

# SAFE HANDLING OF DELICATESSEN FOODS

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Points up the need for education on proper sanitation methods by food industry employees.

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In the 1969 Yearbook of Agriculture, titled Food For Us All, published by the United States Department of Agriculture, former Secretary of Agriculture, Clifford M. Hardin said:

"We pride ourselves in having the world's cleanest and most wholesome food. Yet constant vigilance is necessary to prevent careless and inadvertent contamination".

Are the nation's retail food stores working actively towards this end to prevent the careless and inadvertent contamination mentioned by Mr. Harden? Yes, I think the evidence clearly points to an increased awareness by the industry in food protection measures. Unfortunately, excessive wheel-spinning is slowing down the good efforts considerably.

Besides, how can we expect food store employees to prevent contamination when they don't even know what it is. I mean, we have not educated our people to handle food safely. Most of our education in supermarkets amounts to on-the-job training. You remember the program. It's called "Do it once or twice, you'll get the hang of it".

It's about time we spent some time and money upgrading the retail food industry. Our store people need to become specialists in food, not just can stackers, food wrappers or food handlers.

A food store employee needs to be someone the customer can trust in matters of food purchasing. They need to know more

about how food is grown, processed, prepared, served, and protected.

There are some organizations and educational institutions at present working to fulfill this need, but by-in-large, there is a gigantic void in this area. Let's take a look at the retail food store delicatessen department, for example. Maybe we had better begin by defining just what is a delicatessen.

The dictionary defines delicatessen as "a store selling foods already prepared or requiring little preparation for serving, such as cooked meats, cheese, relishes and the like".

Applying this definition to suit our purpose is relatively simple. Although the deli department in supermarkets is a relatively new innovation, years ago the meat departments in grocery stores displayed ready-to-eat ham, ham salad, bulk cheese, luncheon meat, and other prepared foods, right along with fresh meats. In fact, there are literally thousands of stores today still following this practice.

A deli department may look slightly different depending on the part of the country we're in, but if we stick to our original definition of ready-to-eat foods we won't be far off no matter where we are.

The American free enterprise system is an amazing thing. Since diversification is the way of life today, we find discount houses with deli departments, food manufacturers operating fast food outlets, supermarkets with restaurants and snack bars, and convenience stores selling sandwiches and delicatessen foods. They're all trying for that something extra in sales. Unfortunately, many know little or nothing about

the fine points of the deli business, and as a result, the food protection practices are atrocious.

Here are some examples:

Here is a deli clerk that serves the customer's needs well. He is getting some fresh fish for Mrs. Jones, a few minutes later he is weighing up luncheon meat for Mrs. Smith. What's wrong with that? Both items are in his department! If he and the manager only knew about the problems associated with lack of separation of raw and ready-to-eat products, they might shudder. The deli merchandiser thought the canned hams would make a nice display on the shelf behind the deli department. Too bad he didn't read the label "must be refrigerated".

Here's a deli worker making submarine sandwiches using the band saw to slice his bread while the meat cutters are on break. He really cleaned off that saw before he started—except for the raw meat on top of the blade and the inside. But don't blame him—no one ever taught him to keep raw and ready-to-eat products separate and why.

And why display them under refrigeration when the customer will buy them faster sitting up here on the counter. So what if it's a warm day!

Separation of raw and ready-to-eat products constitutes the majority of the serious food protection violations in a delicatessen department whether it be in storage - preparation - display - or service.

In fact, you might say it is a case of life and death. Yes, food is a potentially dangerous weapon if handled improperly. The deli worker is in the most sensitive area of the store. Take this deli lady, for example. She's a fine person, a hard worker, a real credit to her company. Yet, her work routine is so dangerous that a similar routine a few years ago was responsible for the deaths of several people. Again, it's the question of keeping ready-to-eat products away from anything that has been in contact with raw products — like hands, slicers, knives, tables, and aprons until a thorough job of cleaning and sanitizing is accomplished. Had this woman known the facts of

food protection, she would have never handled cooked chickens after handling raw chickens without first cleaning and sanitizing her hands. We've obviously seen some very lax conditions concerning food safety.

