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Barcelona Blog: Reporting In From The CIES Food Safety Conference

BARCELONA -- Random notes and comments from "Content Guy" Kevin Coupe as the annual CIES International Food Safety Conference unfolds...

- This is the fourth CIES Food Safety Conference that I've attended and spoken at, and seems to be the biggest. JP Suarez, senior vice president and general counsel for Walmart's International Division, and chairman of the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI), says that there are 530 people attending from 44 countries. At a time when a lot of companies are cutting back on travel and educational expenses, that seems remarkable...a testament to the kind of strong program that CIES puts on, appealing to both retailers and manufacturers.

- In his opening presentation, Suarez noted that food safety had diminished as an industry priority between 2000 and 2007, at least according to the annual CIES "Top of Mind" survey, it has come "roaring back."

"Food safety is one of those areas we cannot afford to have as a luxury only when business is good...if the consumer believes it is something is only we focus on when business is good, then the consequences will be dire," he said.

- Good line from Suarez: "The consumer doesn't give us a lot of second chances when it comes to their health."

- Looking around the room, good to see a growing contingent of US retailers attending this conference, from Food Lion, McDonald's, Hannaford, HEB, Kroger, Supervalu, Target and Walmart. Needs to be more, though...which is probably why they've announced that the 2010 edition will be in Washington, DC. (JP Suarez joked that he'd try to get President Barack Obama to speak at it...at least, I think he was joking.)

- Big push on GFSI, from Suarez: "If the consumer ever thinks that certification can be bought and not earned, then we will be in real trouble." (I'm wondering what kind of certification that peanut plant in Georgia got...and whether it was bought as opposed to being earned.)

- There is a fascinating theme running through the first day's presentations – a concern that tough economic times could cause the food industry to take its collective eye off the food safety ball.

- David Hughes, Emeritus Professor Of Food Marketing at Imperial College in London, gave an interesting speech noting the toughness of the economy, stressing that it was the first time since the seventies that we'd seen food inflation converge with a spike in oil prices. One of his big concerns is that oil prices will shoot back up because of political instability in the Middle East: "If you have a spike in oil prices plus food inflation riding on the back of a recession, it will create real problems," he said, with what seemed like British understatement. He's making me worry...

- Hughes just listed all the reasons that the industry has to be worried about food safety: "...international trade in food products ... real and perceived problems with food from high risk countries ... food safety stories sell newspapers (Is this media self interest or just plenty of material?) ... 24/7 global coverage and global transparency ... better science/systems to detect problems ... actions of well organized special interest groups..." Yikes! He also just pointed out that a search of top 10 food news stories in 2008 showed that half of them were food safety-related. Yikes!

- Hughes just repeated the Suarez line almost verbatim: "Food safety is not a luxury you can

focus on when everything else is going well.” Think there is a trend here...

- Hmm... Just noticed that Dr. David Acheson, associate commissioner for food safety at FDA, has cancelled out of an appearance he was supposed to make here. Can't imagine what might be more important than this...unless it is figuring out how to apply the same level of oversight that he's promised to use in FDA's new China offices to places closer to home...like a certain peanut plant in Georgia. (Can't help it...this story makes me nuts. No pun intended.)

- CIES also announced that the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI), which it manages, is developing a joint approach to benchmarking with an organization called GlobalGap, which represents the agricultural industry. The idea seems to be – and this gets a little beyond my level of expertise - to find a way to make one food safety audit and certification process serve various ends of the supply chain...and thus appears to be a good idea that will be both efficient and effective when implemented.

There must be something going around...just got an email on my laptop saying that GlobalGap has signed a similar deal with the Safe Quality Food (SQF) Institute in the US, which is administered by the Food Marketing Institute (FMI).

- Nice presentation by Dr. Art Liang, director of the food safety office at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Same theme, different words: “Even though you may be tempted to cut corners in tough economic times, don't do it,” he warned.

- Liang said that it used to be that scientists didn't detect outbreaks, but just waited for people to come in and say they got sick, and the sources were so clear that they didn't need an epidemiologist. Now, he said, the science is so far ahead that they can actually find a needle in a haystack.

- Cautionary note from Liang: “Foodborne outbreaks actually are stable...it is the number of high profile multistate outbreaks that is going up.” I remain convinced that as much work as the industry needs to do in terms of the science and infrastructure of food safety, consumer-oriented transparency also is a significant problem. There is a lot of coverage and information out there, but not enough good information.

- It's interesting. While the peanut butter-related salmonella outbreak is something that's being widely discussed, I get the sense that it isn't as much of an issue for the Europeans in attendance as it for Americans. Granted, it is a US issue...but there doesn't seem to be a “there but for the grace of God go I” attitude. Rather, they seem to think that is a specific problem owing to lack of proper US regulatory oversight.

This would be irritating, but then I remember that the US food industry sometimes tends to react with similar superiority/arrogance when it reads about occurrences of mad cow disease or melamine-related food poisoning in foreign countries. Then, of course, we find out that it can happen to us...

If recent events prove anything, it is that there is no room for arrogance if you're in the food safety business.

- Just talked to the folks at JohnsonDiversey, which sponsored the video that I presented here at CIES: *Gone Fishing: Food Safety In A Global Supply Chain*.

They've agreed to make a DVD available to any member of the MNB community who wants one...anyone who is interested just has to send me an email with their name, title, company and address...and I'll pass that information on to JohnsonDiversey, and they'll send the video out.

Cool.