



# ENSURING FOOD QUALITY AND SAFETY IN YOUR CONTRACTED FOODSERVICE OPERATION

## Avoid The Blind Spot

Contract foodservice companies play a major role in ensuring the safety and quality of the food they prepare and serve. They follow food safety and quality measures, including employee training, to minimize hazards. Yet, food safety issues (such as foodborne illness outbreaks at conferences, on cruise ships and at corporate cafeterias) can happen to anyone. So what can you do to help ensure your in-house cafeteria is providing safe food in line with customer expectations?

This white paper details important points to consider when hiring and working with a foodservice contractor to strengthen your relationship and improve and maintain food safety.

### MAKING FOOD SAFETY A PRIORITY: AVOID YOUR BLIND SPOT

Poor safety and quality of food served in your organization has the potential of negatively impacting your operations in many ways. Yet many companies in the industrial, commercial and institutional sector view food safety and quality as the responsibility of the contracted dining service and do not actively participate or partner in the process. This makes sense as most organizations that hire an in-house foodservice contractor or a caterer for special events are not in the business of food safety, and their main focus is on their organization's products, services and bottom line.



This necessary focus on day-to-day operations of your core business, however, can also lead to an organizational blind spot. The reality is, food safety is everyone's business—the foodservice contractor's, of course, but also that of your company. The more you understand about the operation, the better you can engage and partner with the foodservice contractor to provide better quality and safety for the people who eat in the in-house dining facility—whether employees, students, patients or customers. And that also helps improve your bottom line.

Anyone serving food is at risk of a food safety scare, minor or major. The foodborne illnesses that receive the most mainstream media coverage are usually larger outbreaks that cross state lines, but many more smaller outbreaks occur <sup>1</sup> and can affect your business. For example, a foodborne illness resulting from the fare served in your organization could make dozens of employees sick. This results in reduced productivity and time off work. And for hospitals and long-term care facilities with more vulnerable patients, even minor issues can cause more harmful health effects.

Foodborne illness incidents could also negatively impact the long-term reputation of your company and brand, even if unreported by traditional media outlets. People are increasingly using social media to share photos and stories of unclean facilities or badly prepared or unappetizing meals, and to make negative food comments in online reviews.

Beyond food safety, food quality impacts how many people use your in-house dining services. Poor food quality can turn people off from eating on-site, which can reduce employee productivity: Eating off-site adds an average of 26 minutes <sup>2</sup> to the traditional lunch hour.

Finally, in an increasingly competitive work environment, good in-house dining options help organizations recruit and retain top talent, especially Millennials who value work/life integration and healthy food options.<sup>3</sup> In addition, increased cafeteria usage by employees can result in improved productivity due to fewer employees leaving the building, not only for full meals but also for snacks, and can increase overall employee satisfaction, engagement and a feeling of connection to colleagues.<sup>4</sup>



Taking preventative steps to ensure that your contracted food service company is proactively managing safety and quality will reduce the risk of a negative event occurring and will also improve the diner and employee experience.

## TOP 5 ELEMENTS OF A GOOD FOODSERVICE CONTRACT

If you are in the position of hiring a foodservice contractor, it's important to establish appropriate food safety and quality elements in the contract. In general, the more detailed the contract, the better – the more specific measures the contractor provides, the more likely it is to have an adequate process in place to minimize risk. If the prospective foodservice provider doesn't offer a contract in its presentation, ask for a copy of the contract as part of the interview process so you can better understand the level of procedures in place and negotiate any needed additions or modifications.

If you already have a foodservice contractor in place, review the signed contract for the information below. This is especially important if you are new to your company or role, or weren't involved in the foodservice contractor selection process.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2015/01/after-last-years-outbreak-food-safety-summit-steps-up-precautions-to-avoid-repeat>

<sup>2</sup> <http://cdn.ifma.org/sfcdn/membership-documents/value-of-onsite-foodservice.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.chargespot.com/workspaces/millennialsgenzworkspace/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/what-can-lunch-tell-us-about-job-satisfaction/>



The following contract clauses are a sign of a good foodservice contractor.

### **Regulatory Compliance**

This may seem basic, but the foodservice provider contract should state that it operates the premises in full compliance with all appropriate regulations and follows health and food safety regulations appropriate for the location. Awareness of regulations tends to go hand in hand with following good food safety practices, which helps decrease or eliminate non-compliances and subsequent enforcement consequences from public health inspections.

In addition, it's important to have a stated contractual requirement for your operator to communicate all public health inspection findings to you immediately. Otherwise, you run the risk of being ignorant of potentially dangerous issues. The contract should also require the development of a rigorous (and verified) corrective action plan, so the same infractions are not likely to recur.

### **Willingness to Be Audited**

While being in regulatory compliance is critical, government/health department inspections do not alone control food safety risk. It is therefore important that the contract specifies that the foodservice provider is willing to be audited by a third-party organization at least once a year.

