

1001 Food Safety

Learn why food safety should be top of mind for any convenience store.

By Sarah Hamaker

A convenience store operator should attend a food safety class if he sells:

- a: Hot dogs.
- b: Pre-packaged food.
- c: Sandwiches, pizza and salads.
- d: All of the above.

Many convenience store operators probably would say “c” when in reality, “d” is the correct answer, says Tara Paster, president of Paster Training Inc. in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Paster has been teaching food safety since 1988 and founded Paster Training five years ago. “I think the biggest misconception that convenience store operators have is not understanding that they are foodservice operators — convenience stores are now selling outstanding food products quickly delivered to the consumer, and health regulators are noticing,” she says.

“Even if you have a microwave, you’re still cooking and preparing food.”

Putting Food Safety on the Menu

Paster says all convenience stores should be concerned about food safety. “The cleanliness of the store from a food safety standpoint is going to influence whether a customer buys even a bag of chips,” she says.

With the Internet, television, radio and newspapers reporting even minor health code violations and foodborne-illness outbreaks, consumers are more educated than ever about food safety issues. “No convenience store wants to have bad public relations because of a food safety issue,” says Paster. “When

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a consumer comes into a convenience store, you need to fulfill his expectations for wholesome and safe food.”

“Convenience stores — or any business that sells food — can’t afford not to be concerned with food safety,” says Cheryl Gray, learning department delivery and evaluation coordinator for NACS member Sheetz Inc. in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Sheetz has more than 325 stores in Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia. “Sheetz takes food safety very seriously because, as a food retailer, it’s

essential. We sell quite a large selection of food products. It’s a major part of our business and becomes even more so as we expand our food offering.”

“Because we want the customer to look at us as more than a convenience store, we have to do the basics right,” says Mark Wolbert, senior director of convenience stores for NACS member Delta Sonic Car Wash Inc. in Buffalo, New York. Delta Sonic Car Wash operates 28 car washes throughout Illinois, New York and Pennsylvania, 27 of which have convenience stores. Of those 27 stores, 10 locations offer full-service foodservice, and two locations have restaurant-quality menus. “We have to understand and know everything there is to know about handling, serving and preparing food to ensure it’s healthy and wholesome for the customer.”

Food Safety Basics

With the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reporting that 76 million Americans will get sick this year by eating food — and of those, 325,000 will be hospitalized and 5,000 will die from consuming contaminated food — paying attention to food safety is not only smart from a public relations standpoint but also in the interest of saving lives.

The CDC has identified the top five reasons why people get sick from eating food. “If convenience store operators can manage these five reasons, they will definitely move their operations ahead of the pack,” says Paster. To avoid those pitfalls, convenience store operators should:

1 Purchase food from safe suppliers.

“You need to know where your food is coming from and you need to get that food supplier to provide a letter of guarantee that their food is

safe,” says Paster. Also check to make sure that the supplier has a HACCP plan in place to ensure that the food is safe.

2 Manage the personal hygiene of your team members. “Wash your hands, wash your hands, wash your hands — it cannot be said enough,” says Paster. Remember to change your gloves along with washing your hands and to send sick workers home.

3 Hold food at the correct temperature. “Hold cold food cold and hot food hot,” says Paster. Check with your local health department for the exact temperature, but a good rule of thumb is to keep cold foods at 41 degrees Fahrenheit and hot foods at 135 degrees Fahrenheit or above.

4 Cook foods to the right temperature. “Make sure you cook all foods, even pre-cooked foods that are reheated, to the minimum cooking temperatures,” says Paster. For example, according to the 2005

Food and Drug Administration Food Code, commercially processed cooked foods, such as pre-cooked chicken wings, need to reach an internal temperature of 135 degrees Fahrenheit; fish, 145 degrees Fahrenheit for 15 seconds; hamburgers and ground beef, 155 degrees Fahrenheit for 15 seconds; and poultry, 165 degrees Fahrenheit for 15 seconds. Also keep in mind that you need to reheat already cooked food to an internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit for 15 seconds within two hours of taking the food out of the freezer or refrigerator.

