



Food Safety: Questions to ask your distributor

There's more to evaluating distributors than checking out product selection, pricing and service levels. Food safety systems at the distributor level – and even farther back in the supply chain – should be part of your evaluation, as well.

Since last fall's devastating leafy greens-related outbreaks, knowing where products come from, how they're produced and handled before they reach your back door is more important than ever. It's no longer enough to receive cases of product from distributors, assuming that they're wholesome and safe. While most distributors and suppliers do operate according to practices generally accepted as safe, the more questions you ask and the more documentation you request, the lower your risk of an outbreak – and your potential liability.

For their part, distributors say they're experiencing increased demand for food safety systems assurance from operators, particularly large chains, for whom illness linked to their brands could be devastating both in human and business terms. Distributors now anticipate such demand and are busy putting systems in place to reassure even the most concerned customers.

Here are five fundamental safety-related topics that are important to discuss with yours:

Cleanliness. A quick and easy way to get a first impression of your distributor's commitment to food safety is to check its cleanliness. When deliveries are made to your location, are the trucks clean and free of debris? Is the warehouse clean and well maintained? If you don't know, ask to take a tour. Most responsible distributors today regularly welcome customers to their facilities.

Inspection Reports. Like foodservice operations, all food distributors undergo annual government-mandated inspections, but many now also invest in independent third-party audits for extra assurance that their systems are up-to-date and safe handling practices are being stringently followed. Ask to see copies of recent audits and inspection reports, as well as HACCP certification documents; keep them on file and update them regularly. Many chains and larger foodservice operations now require distributors to submit to their own third-party testing, as well. Such requirements should be welcomed and facilitated by the distributor.

Temperature Maintenance. What systems does your distributor have in place to guarantee that perishable products are held at safe temperatures during storage and transit? Do its trucks have multiple temperature zones? Are its warehouse docks refrigerated? Are there tracking technologies in place to ensure that proper temperatures are maintained from receipt to delivery? Finally, do the distributor's drivers seem knowledgeable and proactive on the importance of temperature maintenance when delivering perishables?



Training. Distributors with the most advanced food safety systems have made a commitment to training both their own personnel and their customers on best practices. They make food safety part of their own operational culture. Sales reps and drivers who are well-trained in food safety can be strong allies in the battle against foodborne illness, recommending products, pointing out risky operational practices, and consulting on proper storage and handling. Ask about the extent to which the distributor trains its staff in this regard. Also, ask about safety-related training on topics such as HACCP compliance and ServSafe certification that may be offered to you and your staff through the distributor. Many now offer these value-added services.

Supplier Evaluation Systems. Distributors, of course, are middle men: They receive products from manufacturers and move it quickly through their warehouses to get it to operator customers. As such, their systems for ensuring the safety of supplies that land on their docks are critical—again, consider the spinach crisis of last fall, which traced all the way back to a growing area in California. You need assurances that the suppliers whose products your distributors carry are produced in the safest manner possible. That means finding out about quality assurance programs, field inspection practices and verification procedures, and packaging facility audits. Just as your own food safety systems can't stop at your back door, neither can your distributor's."