An independent, third-party audit can look at food safety in a more detailed and systems-based approach than a regulatory inspection. For example, a public health inspection may check that the hand sink is clean and in operating order, with functioning hot and cold water, and that paper towels are within reach. An independent food safety audit also looks at the underlying systems and processes in place to ensure everyday execution of food safety performance. For example, systems that support the critical behavior of handwashing include employee training, preoperational checks that the sink is fully stocked and working, preventative maintenance, inventory control and internal inspections.

An independent audit can also look at health and safety issues (for example, whether the contract foodservice

provider requires employees to use a cut resistant glove) and help establish food quality standards. For example, a brand standards audit goes beyond food safety to look at the customer experience. Top organizations take pride in being the best and want the audit to include employee engagement, service times, friendliness, customer satisfaction, cleanliness and food portions.

The contract should also state that the foodservice provider is bearing the cost of the third-party audit (and any re-audits), and that the foodservice client determines which third-party auditor to use. Audit results should be sent to both the contracted foodservice provider and the client. Some large foodservice companies may already have an auditor. In that case, the client should have the right to view all audit reports and decide whether to keep the provider or require the contractor to be audited by a company of its own choice.

### **Communications Process**

The contract should specify the communications mechanism for tracking and investigating customer complaints and tracking audit results. Ideally, the foodservice provider will notify you right away any time there's a complaint, regulatory inspection or incident, and supply you with any audit or inspection results by email within 24 hours (or with an immediate phone call if there are any critical audit findings).

As with corrective actions in public health inspection findings, the contract needs to require a thorough and verified corrective action process for the issues that led to complaints as well. Unfortunately, the default corrective action often seen is retraining, when in fact lack of training had nothing to do with the root cause. Root causes tend to be linked to system factors such as lack of process, employees rushing, errors due to repetitive tasks that should be automated, lack of leadership commitment and lack of supervisory follow-up or reinforcement.

### **Supplier Assurance**

The contract needs to contain a provision indicating that the foodservice provider has a supplier quality assurance program (a system of supplier control for approving and vetting its food, packaging and service suppliers). Holding suppliers to detailed product specifications as



well as the same food safety practices and procedures as the provider itself helps assure the quality and safety of food and ingredients used in your in-house cafeteria.

### **Indemnification**

The contract should have an indemnification clause, meaning that in the event of a foodborne illness outbreak, the contractor has full responsibility and insurance to cover any costs that your company may incur based on financial loss as a result of employees missing work or other reasons. This should also include a survivor clause, where the contractor is responsible for any outbreaks with longer incubation periods that may occur after the contract has ended and a new service provider is in place. For example, let's say Company A's contract is up on the fifth of the month, but its food handling practices on the first of the month end up leading to a Hepatitis A outbreak, but this isn't discovered until the 15th of the month when people start getting sick. At this point, even though Company B is now in place, Company A still carries the responsibility even though its contract has expired.

## **TOP 4 THINGS TO LOOK FOR WHEN SELECTING A FOODSERVICE CONTRACTOR**

While looking at the contract is key to the hiring process, so is knowing what to do during the selection process. These four steps will help prepare you for meeting with potential foodservice providers.

### **Know Your Needs**

First and foremost, you need to decide what you want and need from a foodservice provider. It's important to take a step back and analyze your company's needs so that you can establish the criteria for the selection and approval of a contracted foodservice provider based on your specific food safety and quality requirements.

Review things that are most important to your company, by asking yourself questions such as: Does the foodservice contractor or caterer have written procedures and recipes with food safety elements in place? A formal allergen management program? A HACCP or HACCP-based program in place? Does the organization use recipes to ensure consistency?

### **Do Your Research**

Also look at the company's history. Does it maintain a record of complaints and quality findings, and is it willing to share them? The company should also track and maintain metrics of food safety and quality and share the results with you. The foodservice company should also have a risk program and share its foodservice checklist with you in advance of signing the contract.



Inquire whether a third-party audit has been conducted and ask to see the audit report. Also search your local health department audit reports. Most have health inspection reports that are available online and go back five to six years. A double-check to consider is asking the foodservice company to provide you with two or three public health inspection records from current sites that you specify. Compare these with ones you can access online. If any are missing, follow up by asking why these reports were not disclosed.

Also be sure to ask the potential contractors for client references and follow up with them.

### **Employ a Team Approach**

Once the interviewing process starts, participate in the selection, assessment and review of potential foodservices providers. Interview more than one candidate and don't go at it alone. Make sure a wide variety of stakeholder from your organization are involved including those with technical expertise. If your company lacks this role, hiring a consultant can help you evaluate companies, compare metrics and head off possible future problems.

### **Sample the Products**

Finally, be sure to sample the prospective foodservice provider's products. Ask them to present you with several different items from their menu, and make sure one of the products includes meat.

## **TOP 5 WAYS TO WORK WITH YOUR CONTRACTOR**

Whether you just hired a foodservice contractor or one has been in place in your organization for many years, there are some steps you can take to help ensure the highest food safety and quality.

### **Follow the Paper Trail**

Firstly, review the signed contract for all the elements discussed under Top 5 Elements of a Good Foodservice Contract, and discuss any missing or incomplete items with the foodservice provider.

