



Flourish in a new tomorrow

Dr Jennifer van de Ligt discusses the changing face of the food sector and what businesses can do to ensure they prosper during and after the pandemic.

AS THE COVID-19 pandemic continues, the ways in which we approach food safety, defence, security and fraud continues to evolve. In the face of uncertainty, food processors and manufacturers must adapt.

Dr Jennifer van de Ligt, Director of the Food Protection and Defense Institute at the University of Minnesota, lends her expertise to the topic and discusses what has changed, what's on the horizon, and what businesses can do today to thrive tomorrow.

What do you feel is the biggest challenge facing food businesses today?

With increasing rates of community transmission and new variants of Covid being detected, one of the biggest challenges for the food industry – whether that be the manufacturer, distributor or consumer-facing side – is worker health. As such, we must ask ourselves ‘how do we keep our employees safe

and assure business continuity in the face of an escalating medical crisis?’

In addition to worker safety, the evolving environment in how food reaches the consumer has placed enormous pressure on the food system and required extraordinary agility and adaptability. For example, prior to the pandemic about half of food in the US was consumed away from home. With the move to remote work coupled with restrictions on restaurant dining, families are consuming much more food in the home. The continued volatility in the distributions between eat-away-from-home and eat-at-home due to pandemic response will continue to challenge the food system.

How has this challenge evolved?

At the very beginning of the pandemic, consumers reacted to lockdowns and restrictions the same way they would to a severe weather event. They visited the grocery store and bought everything they would need to tide

them over, believing that after several weeks normality would be resumed.

This sudden demand challenged the food industry. At the same time, restaurants and pubs closed. This meant that the amount of food people were once consuming in those venues had to be available for home preparation. This made it difficult to re-supply retail outlets with shelf staples at the rate they were being consumed. It wasn't a food shortage, but a food distribution disruption that placed a great deal of stress on supply chains, as we saw a shift from a split of food service and eat-at-home supply to an almost exclusive eat-at-home supply.

When you look at where the food industry is today in comparison, the ability to supply into the eat-at-home retail sector has improved. As restaurants have adapted to this new ‘take-away’ life, the hospitality sector has picked up. Overall, the food industry has done an amazing job. They have been incredibly resilient

in the face of the pandemic; learning and reworking existing models to manage ingredient shortages, distribution disruptions, and worker health and wellness.

We will continue to evolve, but I believe worker health will remain the most important focus for the sector. Food manufacturers and suppliers must consider agility and adaptability to provide more flexibility into both food service and eat-at-home retail channels. I also think, as much as the food industry is capable, the remote worker will have a higher footprint.

What can a company do now to prepare for food defence and food fraud audits that were delayed due to the pandemic?

Prepare now, not just for the in-person audit but for an audit of any kind. There may have been a lull as a result of the pandemic, but one should never forget preparation for audit or inspection. Now that companies have learned to operate within such circumstances, it is important to turn attention back to preparation, as they are likely to receive an audit in the near future.

Not only must businesses consider the organisations performing the audit and their ability to visit in person, they must also consider how the auditor or inspector can carry out their inspection should they show up at your facility. This is probably something you have never had to think about before; what will you do when the inspector shows up on your doorstep and you are currently not allowing any visitors into your facility from a pandemic preparedness perspective? When it comes to audits and inspections, understand how inspections are being conducted and how that might change the way you receive them.

Describe successful and unsuccessful strategies for operating in the ‘new normal’.

The companies I’ve seen that are most successful are those that are open and listen to new ideas. They actively incorporate the best science available to create ways to work within this new structure of the pandemic. They have also prioritised the health and engagement of their workforce and have good communication with employees, specifically sharing what they

are doing and how they are helping workers stay healthy.

Companies who believe they can hunker down and wait out the pandemic so they can return to the way it was are unlikely to meet with success. The way the food industry looks post-pandemic will not be the way it looked pre-COVID. There have been too many changes in the way we operate and communicate with both our workforce and our customers in all food sectors.



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What is food defence?

You may be familiar with food safety – the actions and activities related to reducing exposure of food to naturally occurring, unintentional hazards like foodborne pathogens. Food defence, on the other hand, protects the food supply from intentional adulteration.

Do I need food defence training?

In short, yes! Foreign manufacturers of food for sale in the US must comply with IA rule regulation in the same way as domestic entities.

