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## **MNB Radio: Reporting From The CIES Food Safety Conference in Amsterdam**

Hi, I'm Kevin Coupe, and this is MorningNewsBeat Radio, now available on iTunes and sponsored by Webstop, experts in the art of retail website design.

I am reporting to you today from Amsterdam, where more than 500 people have converged for the annual CIES Global Food Safety Conference. This is the third of these meetings that I've attended, and it is a measure of how important food safety is that the number of people showing up seems to grow each year.

This year, there is a broad representation of American delegates, which I think is a positive sign. Sometimes, we Americans tend to think of ourselves as better than everyone else, not needing to interact with or take guidance from our brethren from other countries. But that's changing...and one of the things I'll be doing today is moderating a panel of US food retailers talking about American attitudes toward food safety and how we need to be more global in our mindset and approach to this important issue. The panel will include executives from Wal-Mart, Hannaford Supermarkets, ShopRite, Supervalu and Amazon.com – a remarkable cross section of people, all of whom will have unique takes on the food safety challenge.

I also had the opportunity to produce a video that will be shown at the conference. Underwritten by JohnsonDiversey, the video consists of a series of interviews with influential senior executives on both the retail and supplier side. When you're in the corner office, balancing a lot of critical issues, food safety is just one part of your portfolio, albeit a foundational issue on which the whole enterprise depends. And we wanted to get a sense of what these executives were thinking, what their perspectives were.

For example, Bill McEwan, president and CEO of Sobeys, stressed the importance not just of information, but of how food safety dovetails with a wide range of issues.

"I don't know when it's going to happen but I think this issue of trust and confidence is going to go beyond food safety and security," he said. "It's going to extend to corporate social responsibility and ethical sourcing and people's notion of not just how safe is our product but how is it produced; where was it produced and what are the factors behind it. It's like these four roads heading into a traffic circle. When we get to the traffic circle there better be some sort of organizing mechanism to process all this information of trust or the industry is going to have real big challenges."

Some of this was echoed by Jose Luis Duran, chairman of Carrefour, the world's second largest retailer. Duran told me that the key challenge for food retailers is "to get closer and closer to the source of the products themselves." Even in an era of mass and global procurement, and perhaps *because* it is an era of mass and global procurement, retailers have both a control and training responsibility when dealing with suppliers.

I was intrigued by something that Dick Boer, CEO of Ahold Europe, said to me – that food safety challenges have become far more complicated because grocers want to offer customers the same products all year round – including seasonal products, like strawberries or grapes. "So you have to buy them all over the globe, to follow summer," he said. Which makes me wonder if, in the desire to satisfy customers, the food industry also has created unreasonable expectations that have resulted in formidable challenges that can never completely be resolved.

A couple of other intriguing comments that are on the video...

Gareth Ackerman, chairman of Pick n Pay in South Africa, suggested that “food safety is also a bit of a demographic issue. And the higher up you are on the food chain the more of an issue it is. The lower down you are it becomes far more of a, ‘how can you feed your family as cheaply as possible as well as possible.’” He’s not suggesting that food safety isn’t important to poor people....just that they have other concerns and are even more dependent on retailers and manufacturers living up to their end of the deal.

On the issue of communicating with customers, here’s what Pierre Olivier Beckers, CEO of the Delhaize Group, had to say: “If we do it in a positive way; if we do it in a consistent and a coherent way, I think we should speak every day, every hour of the day to consumers, making information available. And then that trust factor will go up, not overnight but in time.”

And E. Neville Isdell, chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola, told me: “The reality is that as food has gotten safer, as companies have become more socially responsible our consumers are demanding even more from all of us. The bar keeps getting raised literally every day and that’s really the biggest thing to challenge.”

Mike Duke, the vice chairman of Wal-Mart, agreed: “I believe that the quality of safety efforts today among retailers and suppliers is at a much higher standard than in the past,” he told me. “We all deliver safer food today than ever before but the consumer has higher expectations than ever before.”

It’s true. The bar keeps rising, and consumer expectations keep growing. But communication is the key...with suppliers and retailers and consumers all part of the information chain that is the strength, the integrity of the food business.

Sobey’s Bill McEwan said it: “Communication isn’t communication until both sides get it.” But I would amend that to, “Communication isn’t communication until *all* sides get it.”