

Fakes progress

The opportunity for food fraud may be on the increase but so, too, is the technological expertise to fight back. Ian Lancaster, of the International Authentication Association, is leading the charge...

Protecting the authenticity and ensuring the traceability of the food and drink we consume has never been more important. Concern for the origin of our daily bread is not new, of course, but in today's mass consumer market the need for vigilance is greater than ever before. The consequences of failing to take action can be severe – both from an economic perspective as well as a social and safety one.

With goods moving so quickly around the world and supply chains lengthening, the opportunity for fraud is growing. Counterfeiting is big business and today's brands and specialist products provide fertile conditions for counterfeiters. The food and drink sector is just one of many targeted worldwide, and recent estimates indicate that it costs the sector £31 million in lost revenue every year.



Ian Lancaster

Besides defrauding producers (lost profits) and consumers, passing off inferior versions also raises the spectre of contamination, spoilage and out-of-date products. The implications of which can be serious to both consumer health and producer reputation and liability.

Recent food scares involving the recall of spinach, peanuts and sprouts (*E.coli*, *Salmonella* and *Listeria* respectively) have been catalysts for the new Food Safety

Enforcement Act currently being driven through Congress at a lightning pace in America. Today's consumers increasingly want to know the source and quality of their food, and incidents like this do little for trust or confidence.

In such conditions, there is huge value to be gained in authenticating and tracing products – particularly luxury, organic and premium foods – through the supply chain. Food and drink producers who are able to do this can drive revenues and reduce costs by differentiating their products. They can also gain easier market access, particularly in the US and EU where regulatory compliance schemes increasingly operate.

The capacity to share information through the supply chain is also boosted and can

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create significant operational efficiencies. The consumer, too, is happy in the knowledge that the product is authenticated – a win-win situation.

The challenge for the industry historically in tackling these problems has been twofold: inertia and cost. Significantly, these are now barriers that are being eroded and momentum must be maintained.

The need and will for concerted action is growing internationally with food safety and authenticity high on the policy agenda. In America, steps are being taken to enhance food traceability through the new safety act winging its way through Congress. In Europe and the UK, fresh initiatives are also underway such as TRACE, a five-year



project to ensure complete traceability along entire 'farm to fork' food chains.

The development and accessibility of more sophisticated technology, particularly digital technology that allows data to be shared, is also playing a major role. Wines travelling outside France, for example, are now traceable by labels and engravings. Similarly, in southern Italy, milk and mozzarella produced by local cows is checked using the latest spectroscopic techniques to test it matches information stored in a database, and so comes from its claimed area of origin.

Food and drink producers are increasingly turning to a wide range of technologies like this, the latest scientific techniques and working closely with enforcement authorities to protect our food. The good news is that as more members of the trading community do this, so the benefits will spread across the supply chain.

While the cost – both in time and money – of implementing food traceability remain significant, it is coming down and simply doing nothing is not an option. The need to protect the provenance of our food and drink is hugely important. Failure to take collective action to protect brands will ultimately be more expensive for producers, the industry and society in the long run. ■

Show news

A new exhibition at Olympia aims to help brand owners and their advisers find solutions to counterfeiting. Exhibitors at the Brand Protection Show will be offering everything from security inks, holograms, track and trace technology to sophisticated internet monitoring tools. The show runs from 16-17 September 2009 at Olympia, London.

For more information visit www.brandprotectionshow.com