What are the causes of poor sanitation and food protection practices?

1. Poor training or lack of training
2. Poor communication or lack of communication

If the first two points have been accomplished and sanitation practices are still poor then other causes may be:

3. Poor working conditions:

such as excessively high sales per man hour goals, facilities and equipment in bad repair — which can cause:

4. Poor morale, and
5. Lack of motivation

What steps must be taken to safeguard delicatessen foods?

1. Make a Survey of Present Conditions

The problem must be stated correctly and thoroughly as the first important step in accomplishing adequate food protection in deli departments.

2. Set Goals and Objectives

Targets, priorities, and time frames must be established in order to carry out a total food protection program.

3. Get Top Management Commitment

The program will fail without it. Management will always find another job more important, constantly pushing food protection into the background, something to be saved for a slow day. Management can be motivated if they can be made to see the benefits to be gained in increased profits, lower costs, better customer image and increased sales. I could have mentioned the benefit of protecting the health of the customer as well as employees, but I'm convinced that although

management agrees with this point in principle, the real motivating factor which leads to the decision in starting a sanitation program is the promise of increased profits.

#### 4. Assignment of Responsibility

One person, department, team or the like must be made responsible for the success or failure of such a program. It should be preferably someone other than operations manager (meat, produce, dairy, etc.) as everything must, be the nature of the job, take a back seat to sales. The responsibility for a food protection program should lie with a staff person who would enlist the help of operations management in making the program a success.

To be more specific, if the sales volume permits, the company should consider hiring a director of sanitation. Is this an unnecessary cost adding another staff position rather than someone in operations? Many of those who would answer in the affirmative now have a security director on their payroll and consider him necessary in keeping costs down. A sanitation director would do the same only would probably contribute even more towards profit improvement as well as protecting the health of the consumer and employees.

#### 5. Get Necessary Resources

The start of a food protection program should cost very little, although plans should be made to eventually upgrade those areas such as facilities, equipment, and supplies needed towards the accomplishment of a total program. The resources needed should be part of setting the overall goals and objectives.

#### 6. Educate - Educate - Educate

You'll notice, I've used the word educate rather than train. Education teaches a person to think whereas training teaches a person to react. People are educated — animals are trained.

Through management, the deli worker must gain the knowledge, attitude and skills necessary to successfully apply correct food protection measures in daily assignments.

Areas critical to the education of deli employees are:

- A. Basic bacteriology in lay language — the effects of bacteria on people and products related to spoilage and food poisoning.
- B. Personal hygiene — how careless employees can inadvertently contaminate food products.
- C. Temperature control — why hot foods should be kept hot — above 140°F. and cold foods kept cold — below 45°F.
- D. Separation of raw and ready-to-eat foods in receiving, storage, preparation and service.
- E. Cleaning and sanitizing operations — the importance of adequately cleaning and sanitizing equipment, walls, floors, and the hands.
- F. The economics of sanitation — how correct sanitation procedures can liberate the deli employee for needless reworking and rewrapping of products. For the profit-minded manager, how sanitation can help to increase sales and profits as well as reduce costs.

And while we are on the subject of economics I would like to just mention as a sidelight something about organizations like the National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) who are helping retail food companies achieve a brighter economic picture. Through scientific research and testing, NSF is finding ways to make food preparation and display equipment easier to clean and sanitize thus helping to insure a higher level of public health as well as cost savings.

The National Sanitation Foundation is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to scientific investigations concerning problems of the environment.

Voluntary standards for the sanitary design and construction of food equipment, as well as other environment areas, are drafted and agreed upon by a committee made up of industry, regulatory officials, and the ultimate user. NSF supplies the research and testing necessary for the committee to reach decisions in the development of standards and evaluation of equipment based on the accepted standards.

But back to education.