Next, ask your in-place foodservice provider for pest control reports. (If there is no record of visits, the facility needs to be inspected right away.) Review the report for anything that jumps out. There should be no live insects on the site. The report should contain a written action plan for any site findings, and the report from the next pest control inspection should record these issues as having been solved. If you find recurring issues, you'll need to work with the foodservice provider to find the problem. The issues could be with the building itself which is a matter for your company to resolve.

Look at public health inspection reports going back a few years. Health inspectors will typically find something, but if they are finding the same thing over and over again, that is an indication that the foodservice provider is not taking appropriate measures.

Also look at chemical company visit reports for cleaning, dish machine chemicals, etc. These could uncover a problem such as an issue with faulty detergent dispensers.

If the foodservice contractor is responsible for preventive maintenance, it needs to have a schedule of maintenance dates, based on manufacturer recommendations. Making sure equipment is functioning correctly is critical to avoid risks such as incorrectly calibrated heating and cooling temperatures (which could lead to thrown out or unsafe food, or wear and tear on gaskets) and metals falling into the food.

All employees should have their safety training documented. Training requirements for certified food handlers vary by region, but at the very least, during all hours of operation, a minimum of one person must have management certification training and one other person needs to be a certified food handler. In addition, all management needs to have received manager-level (or advanced) certified food safety training (this should also be part of the foodservice contract).



### Experience Your Restaurant as a Diner

The best way to understand the dining experience is to try it for yourself. Go down and eat in your in-house cafeteria every day for a week. You will taste the food and observe delivery times first hand. Make a point of walking around and checking out the experience of other diners.

### Gather Feedback About Your Cafeteria

While it's good to have first-hand experiences in your own dining area, it's also useful to get formal feedback from your employees or the users of the system. To do so, you can generate a survey of what percent of people eat there and how many times a week, as well as their dining preferences and opinions on the current menu selections. Are your guests satisfied with the quality of the products and the overall experience offered by the on-site foodservice operations? This could include cleanliness of the facilities and food quality and nutritional value.

It's also good practice to provide a locked suggestion box in the cafeteria or electronic means to allow for immediate feedback. Track the comments and work with the foodservice provider to implement changes to common requests. Also compare the comments over time, either year by year or by the same months in previous years.

### Experience Your Restaurant as Foodservice Staff

Even though your main role is not food safety, get permission to walk through the kitchen (being sure to observe food safety practices like washing your hands and wearing a hair net) to observe the flow and to note whether anything stands out. Get to know the operation and the people. The foodservice staff will know that you care and are taking an interest (and that you may show up at any time), and you will build your food safety knowledge.

Ask employees what they do to make the food safe and whether they're experiencing challenges in food safety. More than likely, they are working in a kitchen your company designed and the design or flow may not be optimal or maybe the equipment could be updated. Part of not taking a foodservice provider for granted is also to ask what you as the client are doing to contribute to food safety and where you could be doing more.

It's also important to be aware of food produced outside your facility. For example, it's often the production and service of food at special events (like the office holiday party) where problems occur. This is due to larger than normal volumes and sometimes preparing different foods with unique processes. Sometimes the prep happens days in advance. The service may also be outside the dining area so that temperature control and hygiene become a challenge. To manage this, the caterer needs to develop a specific plan and menu in advance and to understand all risks associated with the menu items and service environment. Ask the caterer to explain the unique risks with the special event and what additional controls are being put in place for temperature control, product protection and personal hygiene.



## Continuous Improvement

In addition to everything discussed thus far, there are a few other ways to maintain a cycle of continuous improvement and support a strong food safety and quality culture.

View audits as learning and management tools. Use your audit reports to measure and report on performance improvement over time. Analyze data to provide recommendations for improvement. Make sure any written corrective actions in previous audit reports are resolved. Look for a root cause to ensure problems don't reoccur and identify, communicate, implement and monitor practical actions. Conduct immediate follow-up activities on any issues that arise (complaints, illness, inspection reports, etc.) to assess the foodservice provider's planned response and to verify completion of short-term and long-term corrective actions.

Educate yourself on food safety practices and partner with your foodservice provider. Larger companies may have a person or department knowledgeable in food safety practices that can assure the safety and efficiency of the contacted provider. If your company doesn't have this role, outsourcing the food safety function is an option that frees you to focus on your core role.

## SUMMARY

Working with and listening to your foodservice provider and recognizing you both have same goal helps ensure a well-run operation. Asking the tough questions makes a good contractor better and helps identify if there is not a good match. Taking responsibility for your organization allows you to be a smart food safety and quality partner with your contractor, while also staying focused on your company's bottom line.





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## About the Author

**Paul Medeiros | Managing Director of Consulting, Technical and Retail Audit Services | NSF International**

Paul Medeiros's team provides services to reduce risk and improve employee/diner safety and engagement at contracted foodservice operations by assessing operations, advising the caterer and providing routine reporting and analysis to the client. Contact him at [foodsafetysolutions@nsf.org](mailto:foodsafetysolutions@nsf.org)