



## ETHICS CONNECTION

# TRANSPARENCY IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY

BY MICHAEL KOPEC, CDM, CFPP

**ETHICS IN THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY** can include many different topics, such as: *Consumer Well-Being*, *Environmental Sustainability*, *Fair Labor Conditions*, and *Transparency*. According to Innova Market Insights, a global market insights provider, transparency is one of the top food and beverage trends today. Even in today's economy, we know that price and convenience are no longer the most important factors when buying our food. Consumers want to know where their food comes from, and their interest in ingredient sourcing is higher than ever! Furthermore, consumers require clarity in the end-to-end food supply chain to feel confident in their buying decisions.

But it's not just the Boomers, X'ers, and Millennials that care about transparency. The next generation of eaters also want to know what's in their food, where it comes from, and whether it is ethical and safe to eat. The accessibility of this information is becoming more important, and consumers of all ages want to take back control.

I'm a father of two teenagers and my kids like to know where their food comes from. I grew up in an era where an apple was an apple, and an orange was an orange, and you just ate it and moved on. Now it's, "is that Honeycrisp apple organic?" "Dad, the orange juice you bought says it was made from oranges from Mexico and Brazil!" Young adults buy with their eyes, but they also buy a story. They want to know that the supplier or farmer they're dealing with shares their values and the product they're going to support accordingly. So, transparency is becoming more prevalent, more critical to these major retailers because they've made promises to their shareholders, their stakeholders, on some of the things that they're going to do or provide. Now, they in turn need

to lean on their supply chain partners to execute on the promises to which they've committed.

### WHAT IS FOOD TRANSPARENCY?

For the consumer, transparency simply means knowing how a product was made. But for those in the industry, Rachel Jenkins of WebstaurantStore.com offers that, "food transparency is the practice of being open and honest with customers in terms of food sourcing, ingredient lists, nutrition facts, allergen concerns, and ecological impact." The impact of food on our planet and bodies is becoming better understood and people are expecting greater control, more information, and higher standards.

Consumers don't just want healthy, good-tasting food, they want to be decision-makers. They need to see food sourcing, ingredient lists, nutritional information, allergens, the production process, and the ecological impact of the foods they buy and eat. According to a Transparency Study conducted by Response Media, 95 percent of consumers feel it's essential for manufacturers and brands to provide food ingredients and how food was made listed on the packaging label or in the restaurant. So, for those of us in the industry, it's vital to understand this movement and the target audience.

In addition to nutritional and allergen information, mysobol.com has a list of some of the terms consumers are eyeing closely these days:

- **Organic**—A specific label identifies produce that is certified to have grown on soil that had no prohibited substances like synthetic fertilizers or pesticides applied for three years prior to harvest.



- **Antibiotic-free**—“No antibiotics” means that the animals were not given antibiotics in their feed, in their water, or by injection.
- **GMO-free**—“Non-GMO” claim means that the food is made without ingredients derived from genetically-engineered organisms.
- **Free-range**—This means that birds must have “outdoor access” or “access to the outdoors.”
- **Cage-free**—These eggs are from hens that were not kept in battery cages, allowed instead to move about the egg production barn. But cage-free does not mean hens were given access to the outdoors.
- **Sustainable**—The production of food, fiber, or other plant or animal products using techniques that protect the environment, public health, human communities, and animal welfare.

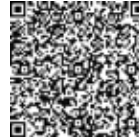


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- **Fair-trade**—This describes a social-responsibility movement in which farmers and their employees are treated and paid fairly, sustainable environmental practices are followed, and long-term trade relationships are fostered.

