

BW HOTELIER

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FSSAI – ENSURING FOOD SAFETY AND HYGIENE

FSSAI'S CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
ARUN SINGHAL, EXPLAINS THE
ORGANISATION'S VARIOUS INITIATIVES LIKE
FRONT OF THE PACK LABELLING (FOPL) AND
HYGIENE RATING SCHEME, AND MUCH MORE

BY: **BWH BUREAU**

BW HOTELIER: Hygienic and safe food is the need of the hour. As the covid-19 pandemic has underlined the need to establish stringent food safety systems, what are the key initiatives taken by FSSAI in strengthening the food safety during this period especially at the FBOs level?

ARUN SINGHAL: As the apex food regulatory body, the FSSAI's mandate is to ensure safe and wholesome food for the country. This role of ensuring food safety and hygiene has gained epic proportions during the ongoing public health crisis. FSSAI, in the lockdown period, ensured that it is available, in action and operational. Import Clearance and Food Testing Labs were classified as Essential Services by FSSAI during the COVID period so that the supply of essential food items as well as trade remain uninterrupted across nations. e-Inspections for ensuring food safety during

the lockdown period and extensive use of digital technology had ensured seamless delivery of essential services even in the lockdown. Various compliance requirements such as renewals of license/registration and returns got deferred in view of the constraints faced by FBOs.

To ensure adoption of stringent food safety systems by the food businesses in every part of the country, FSSAI has initiated an online training module for food handlers on the essentials of food safety and hygiene practices during COVID-19 through its flagship FoSTaC programme.

Till date, ~233,000 people have been trained under this programme. Further, a guidance note titled "Food Hygiene and Safety Guidelines for Food Businesses during Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic" has been released and made available in public domain. This document covers best practices/ guidelines to be followed



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by food handlers to maintain high standards of personal hygiene, safe food practices, implementation of GHP and GMP practices as per Schedule 4 of FSS Act as well as ensuring necessary protocols of social distancing.

Further, FSSAI issued updated guidelines which covered the desired aspects related to uniform protocols and guidance for opening of various units including restaurants and other food service establishments.

A COVID-19 specific page on the FSSAI website is created that incorporates various communication collaterals, guidance notes and press releases along with important notifications, directions and orders released by FSSAI time to time.

BWH: How do you ensure a close coordination with the industry stakeholders to achieve the goal of food

safety in the hotels and restaurant industry?

AS: FSSAI has been constantly engaging with the restaurant associations and their members to ensure that schedule IV guidelines are implemented through various regulatory, training and capacity-building and compliance measures. To make it easy for consumers to make informed choices about the food they eat, FSSAI has recently introduced a voluntary scheme called Hygiene Rating Scheme for food service establishments, hotels and restaurants, bakeries etc.

Under this scheme, a comprehensive checklist has been created based on the criteria a food business needs to meet hygiene and sanitation standards laid in Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006. The food business is then audited basis this checklist and awarded a rating by a third-party audit agency empanelled by FSSAI.

A certificate is generated based on this rating and

displayed for consumers at the premises. This helps consumers identify if the place has been inspected and certified for being hygienic or not. A rating of 3 stars and above is considered a 'Good Rating'.

Through this rating process, food service establishments have the opportunity to understand the basic criteria for ensuring safe food and implement these practices through training and capacity building of their food handlers.

Moreover, food businesses that are compliant can showcase their efforts to consumers by displaying this certificate prominently at the premises. This gives them a competitive edge over other businesses and win the trust and loyalty of their consumers. Till date, ~3800 food service establishments have been enrolled under the Hygiene Rating scheme.

FSSAI had a series of consultations with the Federation of Sweets and Namkeen Manufacturers that represents interests of over 400 manufacturers of Indian sweets and namkeens for introducing standards of the proprietary foods (in the category of sweets & namkeens) and the work is already in process. Further, the Food Authority has asked local mithai and sweet shop owners to display the "manufacturing date" and the "best before" date on loose sweets sold in their shops in a move that will help ensure that the consumers are purchasing a fresh product.

