CHARTING A SAFENESS COURSE FOR THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY

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Abstract

The practical application of sanitation and food protection principles by foodservice operators depends on their understanding of what is necessary for achieving adequate protection of their customers and how this protection can be accomplished. The operator and, in turn, his personnel must be motivated by knowing the basic "why" for each requirement by understanding the direct relationship of the unsatisfactory procedure or condition to the possibility or likelihood of its causing illness. The foodservice operator needs practical tangible aids to guide and assist him in training, supervising, and reminding his personnel and to facilitate his initiating and carrying on an effective self-evaluation of his operation's safety.

We have a mutual concern—that of protecting the dining public from those hazards which could result in customer illness. The restaurant owner and other food service operators have the moral obligation to serve safe and wholesome food in a clean establishment. Most operators are concerned also about the image which their operation creates in the mind-eye of the customer.

The Public Health Officer is responsible to the American Public—the citizens of his community—to protect them from any hazards to health. Thus, we have the common interest, though methods for achieving the end protection vary, and we certainly do not follow the same paths in motivating and guiding the actions that will result in the protection which the dining customer has the right to expect.

Much has been said and written about the responsibilities of both the foodservice operator and the public health official with regard to protecting the public. The pendulum has swung from the far left of the educational approach to achieving adequate food protection to the far right of severe enforcement actions including the publicizing of violators of sanitation regulations.

The National Restaurant Association (NRA) has never and will never condone, sanction, or protect unsanitary or unsafe foodservice operations. Our standards and efforts are dedicated to maintaining the highest degree of safe and sanitary food purchasing, receiving, storing, handling, production, and service. We constantly encourage foodservice operators to work cooperatively with regulatory agency officials and educational organizations concerned with the health and welfare of the citizens in order to make certain the efficient accomplishment of food protection programs.

Education and Motivation

Our mutual problem is, as we all know, finding the way to educate and motivate foodservice management and, in turn, foodservice employees toward utilizing the procedures and observing rules of safety that will bring about the continuing control, if not elimination, of all hazards to food safety. We know that our problem, in part, exists because we have not succeeded in getting the practical knowledge of what must be done to the owner, operator or manager, and to his employees. In some instances, the knowledge of what must be done is there, but the management concern for its importance is lacking. If the boss does not insist on sanitation and safe food handling practices, food protection will be lax, or non-existent, and employees either will not know what they should do to protect the food from contamination and danger, or will not care.

Most of you are familiar with the recommendations which resulted from the 1971 Food Protection Conference at Denver—particularly those which had to do with safe food handling in foodservice establishments. Three foodservice operator-directors of the National Restaurant Association and I participated as members of that particular panel. The Public Health and Safety Committee and the Board of Directors of the NRA reviewed the short and long range recommendations which were made, concurring on all of those which directly pertain to food protection in foodservice operations.

We had gone on record, even before this conference, as supporting the desirability of uniform sanitation regulations, and their uniform interpretation. We co-sponsored the recommendation that each foodservice operator be furnished with a copy of the sanitation regulations applying to his community, together with a layman's language explanation of how the requirements relate to the prevention of customer illness, why they are necessary, and how the compliance can be accomplished.

We proposed the recommendation that enforcement agencies identify critical operational food protection deficiencies, especially those causing most foodborne illness outbreaks in foodservice establishments. Inspections must emphasize those operational deficiencies and the elimination of the hazards involved.

Some of the actions recommended were of such a nature that they could not be quickly implemented. I refer, for example, to the proposal that a foodservice operator or operating manager demonstrate that he possesses the minimum essential knowledge of safe food handling and food protection practices. I think we are all involved in the implementation of this one—through development of training courses and programs which will form the basis for certification of foodservice operators.

Our greatest concern, however, was, and is, with the immediate situation. The customer must be protected now, not later, and must receive this protection every time he or she enters a foodservice establishment. Since the foodservice operator faces his customers daily, it is incumbent upon him that he know just how safe his foodservice is and to what extent his employees are failing to observe the rules of sanitation. Hence, we advocated a recommendation that every operator capable of carrying on a self-inspection program be encouraged to do so, and that a model be developed to provide him with the assistance and guidance he would need to initiate and carry on such a program. Many readers have seen the new NRA publication, A Self-Inspection Program for the Food Service Operators on Sanitation and Safe Food Handling. It includes guidelines on initiating a management inspection and self-evaluation program, and includes 23 inspection checksheets covering both practices and functional areas of an operation. It even includes special coverage on the subject of customer concern.

**Self-Inspection**

This publication has been made available for use by a foodservice operator as a practical management tool to provide him with the information that he needs concerning food protection and sanitation deficiencies and hazards which need correction or elimination. The system is, of course, recommended to the operator on the basis that his responsibility to protect his customers applies every hour his establishment is open for business. The guidelines insure coverage of his operation by all categories of management personnel including his night managers and managers of satellite operations, and include coverage of personal safety of food handlers, food handling practices, 16 functional areas of an operation and five general areas of customer concern. The latter are included because, though customer complaints and customer reactions do not always relate directly to food protection, they do reflect customer dissatisfaction with an operation. In many instances, the unsatisfactory conditions or practices observed are, in the customer's mind, indices which lead to the conclusion that the entire operation may be unclean and suffering from bad management.

The 23 separate inspection checksheets provide flexibility of benefit to a foodservice operator by, first, permitting use of those which specifically apply to the type of foodservice operation involved and, secondly, permitting the scheduling of the inspection of various practices or functional areas at a frequency appropriate to the relative extent of hazard.

**No Single Method**

There is no single way of achieving complete protection of the dining public—no miracle method of assuring the actions which will guarantee food safety day in and day out. Adequate regulations conscientiously enforced won't do it. Education and certification of foodservice operators won't do it. Indoctrination, training, and supervision of personnel won't do it. Yet all of these are extremely important, because a lack or deficiency of any of these will weaken the combination of actions which must exist if the public is to receive the protection it expects and has the right to expect.

I repeat what I have said many times before—the foodservice operator must understand the great importance of sanitation and food protection to safeguard both the health and welfare of his customers and the success of his business. If he does not, and does not understand what must be done and why—enforcement efforts become frustrating and his operation is doomed to mediocrity, if not failure. Management must want and insist on a pattern of safety which will assure diners of safe food, served in a clean establishment every single hour that that establishment is in operation.