5 Clean equipment properly. “People are not properly cleaning and sanitizing their equipment,” says Paster. Proper cleaning means removing visible dirt, while sanitizing is reducing the level of micro-organisms on the surface to a safe level. “It’s a two-step process, and you can’t skip a step,” she says.

Inspection Time

Health inspections can create anxiety, even for seasoned convenience store operators, but one of the best ways to prepare for an inspection is to do your own first. “I recommend being more proactive about health inspections,” says Tara Paster, president of Paster Training Inc. in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. “We offer convenience store inspections before the health inspector comes so that we can fix things beforehand.”

Paster Training’s inspection covers all the bases that the local health inspector will look at and provides feedback to the operator on areas to improve or fix. “We give recommendations and solutions to problems, as well, so that the convenience store operator can be proactive rather than reactive,” says Paster.

NACS member Delta Sonic Car Wash Inc. in Buffalo, New York, used Paster Training to conduct an inspection of its 27 locations that offer foodservice. “It was like turning on a light,” says Mark Wolbert, senior director of convenience stores. “We asked Tara to critique us from A to Z to tell us what’s good, bad and ugly.”

The inspection gave Wolbert a starting point and provided helpful feedback on areas in need of improvement. “We’re primarily a car wash, so food safety isn’t our area of expertise,” he says. “It was good to bring somebody in to look under every crack and crevice for any potential opportunity for there to be an issue.” Wolbert plans to continue having sporadic self-inspections to keep Delta Sonic Car Wash’s food safety on track.

Learning About Food Safety

One of the best ways to avoid food safety mistakes is to get food safety certified. NACS Food Safety Training courses by Paster Training teach the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation's ServSafe food safety training curriculum. Convenience store operators and foodservice workers can take a two-day, 16-hour course or a one-day, eight-hour course, depending on state requirements. At the end of either class, participants take a nationally recognized test; to receive a ServSafe certificate, students must score 75 percent or higher.

"We follow the ServSafe program but add our own spin to it," says Paster. "We

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try to stimulate the students by making the ServSafe program as fun as possible." For example, students are entertained with songs such as "You're going to have a stomachache tonight" and "Don't get sticky with it," and participate in the white powder, thermometer calibration and hand-washing exercises.

"We pride ourselves on the entertainment part," says Paster. "We're very serious about food safety and very serious about education but don't want to torture operators with a boring class," says Paster.

Sheetz has been using Paster Training for nearly five years. "From the administrative side, Paster Training is superb," says Gray. "They always provide

excellent customer service and are very detailed and thorough with participant data and record keeping. Paster Training ensures that the information is accurate, concise and is delivered in a learning environment that is fun and keeps the learner's attention. Thus, the information provided is readily applied in handling food safely in our stores, and also has impacted how employees apply food safety techniques in their own homes."

"Tara has taken the ServSafe curriculum and presented it in a way that keeps it fresh and fun for students going through these classes," says Wolbert. Delta Sonic Car Wash has used Paster Training since the spring. "She did a great job of holding our attention but also getting the points across and going through the curriculum."

"The only way I can describe Tara is that she is on a mission about food safety," says Gray. "She somehow makes food safety fun and people comprehend it."

Driving Home the Importance of Food Safety

After attending a food safety class taught by Paster, Wolbert was amazed by how much he didn't know going into the class. "I've been in the food business for 25 years, from grocery to convenience stores, and I was surprised by how ignorant I was about food safety," he says.

Gray adds that for Sheetz, food safety has top priority and food safety training helps keep that top of mind. "A food retailer's reputation is only as good as the products it sells," she says. "We want to be known in the industry as well as in the consumer's mind as a place to go for fresh, high-quality food that is good and safe." ○

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