#### **HOW CAN WE MAKE OUR FOOD SYSTEM MORE TRANSPARENT?**

In order to make those informed decisions about what we stock in our pantry and fridges, or put in our bellies, we need *traceability*, or the ability to find out where and how our food was made. But modern food supply chains are global and hugely complex, and having so many people involved in producing our food creates two main issues:



## REFERENCES

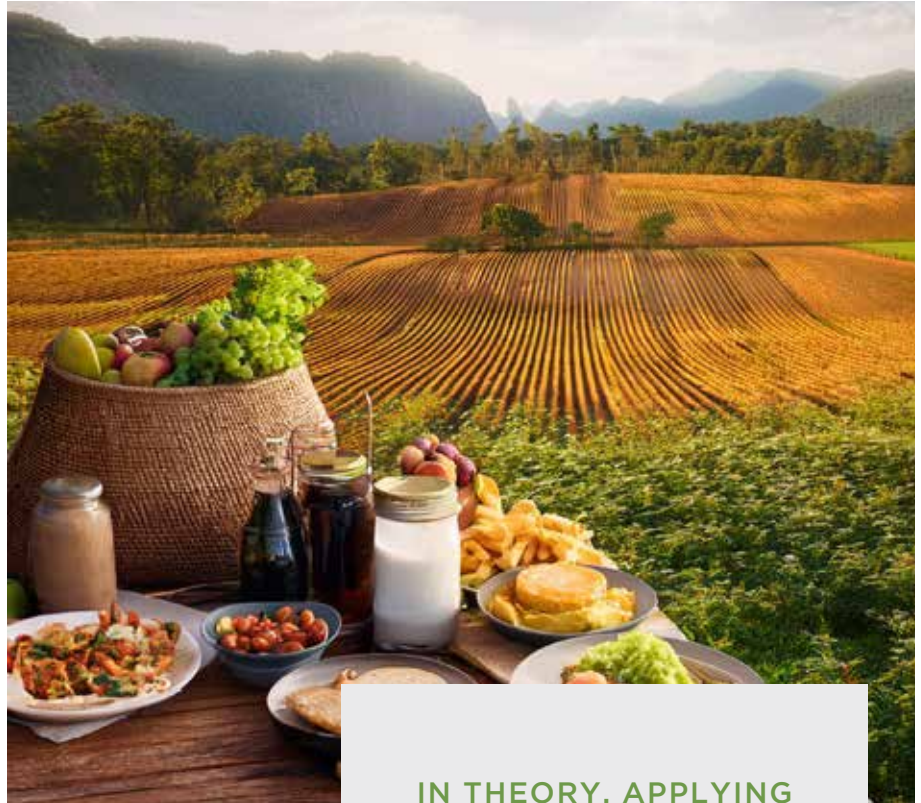
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1. Suppliers often struggle to collect detailed data about the origin of our food, much less the journey it makes to reach us, leaving us without the information that we need to make an informed decision about what to buy.
2. A complex system makes it easier for bad actors in the supply chain to lie about the origins and contents of food products, which is known as food fraud.

Today the sale of illegally altered, repackaged, mislabeled, or stolen foods is a multi-billion-dollar problem. Some products labeled as organic have simply added the label to boost sales and are not actually produced in line with organic standards. Did you know that merchants in ancient Rome diluted olive oil with cheaper alternatives to boost their profits? Unfortunately, some producers in modern-day Italy have been known to be doing the same thing. Better traceability in our food system would help us minimize the risk of mistakes and that of food fraud, helping producers and suppliers to protect their reputations and giving us all more confidence in the food that we buy.

### REGULATORY PRESSURES

In November 2022, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) published the highly-anticipated and long-awaited finalized Food Traceability Rule, implementing Section 204 of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA Section 204). What's important to note here is that compliance with the rule will be enforced by January 2026, so some of the larger food manufacturers and distributors have already begun to prepare in anticipation. Essentially, FSMA 204 requires the FDA to:



Establish and publish a Food Traceability List (FTL) identifying high-risk foods to human health and then set additional traceability recordkeeping requirements for “persons” who manufacture, process, pack, or hold foods on the FTL.

