Food Safety Update: Lab Testing

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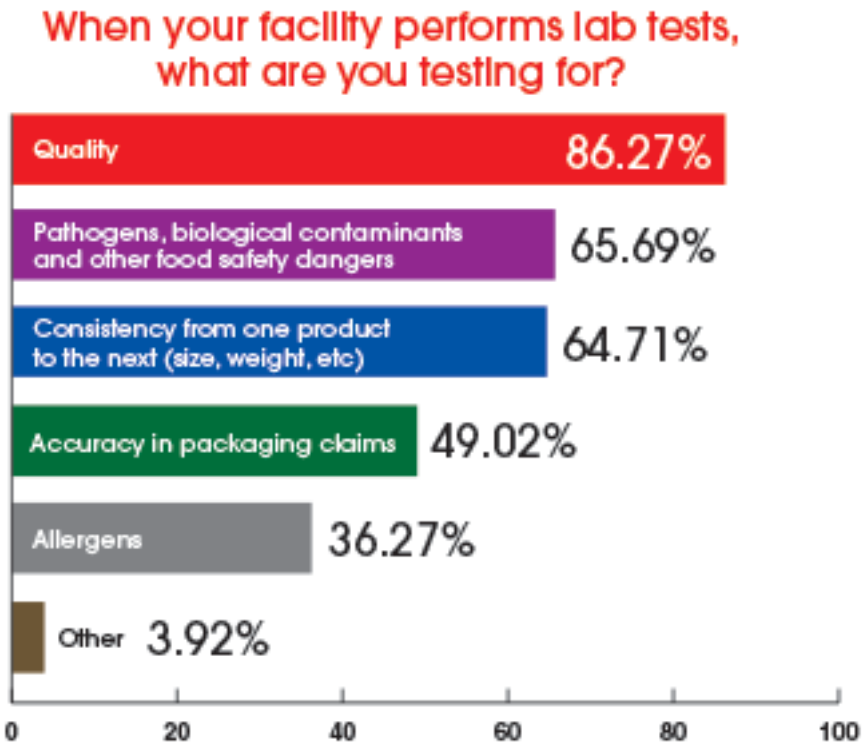
Pending Food Safety and Modernization Act (FSMA) rules require new traceability measures and stringent HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) plans along with food manufacturers own safety testing. *Food Manufacturing* surveyed readers on how they use food safety and QA/QC testing.

Nearly 60 percent of survey respondents said they test each batch of food, while approximately 40 percent said they test a random sampling of the product. Nearly 83 percent of respondents said they hold all product until satisfactory test results are returned. Almost 17 percent said they ship product before test results are in.

Most facilities are testing for quality when they perform lab tests, according to respondents. Nearly 86 percent said that quality is their first priority, followed by 65.7 percent that said they test for the pathogens, biological contaminants and other food safety dangers meant to be caught at critical control points. Another 64.7 percent said they test for consistency, such as size and weight. Forty-nine percent of respondents said they test accuracy in packaging claims, and 36.3 percent said they test for allergens. Some respondents suggested of other types of testing, like taste and fat/lean content.

Approximately 48 percent of survey respondents said they perform tests in-house and/or have a QA/QC facility, as well as send samples to an outside lab. Another 30.4 percent said they solely perform tests in-house with their own lab technicians. Almost 17.7 percent said they only send samples to an outside lab. Nearly four percent said they neither perform in-house tests nor send samples to an outside lab for testing. The same amount of respondents said that they did not feel their facility’s testing policy is effective to ensure food safety. The remaining 96 percent were confident in the safety of food testing at their facility.



