

Sickening staples: Peanut butter recall highlights our need for a culture of responsibility

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Nine suspected deaths, 600 people sickened, and the possibility of 2,000 contaminated consumer products now hang in the balance following the most recent rash of food-borne illness in the United States. What's more, a criminal investigation is ongoing as a black cloud hangs over peanut butter, a huge staple of the American diet.

The story behind salmonella-tainted peanut products from **Peanut Corp. of America**, which has now filed bankruptcy, sadly grew longer and longer as a sister plant in Texas was added to the investigation initially sparked by poor management at the company's Georgia-based plant.

Today the result is consumer wariness for all peanut-based products.

Could some of these losses have been prevented via enhanced traceability and investigation on the CDC and FDA's part? The answer is a resounding "yes," as the retail industry has developed a set of standards for the traceability of various food products that rely upon a few key e-commerce technologies such as EDI, data synchronization, bar-code labels, and RFID.

But the problem is many of these technologies have yet to be adopted by major retailers and agricultural product manufacturers, rendering traceability models useless in their efforts to accelerate the recall of unsafe food products from the supply chain.

Rear-view reactions

Considering the money—and lives—lost due to the salmonella crisis, companies should begin investing in these e-commerce technologies now, before the next outbreak occurs.

Regarding the operations of Peanut Corp. of America, says Steve Wilson, a U.S. government food inspector and member of the board of the **American Society for Quality (ASQ)**, "There's a limited amount of information available because there's an ongoing criminal investigation. But it appears that the quality system designed for [Peanut Corp. of America] wasn't followed for reasons that haven't come out yet. The problem with any quality management system is it has to be agreed upon and followed. This is a management responsibility issue."

Among the well-established best practices for preserving the security of food quality in the supply chain, Wilson adds, is the rigorous **Hazardous Analytical Critical Control Point (HACCP)**, a protocol developed by the Navy more than 30 years ago to ensure against contamination of food for astronauts in space.

“It’s a mechanism for identifying hazards and where they would be introduced in the supply chain. [It’s about] controlling them at that point through documentation and extreme process control,” says Wilson. “If the limit is exceeded, you immediately bring it back into control.”

It’s all about prevention, Wilson continues. “It’s near impossible to test defects out of a product,” he says. “You can’t rework it to make it acceptable.”

But readily available e-commerce technology can serve to better contain a potential health risk should contaminated product enter the supply chain.

“The technology is available, but not fully leveraged to identify the source and react faster if there’s a problem,” says Steve Keifer, VP of industry for B2B e-commerce specialist **GXS**. Data synchronization is essential for this, he says.



According to Steve Keifer, VP of industry for B2B e-commerce specialist GXS, data synchronization taps auto-ID technology such as bar codes or RFID to track shipments and view information about ingredients, processing locations and dates, and other critical supply chain data.

“Data synchronization allows manufacturers to share product catalogues with customers, distributors, and retailers of their products,” he explains. “Using XML, you can electronically send all relevant data associated with each individual SKU. If everyone had synchronized product data, it would be a simple exercise to go into the database and pull up all products to determine the universe of impacted SKUs.”

Data synchronization uses auto-ID technology such as bar codes or RFID to track shipments and view information about ingredients, processing locations and dates, and other critical supply chain data. The Global Commerce Initiative, a growing consortium of global manufacturers and retailers worldwide, is a leading proponent of its use—citing its **Global Upstream Supplier Initiative (GUSI)**.

The central product of GUSI is its process model, known as the **Upstream Integration Model (UIM 2.2)**, which defines a range of common business processes and supporting technical standards and information flows for various scenarios. The model, built in a modular way, offers a collaborative approach to both supplier- and manufacturer-initiated ordering processes and addresses the most common variants

Event-management extra

Automated notification technology further capitalizes on the use of data synchronization, GUSI, and other best practices that span the affected supply chain from point of origin to end consumer with pinpoint accuracy—but in a matter hours rather than weeks.



Ken Dixon, executive VP of MIR3, a supplier of automated notification technology, says a growing number of retailers now have customer loyalty programs that record each item purchased by individual consumers—a step that facilitates safety notifications should tainted products or ingredients be discovered.

Dixon.

“With the push of one button, calls can be made to recall products from an OEM based on bar-code information, thereby pushing notification downstream all the way to the end customer,” says Ken Dixon, executive VP of MIR3, a supplier of automated mass-notification technology.

Dixon says a growing number of retailers now have customer loyalty programs that record each item purchased by individual consumers, such that when coupled with a particular customer’s phone number, a call can be placed directly to them, notifying them whether a certain product sitting in their pantry is affected and should be returned—or is safe to eat.

“As the gatekeeper of that information, a local retailer can provide deliver a sense security to its customers, and convey the message that they care about them,” says

MIR3 is serving more than 5 000 customers from six data centers. “It makes it possible to send out thousands of messages in a second, or make millions of phone calls in hours, explains Dixon. ‘The customer gets the option of “pressing 1” to acknowledge they received the message, thereby mitigating any potential future liabilities.’”