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Food Management

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When the Public Panics.

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Research a rumor before you react to it.

How many times has it happened in your operation? A national news report or local headline trumpets the possible harm or contamination of a specific product, the outcry is deafening, and you rush to pull it off your menus and serving lines. There was the alar scare, the controversy over aspartame, the news on peanut butter allergies...and the list goes on.

People who are experts in food management often are perceived as experts in nutrition, but their background might be in the culinary field or in hotel/restaurant administration. Rumors of unsafe or unhealthy products can throw their operations into turmoil and send them scurrying to rewrite menus or chase down ingredient listings.

When I am faced with a product scare, my first job is to identify the source of the allegations and assess their accuracy. Only after I've done that can I move to cushion the damage the rumors may cause to individual products and manufacturers.

Damage Control

Foodservice directors need to prepare themselves to confront food and ingredient rumors--and to react to them.

At the first sign of a widespread panic, you should focus on is: How valid is this information?

Especially with the internet, it's too easy for the public to access information without understanding the validity of that information. It's also tempting to make general conclusions from one limited study. And it is just as easy to spread false information as to communicate legitimate information.

A good example is the recent internet scare that linked aspartame, artificial sweetener, with a whole list of diseases, including multiple sclerosis and diabetes. In fact, there wasn't science behind it.

The biggest frustration is often to track down the original source of the

rumor, allegation or scare. The questions you should be asking are: Where did this information originate? Is the information peer-reviewed? What are the credentials of the author?

I recommend the following sequence in verifying information.

Start with reputable, national organizations such as the American Dietetic Association (ADA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the American Heart Association (AHA), the National Institute of Health (NIH). Most of these organizations have 800 contact numbers and routinely place information lines in service on specific issues as they arise.

Check out Internet web sites, but only those with legitimate scientific credentials, such as the Tufts University Nutrition Navigator Site (<http://navigator.tufts.edu>).

Turn to your bookshelf. This won't help much with the one-time scares, but it will help answer the questions on issues of recurring concern and general questions regarding nutrients, recommended dietary allowances, etc. Be sure to ask who has reviewed the book and what they have said about it.

Here are my recommendations for books that should be readily available to any FSD. The Health Professional's Guide to Popular Dietary Supplements; Food Folklore: Tales and Truths About What We Eat; Vitamins, Minerals & Dietary Supplements; is; Food Allergies; and Being Vegetarian. (Make sure that you have the most current versions of these books.)

Call your local hotel/restaurant, dietetic or nutrition education college or professor, community-based registered dietitians, public health officials. Get to know your local experts before an emergency develops and know how to reach them.

Touch base with your professional peers. Use your professional association to identify, locate and contact peers who may have expertise in the area or experience with a similar situation.

Keep a Clear Perspective

In handling the massive doses of nutrition information that flood the public, I have a few final pieces of advice.

First, keep in mind that some of the new research and information has contributed to the public health. We have seen concrete evidence in favor of emphasizing monounsaturated and unsaturated over saturated fats, doing more grilling than frying and using more herbs in place of butter and salt for seasoning.

Second, resist scaring customers. You've heard it before, but here it is again: no foods are bad foods and every food is acceptable in reasonable amounts. You shouldn't dismiss eggs from your diet because

Food Management:

eggs contain cholesterol. You shouldn't be eliminating ground beef products because people have gotten e-coli from it. You should not stop eating chicken because of the salmonella possibility.

Finally, don't go nuts over fat. Enjoy a variety of foods and accept the limitations of controlling fat and calories. You can't peel the fat off a french fry and you can't skin a chicken wing. Eat them and enjoy.

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