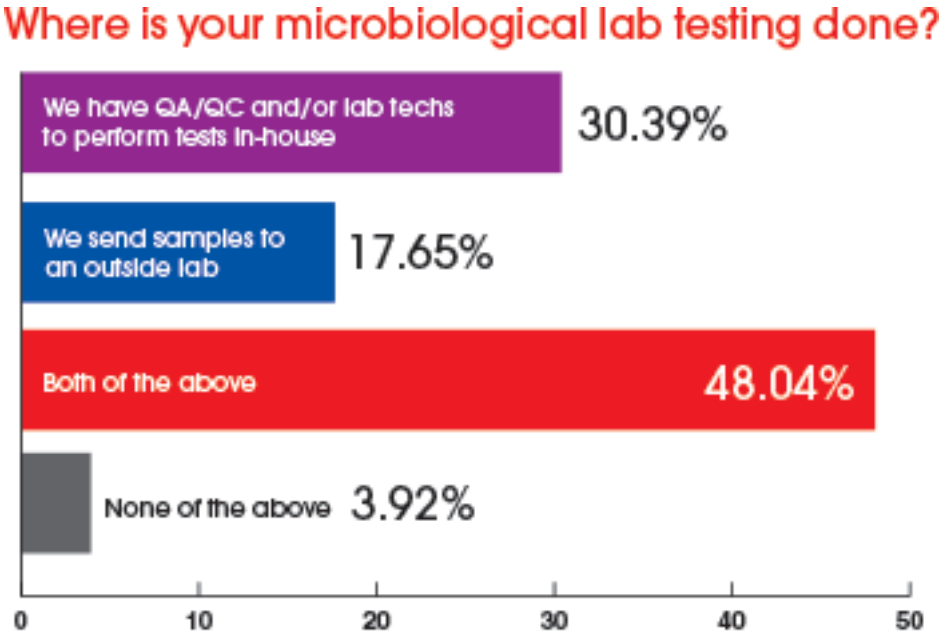
Customer demand is the most important factor influencing changes to respondents' facilities' QA/QC and laboratory testing policies, at 26.7 percent. Nearly 20 percent said regulations were making the biggest impact on their testing. Another 20 percent cited company-driven policy changes. The requirements of certification bodies were the greatest influence for 16.9 percent of respondents. Fluctuation in companies' profits were responsible for 14.9 of respondents' lab testing policy changes.

Food defense, or protecting food from intentional contamination, is gaining more notice in the manufacturing industry. Nearly 51 percent of survey respondents said they already have plans to implement preventive controls for food defense by expanding the HACCP process. Another 25.7 percent of respondents said they are evaluating HACCP expansion for food defense. Nearly 17 percent said they plan to incorporate food defense vulnerabilities into their HAACP process. Approximately 6 percent said they will not.

Implementing effective lab testing procedures at food manufacturing facilities can be a challenge. The top difficulty, according to 30.4 percent of survey respondents, is the time it takes to get results. Another 26.5 percent said changing regulations impeded their lab testing procedures. Nearly 15 percent said they had difficulty finding qualified/competent workers. Choosing what to test for was an obstacle for 8.8 percent of respondents; another 8.8 percent said the accuracy of test results were a challenge. Nearly 7 percent found difficulty in getting buy-in to implement effective lab testing procedures from upper management or executives.

The amount of workers in facilities' in-house laboratories varies. Thirty-three percent of respondents employed 3-5 workers there. Nearly 22 percent of survey respondents said they employ 12 or more workers in laboratories. Almost 20 percent employed 1-2 workers, nearly 13 percent have 6-8 workers, and approximately 10 percent employ 9-11 people in laboratories.

In-house laboratory staffs were generally static or shrinking in the past 24 months, according to survey respondents. Nearly 60 percent said their lab staff has remained the same in that timeframe. Thirteen percent said their lab staff has decreased. However, 25 percent said their lab staff has grown in the past 24 months. Three percent of respondents said their facilities don't employ in-house staff.



Similarly, outsourced lab staffs have been largely unchanged in the past 24 months, respondents said. Nearly 54 percent said their outsourced lab staffs have stayed the same, and nearly 8 percent said they have decreased. Approximately 18.6 percent of respondents said their outsourced lab staff has increased. Nearly 20 percent said they do not outsource lab staff.

Of respondents to this survey, 29 percent said they employ less than 50 people at their plant. Nineteen percent said they employ 251-500 people. Eighteen percent of respondents said they employ 101-250 workers, while 16 percent employ 50-100 workers. Another 13 percent said they have 501-1,000 employees. Just 5 percent of respondents said they employ more than 1,000 workers at their plant.

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