

Meeting of SOFHT Yorkshire & NE Branch on 22nd April 2008

Crisis Management in the Food Industry

A meeting hosted by Highfield.co.uk, a Supporting Company Member of SOFHT, at Highfield House in Doncaster, attracted several delegates including representatives from Pinsent Masons, Food and Trading Law Advisors, Roger Hart Associates, D.G. Technical Services, Acheta Consulting Ltd, Yorvale Ice Cream, Warburton's Ltd, Willows Services and Hull, Hambleton and Doncaster local authority enforcement services.

Jonathan Bayne, Head of Technical Services, Sustainability & Regulatory Affairs at Musgrave Retail Partners (GB) Ltd sponsored the event and used his broad experience as a qualified Food Technologist and Head of Technical Services to advise on techniques for crisis management in the food industry. Jonathan used a case study of an actual event that he managed involving the counterfeit labelling of a popular wine.

The globalised food industry, fast communications, sophisticated science and a media hungry for food scares means that no part of the food industry can escape the threats of food fraud or product recalls. Respected companies including Cadbury's, Coca Cola and Perrier have all suffered product recalls threatening to damage their well established reputations.

Jonathan explained the difficulties he faced when advised by his enforcement authorities of a counterfeit product that was currently on sale in the retail stores for which he was responsible. His response to the incident was hampered by the investigating team, which included not only law enforcers from his own authority but also those from other EU member states where the offending product had been produced. An immediate recall could have seriously disrupted the investigation yet the continuing sale of the product was not in the public interest.

The techniques adopted to resolve the dilemma eventually resulted in a successful outcome with the product withdrawn and the perpetrators of the crime duly punished in another Member State. However, the lessons learnt from the experience emphasised the need for a crisis management policy within all food companies. Of particular importance were the techniques used in handling the media; it is essential to provide sufficient public information yet, at the same time, protect the reputation of the organization from undue damage caused by inappropriate interpretation of the facts. The company involved in the inadvertent purchase and sale of the counterfeit product did suffer serious losses, however, much of this was reclaimed from insurers and Customs and Excise, but only by appropriate management of the incident.

Jonathan's presentation stimulated much discussion at the meeting and raised the importance of having a pre-planned system to manage a crisis. Even the most creditable of food companies need forethought and planning to emerge from such incidents with their reputation intact.

Jonathon Bayne is the current Chairman of The Society of Food Hygiene and Technology.

Cath Graham, Meetings Secretary, SOFHT Y& NE Branch