

Food scandals speak to trust more than science

By [Gareth Ackerman](#)

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It is not only small retailers and less-than-scrupulous manufacturers who have been hit by scandal, as the global flood of revelations about adulterated food has raised legitimate questions about food safety and the integrity of what we eat.



Some of the world's biggest and most reputable companies, such as Nestle, Tesco and Asda have experienced scares, despite the fact that they operate some of the world's most sophisticated testing and quality-control facilities.

In Europe, DNA from animals, such as horses or donkeys, has been identified in ostensibly beef products, highlighting once again the complexity of food chains, even in developed economies, the challenges involved in maintaining control over food production systems and consumer confidence in the labelling of food products.

As chair of the Consumer Goods Forum (CGF), an international association of retailers, manufacturers and service providers committed to a sustainable, safe and healthy consumer goods industry, I believe that the current issue is more about trust and good faith than it is about hygiene or the adulteration of product. Putting customers first is what builds trust, and high on the list of consumer rights is the right of access to comprehensive, visible, and reliable information about contents, ingredients and quantities, so that the customer may know what he or she is buying.

It is for that reason that responsible manufacturers and retailers insist on a transparent labelling policy that not only enables consumers to make responsible choices, but also promotes the principle that 'if it isn't on the label, it isn't in the product'. In South Africa, we have comprehensive legislation that now governs food labelling, and while not without challenges in some areas, I believe that responsible retailers are making every effort to work with government agencies to ensure that we get our labelling right.

Difficult to test everything

While any other major retailer can confidently offer a guarantee of its product's safety margins, it is manifestly impossible to test every item or product on every shelf in every store. Technology plays a vital role in complying with the highest possible standards for food safety and security.

In the group, for example, we employ an expert team of 42 full-time food technologists whose sole job is to ensure the quality and safety of food merchandise. Maintaining the integrity of the business includes conducting routine and unannounced visits to suppliers of branded products to ensure adherence to the group's hygiene and food safety standards and SANAS-accredited independent laboratory testing of products against detailed specifications.

In addition to this process of stringent checks and controls, the group makes every effort to give preference to local suppliers, in order for the technical team to monitor their food safety management system, which governs the methods of manufacture and traceability, so it knows exactly where the food is coming from. Through developing long-term relationships with such suppliers, it is able to monitor the entire supply chain, from farmer to supplier, delivering traceable, high-quality products that it is able to trust. Buying locally also substantially benefits food production in South Africa, as well as developing local communities, with 90% of the private label brands being sourced locally.

Enforcement needed

South Africa can boast world-class legislation designed to protect the consumer, but more needs to be done to add enforcement muscle to this regulatory regime. Last year, a Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries report found that since the privatisation of meat inspection in 1992, there has been a decline in the quality of this function, particularly in rural and small-scale abattoirs and there is a severe shortage of qualified personnel in state veterinary services, testing facilities and a well-resourced, independent abattoir inspectorate.

As the number of non-registered facilities rises - there are currently around 500 abattoirs in South Africa - there is a challenge for retailers to engage with state agencies to address issues of compliance and state-registration. The group's policy is to source meat from only state-supervised abattoirs. However it is incumbent on all responsible retailers to require that all abattoirs are carefully inspected, monitored, with trained staff to ensure full compliance with health, safety, and other relevant regulations. This is an area where all parties involved need to come together to find a way forward in improving the standard of food safety - which is a fundamental consumer right.

DNA testing complex, costly

Because the sheer complexity of the very long food supply chain means that the principle of traceability can only do so much for consumer reassurance, DNA testing has increasingly been held out as a possible solution to the growing problem of contaminated foodstuffs and the group makes significant use of DNA testing.

Indeed, in the wake of the horsemeat scandals in the UK, suppliers, processors and retailers have rushed to apologise to their customers and pledged to make greater use of DNA testing on their products.

However, this is a very technical and specialised area, which needs to be approached with caution, because it is often neither practical nor cost-effective.

It is possible to draw a distinction between the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of DNA testing. Under a rigorous and necessarily sensitive DNA testing system, for example, a purely qualitative analysis of a beef sample may trigger alarm bells at the most insignificant and minute traces of other species content - this could be as low as 0.0000001%. Quantitative tests on the other hand, are more important, because they show if substitution has taken place.

Ultimately, what is needed in South Africa is an agreed set of protocols on what tests are the most useful in telling retailers what they need to know: that they can give the assurance to their customers that everything possible is being done to mitigate against adulteration of product.

All must promote food security

As chair of the CGF, I have committed the group to being a signatory to all the CGF protocols, such as the Global Food Safety Initiative.

However, this is an issue, which extends beyond the immediate interests of the group and touches on fundamental questions about South Africa's food security. It will never be easy to ensure absolute foodstuff integrity, but without the combined commitment of both government and the private sector, it will be well-nigh impossible.

Healthy competition between retailers pushes down prices, but for foodstuff integrity to reach its highest standard, retailers and suppliers need to find a way to put narrow sectarian interests aside where possible to join in the crusade to promote food security. It is in our commercial interests to respond to a growing consumer demand for packaging and labelling that is transparent, informative and ethical.

It is imperative that through an industry-wide effort, in partnership with state regulators, we reassure our buying public that our food meets or exceeds all statutory requirements, ensuring that all our products meet the high standards of quality and integrity that we specify and which our customers are entitled to expect.

I suspect that, ultimately, the lesson we draw from the food scares of recent months will tell us more about trust, ethical business conduct and consumer confidence than it will about science.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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