Food Quality Systems – A White Paper

Dr. Philip Ashurst, Food Industry Consultant

The growth of food quality systems

Quality systems have grown in significance in most industries over the last two decades and the food industry is no exception. Many food companies adopted the British Standard system (BS 5750) and this subsequently became known by its International Standard Organisation Classification (ISO 9000 and its derivatives).

The original quality standard was often summarised as "write down what you do and do what you write down". Critics of the standard highlighted the fact that it allowed almost any standard of end product, provided consistent 'quality' was maintained. In partial recognition of this, the ISO 9000 standard was replaced by ISO 9000:2000 which addressed the need for objective quality.

The introduction of the 1990 UK Food Safety Act sharpened the focus on quality within the food industry although it was immediately apparent that quality systems alone could not meet the full needs of the industry. Under the 1990 Act the whole supply chain, including retailers, were obliged to take "reasonable precautions" and "exercise all due diligence" in the development, manufacture, distribution, advertising and sale of food.

UK food retailers responded by either setting up their own teams of technologists to assess and verify all suppliers against their own internally developed standards, or to only use suppliers accredited by independent auditors against the national quality standards (BS 5750/ISO 9000:2002).

The BRC and its standards

In 1998, the British Retail Consortium (BRC) developed the BRC Technical Standard and Protocol for companies supplying Retailer Branded Food Products. The standard rapidly spread to other sectors of the food industry including food service and the manufacture of food ingredients. Use of the standard has since widened to users outside the UK, acting as a basis for many retailers to assess suppliers.

The BRC Technical Standard has been revised three times since its introduction in 1998. Issue 4, produced in January 2005, is known as 'The BRC Global Standard - Food.' This standard is reviewed regularly by the BRC membership and revised as necessary.

The standard now has three main requirements; the adoption and implementation of Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP), a documented and effective quality management system and the control of factory environment standards, products, processes and personnel.

The standard is set against the legislative requirements in the UK, which is one of the few countries to have a statutory 'due diligence' defence requirement. This effectively prevents retailers from accepting and relying on a 'warranty' defence against any legal proceedings.

The BRC Standard has developed to cover responsibility - for the safety and legality of a product - that is shared between supplier and retailer. Emphasis for the retailer is in the area of control; retailers are responsible for ensuring that a product has a detailed specification, which is not unlawful or inconsistent with compositional or safety standards or with good manufacturing practice. Retailers should also ensure, by periodic visits or receipt of independent audit reports, that the manufacturer is competent to produce the specified product, meet relevant legal standards and operate

appropriate standards of production control. Retailers are additionally responsible for establishing and maintaining a risk assessed programme for product examination, testing or analysis.

The BRC Standard comprehensively covers areas of quality, hygiene and product safety throughout the food industry. The standard addresses part of the 'due diligence' requirements of the food manufacturer, supplier, packer and retailer. Food manufacturers may also use the standard to ensure their suppliers are following appropriate standards thus completing the due diligence chain. The standard allows evaluation by third party certification bodies to an international standard (ISO/IEC Guide 65).

Additionally the standard requires continuing surveillance and confirmation of follow up of corrective actions on areas of non conformance to the standard, thereby ensuring the establishment of a self improving system for product quality, safety and hygiene.

Overall, the principles of the BRC Global Standard – Food are to: minimise duplication, encourage 'local' evaluation, ensure openness, transparency and compliance with fair trading legislation, promote direct stakeholder participation during development and maintenance as part of technical advisory committees, continuously review and improve standards and support processes to ultimately promote best practice.

The business case for compliance

Food manufacturers, whether large or small, are committed to the growth, development and improvement of their businesses. As most food is sold via retail outlets, the broad scope of the BRC Global Standard – Food has a great relevance to food manufacturers. Whilst it is currently not essential to have the accredited standard in place to operate successfully within the food industry, it is almost inevitable that at some point in the development of a food business a particular customer will demand compliance with the BRC standard.

The implications of implementing the standard vary according to the complexity of the operation concerned, but it is unlikely that paper systems alone will be sufficient to cope with the demands of the standard. The need to trace raw materials, record product specifications and the packaging used, and the distribution of the end products is itself sufficiently complex enough to require the use of an efficient software solution. When the complexities of accommodating the records of hygiene checks, plant usage, analysis, complaint handling and other local needs are added, it becomes practically impossible for food manufacturers to operate successfully without the support of software. The software provider must understand the food industry and be able to demonstrate a successful track record of food industry support.

Dr Philip Ashurst is a Food Industry Consultant with over 40 years' experience in the food manufacturing industry. Previous positions include Directorships within various food manufacturing companies – including Chief Executive - and the management of his own company.

This is the second in a series of White Papers by Dr Philip Ashurst on the food industry and the issues affecting food companies. Philip is available to give independent advice to food companies - particularly in the areas raised by this article. He can be contacted in the first instance on +44 (0)1432 840448 or by email: philip@ashurstassociates.co.uk