



Total Recall

A strong recall program benefits both consumers and manufacturers

Product recalls are dreaded events. No matter how quickly a company reacts, that brand is going to take a hit. But how big or small that hit will be often depends on the company's product recall program.

Having solid manufacturing practices in place and following HACCP and ISO models are good preventative measures. But the reality is that product flaws, food safety issues, accidental contamination or even human error can happen. In recent weeks, even big players such as Cadbury Adams Canada Inc., Unilever United States Inc., A&P Canada, T&T Supermarket and Nestlé Canada Inc. have all experienced product withdrawals or recalls.

So what can you do about it? In the event of a recall, manufacturers' first must protect consumers. But a properly planned and executed recall program can also help protect brands. "There will always be a hit. Something we ingest is so close to us and we buy so much food in North America based on trust that there's always going to be a temporary hit whatever happens," says Alan Middleton, professor of Marketing at Toronto-based York University's Schulich School of Business. "So the question for the recall and the plan behind the recall is how to minimize the length of time of that hit. And that's really what all this is about."

Once you have confirmation of a product crisis, taking responsibility and reacting within minutes to alert the public goes a long way in restoring confidence. But in order to react promptly, you must already have a well-rehearsed recall program in place, one that considers all possible eventualities, from minor recalls to the most severe and widespread. A recall program, depending on its nature, may also involve speaking to the public directly to let them know how you're dealing with the problem. Remember that your message must also be absolutely clear, avoiding confusion over the details. As Middleton says, "People do not read the details...or view the details on television."

According to Larry McIntosh, president and CEO of Winnipeg-based Peak of the Market, a grower-owned vegetable supplier and manufacturer of gourmet soups, an

effective recall program includes, at a minimum, a number of aspects. They include having a team responsible for handling required duties; recording the reason for the recall and any health risks involved; halting distribution of the product and isolating any within the operation; identifying the product and the quantities involved; communicating with concerned parties; retrieving product from the market; disposing contaminated product (if necessary); and determining future preventative plans and assessing the recall's effectiveness. Peak of the Market has had a recall program in place for the last three years and fortunately has never had to use it.

According to McIntosh, when they began testing the program, they realized there were some holes. For instance, Peak of the Market's traceability system uses a code that's found on each package. The code identifies which farm the product came from and the date it was packed. With that information Peak of the Market can go back to the growers' records, which it audits, and identify the field the product was grown in, what was

grown next to it and the seed that was used. The company, however, found that when the code is changed the first few tags that print off are blank. "We happened to go into a retail grocery store and picked up a bag of potatoes that had no number on it," says McIntosh. "We thought, 'That's not going to work.'" It may only be the first two bags out of a run of thousands, he adds, but if there's a recall, odds are it may have to do with those bags without a code. "Now we ensure that those [blank] tags are taken off before they go on the bags," he says.

Fortunately or unfortunately, says Middleton, recalls are no longer uncommon, a fact which may or may not work against food manufacturers if they should face one. It does mean consumers are more aware that things do happen. "People are now used to the idea that things happen," says Middleton. "Provided the company comes across as having accepted responsibility and as having done something, it needn't harm [consumers'] decisions."

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For information on setting up a recall program:

Canadian Food Inspection Agency

• Office of Food Safety and Recall

<http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/rearapp/rearappe.shtml>

• Make a Recall Plan

<http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/rearapp/rap/mgze.shtml>

Food and Consumer Products of Canada

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