

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

Consumers Are Confused, Concerned About Food Safety

Consumers now have more concern about the safety of food purchases than ever before. In 2009, nearly one-third (31%) of shoppers stopped purchasing certain food items because of food safety concerns, up 5 percentage points over 2008, according to the *U.S. Shopper Trends 2009* report by Food Marketing Institute (FMI). As a consequence, contamination from bacteria/germs tops grocery shoppers' list of the most important food issues, with 53% categorizing it as a serious health risk. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (47%), product tampering (45%), pesticide or herbicide residues (43%), and terrorist tampering (41%) rounded out the list of top food issues, according to FMI.

The FMI report also indicates that consumer concerns over antibiotics and hormones used on poultry and livestock posted a sizeable increase, elevating to 36% from 27% in 2008. In addition, consumer awareness of recalls remains high: In 2009, 74% of shoppers stopped (either temporarily or permanently) purchasing items containing peanuts, and 32% stopped purchasing produce (particularly spinach and tomatoes).

More shoppers are also checking labels for chemical additives and preservatives. Four in 10 shoppers (44%) say chemical additives are very important when checking the label, and 34% say preservatives are. In 2009, claims of 'no

chemical additives' and 'no preservatives' ranked eighth and ninth, respectively, on the list of most sought after food health claims, just behind whole grain, high fiber, low fat, low sodium, absence of *trans* fats, low sugar, and low calorie, according to FMI. Moreover, the International Food Information Council (IFIC) reports that 67% of shoppers check ingredient lists for the type of fat/oil, 62% for sweeteners, 49% for natural ingredients, 44% for artificial ingredients or preservatives, 30% for caffeine, 16% for food colors, and 16% for allergens.

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And 'grown or produced in the USA' remains a strong food packaging claim with 90% of shoppers saying it makes them very or somewhat comfortable, FMI reports.

Overall, only 9% of consumers are extremely confident in the safety of the U.S. food supply, according to an IFIC survey. FMI research found that the number of consumers calling for improved government oversight in food safety rose 4 percentage points in 2009 vs 2008; the number of those who believe that consumer groups should play a strong role in food safety also increased by 4 percentage points.

In contrast, consumers are routinely neglectful when it

comes to food safety practices in their homes. This is cause for great concern since the 2009 *Gallup Study of Cooking Knowledge & Skills* reports that 58% of Millennials, 54% of Gen Xers, and 44% of Baby Boomers prepare more meals at home than they did a year ago. For example, IFIC found that the number of consumers who wash their hands with soap and water before preparing food dropped from 2008 to 2009; the number of those who wash cutting boards with soap, water, or bleach fell, as well. Cooking to a required temperature, storing leftovers

within two hours of meal preparation, and separating raw meat, poultry, and seafood from ready-to-eat foods were also not high on consumers' to-do lists.

Moreover, the number of shoppers who clean food thoroughly every time fell 5 percentage points to 64% in 2009; those who make sure their food is fresh every time fell 4 points to 67%. Only one in five food shoppers (19%) think that eating foods past their use-by date is a serious health risk, reports FMI. The number of shoppers who look at expiration dates every time fell from 69% in 2008 to 62% in 2009. Those who discard food past the use-by date fell 7 percentage points to 37% in 2009. Using a meat

thermometer to check doneness is a regular practice for only 25% of consumers.

The NPD Group found that microwave use rose 10% in the last two years. Nevertheless, IFIC reports that fewer consumers adhere to some safe cooking practices such as flipping, rotating, and stirring during the microwaving process.

A 2009 report from Mom Central Consulting shows that 43% of moms bought more in bulk, 42% purchased more frozen foods, and 55% ate more leftovers. FMI found that 58% purchased meat in large quantities to store over time. Ironically, a November 2009 American Chemistry Council survey reports that the No. 1 kitchen mystery among those ages 18–34 was determining how long they can keep and use leftovers.

Clearly, with a 2009 Gallup report confirming that 54% of U.S. adults describe themselves as inexperienced cooks and The Egg Board's 2009 survey revealing that 42% know someone in desperate need of cooking skills, the perceptions and realities of food safety will likely worsen. To that end, it may be time to increase the availability of safety technology—from pop-up timers to time-temperature indicators on labels—to ensure a safer food supply. **FT**



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