As I mentioned before, delicatessen employees cannot be expected to practice correct food protection practices if they don't know what it is all about. We talked about the knowledge needed to do the job as well as the attitudes pertaining to working conditions. What skills must be learned by the deli worker towards achieving good food protection practices?

The kind of skills needed in this case are not necessarily physical but rather observational. Observational skills are necessary in recognizing the problem. Day after day we pass the same work areas without being aware of what is going on around us. This is just a case of teaching an employee to spot incorrect sanitation conditions based on prior education. But it should be emphasized that the problems cannot be corrected until they are recognized.

What I am proposing is that delicatessens practice self-inspection on a regular basis rather than wait for a health official to catch the problems in an annual or semi-annual visit. Of the some 100 plus check points on a health official's inspection sheet, there are only about 10 that again and again are noted. By concentrating on these top ten problem areas, we can solve most of our food protection problems and along with it increase profits through lower costs.

It is easy to accomplish if the employee is educated.

I've said a lot about the area of education, but I don't want to leave it without mentioning the necessity of educating the consumer. Yes, I said the consumer. They are responsible for many of the problems associated with food protection and don't know it. Take, for example, the housewife that does her food shopping first, and leaves perishable products in a warm car for several hours while she does other shopping. Or the homemaker that lets products thaw at room temperature for 8-12 hours. Or the one that unknowingly uses the same cutting surface for preparing both raw and ready-to-eat products.

In some cases, it's like playing with dynamite, in others the retailer might have

to give a refund on the product even though the customer caused the spoilage to occur. If the products on display in the retail outlet are already on their way "over the hill", the chances are greater for a customer return. This is why products must be fresh as possible and the customer must be educated in food protection measures. Who should do the educating? A lot of people. The retailer has an excellent chance to protect his investment by supplying the customer with information in pamphlets, advertisements, via TV and other media.

Fortunately, the United States Department of Agriculture has already published an excellent pamphlet called "Keeping Food Safe To Eat", specifically pointed at the consumer. It costs only one thin dime - ten cents - and gives the homemaker excellent food protection information. If I was a retailer, I would see to it that each of my customers received a copy of this publication. It would be excellent public relations, helpful in promoting public health, and possibly cheap insurance.

There is no doubt about it, the consumer plays an important part in the success of such a program.

There are many sanitation education programs available today through various food associations, wholesalers, chemical companies, equipment manufacturers and independent training companies, but most do not include provisions for help in. . . .

## 7. Evaluation and Feedback

Starting a food protection program is one thing, accomplishing stated goals and objectives is another. There are some immediate steps necessary in helping to determine whether the program is moving along in the right direction. It's simply making an evaluation of where we were when we started, where we are now, and what do we have left to do in reaching the desired goals. If the evaluation and feedback show that up to a point certain areas were missed, retracing of some steps may be required. Evaluation and feedback are indispensable in keeping the program moving systematically towards its goals. It goes hand in hand with the self inspection mentioned previously, and the last point which is . . . .

## 8. Follow Up and Control

Not enough can be said about this point. Without follow up and control, the program will fail. It again points to periodic self inspection by all levels of management, as well as built in control factors to insure the success of the program. Cleaning and sanitizing must be planned into the work schedule the same as food production otherwise it will be a hit and miss approach. All duties must be detailed and check lists used as a control factor.

I've seen many programs get off to a good start in the past two and a half years. Many have fallen by the wayside in six months or so because the follow up and control factor was not built into the system.

Areas such as sanitation (food protection), security and safety are considered by many retailers as intangibles, that is those areas where clear cut results cannot readily be determined as in the sale of products. Until attitudes change, the costs of doing business will remain high, profits low, and the protection of the customer in doubt.

The steps I've detailed will insure the safe handling of delicatessen foods. If retailers do not voluntarily incorporate such programs, it may be eventually forced on them by regulatory agencies in the interest of public health. The voluntary route would be the least expensive in the long run.

It's worth thinking about!

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