62.5% of retailers responded that they think having tamper-evident produce packaging would have no effect on sales, while 37.5% think it would increase sales.

Best-by or consume-by?

When retailers look at the expiration dates on packaged produce, they come to different conclusions as to what the date means.

Packaging that clearly states "best if consumed by" or "do not display after" may provide some guidance, but there remains confusion.

Specifically, does the expiration date mean that the produce should be consumed by that date? Or does it mean that the produce should be pulled from the shelf on that date, but still can be consumed?

Nearly 29% of retailers said it should no longer be consumed after the date listed.

About 71% of retailers said it should be pulled from the shelves by the date listed.

Item-level traceability

There are many elements that go into putting produce that is safe to eat into the hands of consumers. But one of the biggest trends is developing a database of knowledge to effectively put the blame for foodborne illness at the appropriate point in the supply chain.

Retailers and their supply partners are investing millions of dollars to be able to trace back to every point that a suspect product was handled.

One of the highest-profile traceability programs so far comes from The Kroger Co., Cincinnati.

Kroger's "Quality You Can Trace" program is administered through a partnership with Redwood City, Calif.-based YottaMark, which owns the HarvestMark traceability program.

Each bag in Kroger's Fresh Selections salad line carries a 16-digit code that shoppers can enter at www.HarvestMark.com to decipher the salad's origin, packing location, ingredients, date and time the product was packed.

"This is the first time that a retailer is reaching out directly to the consumer with a value proposition. It's a watershed moment," says Elliott Grant, founder and chief marketing officer of YottaMark.

While space-constrained PLU stickers with data bars can tie a grower to a particular product, they do not have enough space to tie the product to a specific field or lot, says Gary Fleming, owner of Symbolon Group, Indian Hills, Colo.

Nonetheless, the identification system is gaining traction. Retailers including Wal-Mart Stores, Loblaws, Wegmans, Winn-Dixie, Kroger, and HEB have begun using PLUs with data bars.



COURTESY OF YOTAMARK

Kroger Co. launched its "Quality You Can Trace" program this fall. Each bag in Kroger's Fresh Selection salad line has a 16-digit code shoppers can use to find out the salad's origin, packing location, ingredients, date and location it was packed.

For items with plenty of surface area, such as bags and clamshells, a UPC that has a prefix for the company is recommended, Fleming says.

Intelligent case tracking

Radio frequency identification (RFID) has been tested at many levels throughout the supply chain, including by Wal-Mart and its supply partners.

Despite all the tests and hoopla, RFID does not appear to be on the minds of many retailers.

Just 12.5% reported having considered using RFID in the past year.

About 81% said that they have not considered it, while just 6% said they have read or heard about it, but are not considering it.

But by having RFID at the case level, in the event of a recall retailers will be able to more quickly know if they have to pull product, Grant says, adding, "It makes for faster, more narrow recalls."

Case-level tracking also lets retailers know which products from which shippers can be restocked.

"When you look at the history and industry costs of produce recalls, you only have to stop one prolonged recall for the Produce Traceability Initiative to pay for itself," Grant says.

What are growers doing about traceability?

Grower-shippers responding to our survey

continued on page 12

How will the ongoing food safety issues affect packaging?

No effect	21.4%
Packaging will increase by up to 25%	55.4%
Packaging will increase 25%-50%	16.1%
Packaging will increase by more than 50%	7.1%



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Cases of yellow squash from Grow Farms, Louisville, Ky., bear HarvestMark traceable labels. The Produce Traceability Initiative aims to have electronic traceability of every case of produce supply chain-wide by 2012.

continued from page 10

reported offering a range of items that are traceable. Items listed include fruits such as apples, pineapples, grapes, blueberries, mixed berries, peaches, plums, nectarines and apricots.

Vegetables noted as being traceable are peppers, greens, avocados, tomatoes, asparagus, onions, bulb onions, celery, leaf lettuce, strawberries, cabbage, green onions, parsley, flat parsley, cilantro and spinach.

About 76% of growers responding to the survey said that each package of produce they sell is traceable back to the field.

To share or not share the exact point of origin?

As traceability advances, retailers and their suppliers are trying to figure out what level of detail in results should be shared with shoppers.

The Kroger program is still evolving, Grant says. In general, it lets consumers know the region it was grown or packed, as well as the food safety status of the item.

And while Kroger captures more data, including the field that the product came from, it doesn't necessarily show it consumers, he says.

"It's up to the brand marketer to decide how

For more information about the Produce Traceability Initiative, visit:
www.producetraceability.org

much information to share with consumers," Grant says.

In the case of a food safety problem with a bag of lettuce, if a consumer told Kroger about a problem via the Web site, Kroger can trace back the issue to the point of origin. Bags packed on a certain date have a unique code, which the brand can use in traceability due diligence, he says.

But Fleming says such traceability may have more public relations value, as opposed to being a true supply chain traceability solution.

"It implies that a food safety problem was where the product was grown, instead of perhaps a warehouse where it was stored. It's only part of the picture," he says.

But there are other benefits to the Kroger system, Grant says.

For instance, each time a consumer enters a code, that person's IP address is captured, allowing the retailer to know that a consumer ate produce from bag on a certain date, and how many days that occurred after packing.

Monte Package Company Based in Riverside, Mich., Monte Package Co. has been dedicated to manufacturing and supplying the finest produce containers available since 1925. Family owned and operated, the company continually strives to be the leader in agricultural packaging supplies well into the 21st century. Monte Package has committed itself to this through the constant dedication of offering customers quality products, outstanding service and competitive pricing. To learn more, visit their website at www.montepkg.com.

● **What is the hottest trend you see in produce packaging?** Sustainable packaging is one of the hottest trends right now, along with traceability. We handle requests for one of these two trends each day.

● **How do you come up with new packaging ideas?** Our customers know what they are looking for in new package ideas. We listen to their ideas and needs, then proceed to manufacturing a package that fits the required need. Monte Package Company has many resources available for different types of produce packaging requests.

● **How do you test new packaging?** We rely on the retailers to test new packaging. It is easier to test real world scenarios in a real world environment and the retailer offers the best place for this to happen.

● **What is your company doing to address sustainability retail concerns?** We are always looking towards "green" solutions for retailers. The exposure of green initiatives across the industry helps open new doors for the success of sustainability in the industry moving forward. Over 80% the clamshells that we supply are manufactured from PETE. We source product lines that have in excess of 50% of recycled material. Our suppliers are using alternative energy resources for power, including the use of a "Sun Farm" to produce CLEAN power that reduces the amount of green house gases released to the atmosphere, while simultaneously reducing the amount of oil, coal and natural gas being used in manufacturing. It is a very exciting time to be in the industry.

● **What sustainability efforts do you anticipate implementing in the next 3 years? 5 years?** Monte Package Company anticipates the elimination of waxed boxes in the next 3-5 years. Monte Package Company has converted over 50% of the waxed (cascaded) cartons which are not recyclable, supplied the vegetable growing industry to a "Dry Alternative" that is recyclable.

Why do you think there is a greater demand for produce packaging?

Increased emphasis on value-added	56.3%
Increased emphasis on ready-to-eat/cook	59.4%
Advanced technology	21.9%
Food safety	65.6%
Other	15.6%