

According to Kansas State University professor of diagnostic medicine and pathobiology Doug Powell, food safety has been misrepresented and put under the label of 'quality' across all sectors of the industry. Speaking at the Produce Marketing Association (PMA) Australia-New Zealand Fresh Connections 2013 event in Sydney last week, he discussed the importance of creating a food safety culture, rather than relying on regulation and government policies to provide businesses with secure and safe produce.

"Food safety surveys don't detect what people do behind the screens," Powell told delegates at the conference.


Doug Powell

He highlighted the significant role technology could play towards reinforcing good practices, while developing a working environment where employees care about food safety and promote it with their colleagues.

He added that video surveillance had proven more effective than most conventional methods, while some U.S. businesses were displaying news stories of foodborne illness outbreaks in workers' lunchrooms, often supported by graphic images.

"The grosser it is the more effective it will be, particularly with the younger generation," he said.

"Creating a set of shared values within the organisation is a necessity, so people can say - 'Dude, wash your hands!'"

U.S. consumers are pushing towards more transparency for food industry businesses. Powell said this had led to more public disclosures about food safety policies, including inspection reports, as well as photos and videos. Such materials are now regularly published on businesses' websites, while QR codes are making their way onto products for consumers to see where they come from.

While the U.S. is progressively moving towards positive change for safer food, Powell told www.freshfruitportal.com that Australia "has a long way to go".

"Having lived here [Australia] for over two years, I don't see that public culture of food safety. There were 140 people sick in Canberra, because they were using raw eggs in mayo and yet there was no media coverage about it.

"One chef in Canberra publically said 'I will never use processed eggs'. My comment at the time was - 'Then say goodbye to your business' and now it's gone."

Powell believed Australia's inflexible attitude towards change was preventing it from rising above other countries in food safety.

"The thing I hear most in food safety, whether it's produce or anything else is - 'We've always done it this way and I've never made anyone sick'. What it probably means is that you don't have the surveillance systems to pick it up.

"This is a reality - there will be outbreaks, like with rockmelon and peanuts in Australia and you as an industry have a chance to come together and get proactive, or wait until the next outbreak."

Creating shorter supply chains or selling locally grown produce has had little effect on the spread of outbreaks, the expert added.

"I think pushing direct-to-retail is great, but it requires logistics and checks. It's not safer just because it's there quicker.

"Whether your food comes from around the corner, or around the globe, you either know about dangerous microorganisms and take precautions to reduce them or you don't."

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