Last year, FSSAI finalised another regulation (which would be voluntary to begin with) specific to menu labelling that would mainly be covering food service establishments and/or FBOs. This regulation would empower the consumers



with information on food they eat as food service establishments would declare quality (type of preparation, composition, nutritional information including any allergens and energy) and quantity (amount, number, size etc.) of the products per serving.

BWH: Do you suggest any change in education curriculum to make more awareness about food safety & hygiene among the aspiring hospitality professionals?

AS: It is important to incorporate FSS Act and some relevant parts of the Regulations into educational curriculum for aspiring hospitality professionals. Part V of Schedule 4 or FoSTaC advanced catering curriculum can be adopted as part of the curriculum.

Further, various FSSAI initiatives such as Hygiene Rating Scheme, Street Food Hubs etc. are relevant for this sector and students can be given more knowledge about implementation of these programmes at scale.

BWH: Front of the Pack Labelling (FOPL) and Hygiene Rating Scheme are pro consumer initiatives in countries

like India, do you feel it should be implemented on fast track mode or gradually? Should it be made voluntary or mandatory in India and why?

AS: Food is an essential part of health and wellbeing; and poor diet is the number one risk factor for disease and death. There is rapidly rising incidence of non-communicable

diseases in the country.

Acknowledging the fact that a major contributing factor to obesity and diet related NCDs is the rising consumption of unhealthy foods high in Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS), FSSAI started work for bringing about a change in the existing labelling regime about a year and a half back.

The matter regarding Front of Pack labelling has been under consideration. The existing global practices were referred and various consultations with stakeholders like Government organisations, consumer organisations, and industry association were held.

Front-of-the-Pack Nutrition Labelling is still under discussion and we aim to finalise it soon. However, complete information is already being provided on the back of pack even today.

As bringing about a change through Regulations typically take time, we believe that while this will be mandatory in nature, it should be implemented gradually so that sufficient time is given to food businesses to invest judiciously in packaging as well reformulation or other additional requirements that need to be planned at their level.

Similarly, for hygiene rating, while it is not mandatory, we believe it is beneficial to both food businesses as well as consumers. The Hygiene Rating Scheme is a technology-driven, consumer friendly scheme where food establishments are given a rating on a scale of 1-5, where 5 indicates excellent compliance and 1 indicates poor compliance of food hygiene and safety standards.

I sincerely hope that we will see acceleration under this scheme as consumers affirm choices for high rated establishments encouraging more and more businesses to enrol themselves for the Hygiene rating scheme.

BWH: What would you like to convey to the hospitality industry professionals who constitute the strong

readership of BW HOTELIER?

AS: Eating out has become a regular routine for many of us. Some of us eat out of necessity and many of us out of choice. Today's fast-paced lifestyle and increased mobility, particularly among the younger generation, leaves little time for preparing and eating meals at home.

Therefore, many of us are increasingly opting to eat out or have our food delivered from eating joints especially at workplaces, colleges or during travels. With the advent

of multiple international cuisines and a large number of fine-dining places and world-class restaurants offering both variety and high quality of food, a large number of people choose to eat out for pleasure.

Given the frequency of eating out these days, it is also important to assure consumers that the food they eat is safe and hygienic for consumption, no matter wherever they eat.

Using your platform, I would like to urge food service establishments including hotels, restaurants, catering outlets and food joints to apply for hygiene rating certification and ensure self-compliance. This will create a better brand recognition and instil trust amongst consumers about the food served by the outlets.

I also expect hotels who serve meals to their employees and staff to enrol themselves for the Eat Right Campus initiative.

The ERC certification recognises the efforts of the campus, adds prestige and brand value to its name and enables it to inspire others to adopt these best practices. In particular, it provides a unique opportunity for workplaces to showcase their efforts around employee health and wellbeing.

I really hope that through strong readership of BW HOTELIER, you will certainly influence hospitality industry professionals to consider adopting some of these initiatives and join the league of change makers. ■



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