Currently in the United States, it takes an average of 57 days to recall items after the FDA reports a risk. Under FSMA 204, companies producing food on the FDA’s Traceability List must reduce this to 24 hours.

### TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

Companies and food establishments are actively starting to investigate how things move throughout the

## IN THEORY, APPLYING BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY

to our food system could allow us to trace the journey of our food from farm to fork with complete confidence.

supply chain, where their product is at all times, and the ingredients for their product. Some people believe technologies like blockchain are the answer. Blockchain is a special kind of database that everyone has access to and once you add information to it that information is locked in, it can never be removed or altered. In theory, applying blockchain technology to our food system could allow us to trace

the journey of our food from farm to fork with complete confidence. Unfortunately, blockchain doesn't work as well for regulating physical products like food as it does for digital ones. Other technologies available on the market include: Ambient IoT, IoT Pixels, Digital-Physical Seals, Iris App, and Arla Milkchain.

It is important to remember that technology is not a cure-all when it comes to traceability and its role is limited. Its purpose is to diminish the margin of error and reduce opportunities for bad actors, or those that engage in wrong behaviors. Improving the traceability of our food would undoubtedly bring benefits for everyone. But rather than seeing one specific technology like blockchain as the solution, we instead need to focus on understanding the wide range of issues that underpin poor traceability today. It's quite possible, even likely, that the transparent and traceable food chains of the future will be built on relatively simple systems and strong monitoring

## BY 2026, THE FDA'S NEW FOOD TRACEABILITY RULE


will require faster recall times and stricter tracking for high-risk foods, pushing the industry toward greater transparency.

infrastructure, rather than on cutting-edge technology. But one thing's for certain, making these changes will require collaboration between everyone in the food system that wants to see things change, including all of us.

### SUMMARY

Transparency is not a fleeting trend, but a permanent shift in the foodservice landscape. Food manufacturers and establishments that embrace openness around ingredients, sourcing, and operations

will build the trust and loyalty that ensures long-term success. In contrast, establishments resistant to change risk falling out of favor with a dining community that demands to know what it is putting on its plates and into its support.

By prioritizing transparency, the foodservice industry can rise to meet elevated consumer expectations, promoting a more sustainable, equitable, and health-focused food system for all. 



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## CE QUESTIONS | ETHICS CONNECTION



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This **Level I FOOD SERVICE** article assumes that the reader has introductory knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to ensure a basic understanding and explanation of the concepts of the subject matter and recalling of related facts.

Reading *Transparency in the Food Industry* and successfully completing these questions online in the ANFP Marketplace has been approved for 1 hour of Ethics continuing education for CDM, CFPPs. To earn 1 Ethics CE hour, visit [www.ANFPonline.org/market](http://www.ANFPonline.org/market) and select **Edge CE Articles** within the Publications section. Purchase the article and complete the quiz.

- Food transparency is the ability to track a food product and its ingredients throughout the supply chain, from production to distribution.
  - True
  - False
- Regarding packaging and labeling, some of the terms consumers are eyeing closely these days include all of the following except:
  - Organic
  - Non-GMO
  - Fat-free
- To make informed decisions about what we stock in our pantry and fridges, we need \_\_\_\_\_, or the ability to find out where and how our food was made.
  - Transparency
  - Traceability
  - Transformation
- According to a Transparency Study conducted by Response Media, what percentage of consumers feel it's essential for manufacturers and brands to provide food ingredients and how food was made, listed on the packaging:
  - 75 percent
  - 65 percent
  - 95 percent
- Cage-free means that hens are given access to the outdoors.
  - True
  - False
- Currently, it takes an average of \_\_\_\_ days to recall items after the FDA reports a risk.
  - 60
  - 47
  - 57
- What does FSMA stand for?
  - Food Service Management Association
  - Food Safety Modernization Act
  - Financial Services and Markets Authority
- In theory, applying blockchain technology to our food system could allow us to trace the journey of our food from farm to fork with complete confidence.
  - True
  - False



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