



CAMPBELL RESEARCH & CONSULTING

**Evaluation of
Food Safety Information
Resources &
Identifying Information
Needs of Food Businesses**

Report 4
Summary of Findings & Conclusions

Prepared for

**Department of Human Services
Food Safety Unit**

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1. Introduction

A key role of the Food Safety Unit (FSU, the Unit) of the Department of Human Services (DHS) is to ensure that the food produced and consumed in Victoria meets national safety standards.

The Victorian food safety regulatory framework is complex and includes a number of stakeholders – organisations and individuals that provide information and regulate food businesses. For example:

- Municipal Councils;
- Food Safety Auditors;
- Registered training providers;
- Industry Associations; and
- Food businesses

Providing stakeholders with appropriate information to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements is an important role of the FSU. Over the past 4 years the Food Safety Unit has produced and disseminated a variety of information resources for stakeholders, including:

- Brochures;
- Food safety program templates;
- Videos;
- Guidelines, and
- Web pages.

The primary focus of the information resources has been to:

- Facilitate compliance with the regulatory requirements and legislative reforms introduced in 2001; and
- Inform food handlers of safe food practices.

The reform process has now concluded and the FSU feel that the need to communicate regulatory and compliance requirements may no longer be a priority. The Unit, however, continue to experience demand from Municipal Councils and Registered Training Providers for information to provide to their clients.

The FSU therefore commissioned Campbell Research & Consulting (CR&C) to conduct a study to provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of existing information resources in order to assist them in development of future information resource and dissemination strategies.

1.1 Project Objectives

The objectives of the study were clearly defined in the Project Brief produced by the FSU. “*Evaluation of food safety information resources and identifying information needs of food businesses*”:

- Identify **who** uses ‘business’ food safety information resources and understand **how** these resources are used.
- Ascertain the **effectiveness** of existing information resources in **educating or influencing** the different stakeholder groups (different audiences).
- Ascertain food safety information **needs, gaps and preferences** of various stakeholders.
- Identify preferences for the **content, style and dissemination methods** of information resources.

- Identify **key factors and barriers** that influence stakeholder acceptance, response to and use of food safety information resources.
- Provide input and understanding to the development of a **business information resources strategy**.

1.2 Methodology

The project consisted of a number of stages to address the FSU's requirements:

- **Assessment of Information Requests.** In this stage the forms used to record requests received for information resources (Information Request forms) were analysed to identify the stakeholder segments and information requested over the last 3 years.
- **Assessment of Information Users, Information Needs and Barriers.** This stage of the study consisted of two research components designed to identify issues and behaviour surrounding provision and flow of food safety information resources.
 - **Phase 1: Exploratory Stakeholder Consultations.** This phase consisted of:
 - depth interviews with intermediaries (organisations and individuals that provide information and regulate food businesses); and
 - focus groups with people working in a range of food businesses.
 - **Phase 2: Food Business Survey.** A telephone survey of 400 people responsible for food safety within a range of randomly selected food businesses.

This study involves the production of four reports.

- **Report 1:** A summary of the results of the analysis of the Information Request forms.
- **Report 2:** A discussion on the findings from the Exploratory Stakeholder Consultations – the depth interviews and focus groups.
- **Report 3:** Presentation and discussion of the results of the telephone survey with food businesses.
- **Report 4:** A report which integrates the findings from all stages of the study (this report).

1.3 This Report

This report pulls together an overall summary of the findings from the three stages of the study and, based on the conclusions drawn from these, makes recommendations regarding the development of an information resource strategy for the future. It is recommended that Reports 1, 2 and 3 are read in order to understand the detailed findings from each stage.

1.4 Acronyms

The acronyms used in this report are described below (Table 3).

CR&C	Campbell Research & Consulting
DHS	Department of Human Services
FSU	Food Safety Unit
EHO	Environmental Health Officer
CATI	Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing



1.5 Disclaimer

Please note that, in accordance with our Company's policy, we are obliged to advise that neither the Company nor any member nor employee undertakes responsibility in any way whatsoever to any person or organisation (other than the Food Safety Unit) in respect of information set out in this report, including any errors or omissions therein, arising through negligence or otherwise however caused.

2. Summary of Findings

This summary brings together the findings from the three stages of the study:

- Analysis of the Information Request forms.
- Findings from the depth interviews and focus groups conducted with food businesses.
- Results of the telephone survey with food businesses.

The findings are discussed in detail in the reports produced for each stage of the study.

When reading this report the following should be noted:

- No significant differences were apparent between the behaviour and views of stakeholders in the metropolitan area compared with those in regional areas of Victoria.
- The term ‘inspectors’, when used in the context of this report, reflects the way it was used by food businesses in the qualitative stage, when no distinction was made between Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) or auditors.

Source, dissemination & use of food safety information resources

The diagram attached as Appendix 1 shows the main dissemination channels and flow of food safety information. This can be summarised as follows:

- EHOs within local councils, trainers, management of Class 1 and large multi site businesses (including franchises) act as **first level intermediaries** in terms of accessing and disseminating food safety information.
- These are the **primary users** of the FSU website (and other websites) and the food safety information resources produced by the FSU.
- **Small businesses** are time and resource poor and do not always have access to a computer. **Local councils/EHOs** are the major source of food safety information for small businesses.
- **Local Councils and/or EHOs**, the most dominant orderers of FSU resources, used pamphlets and posters as:
 - components of information packs for new businesses; or
 - occasional reminders for small businesses that are slow to meet compliance standards.
- EHOs indicate that they pass on some of the FSU resources to food businesses – primarily smaller businesses in their area and this was borne out by the survey with food businesses. However, in the qualitative stage there was low recall and retention of food safety information of this type among businesses at all levels and the material rarely appeared to reach ‘grass roots’ staff.
- Training organisations are also a resource provider to small businesses but to a lesser extent. Small businesses also relied on **Industry Associations and colleagues** to keep up with compliance and food safety information.
- **Trainers**, the second highest orderers of FSU printed material, use these resources as:
 - ‘hand outs’, or for inclusion in course material; or
 - a source from which to develop more targeted and branded material.
- **Trainers and auditors** have an established link with **Class 1 and large multi-site businesses** (including franchises).
- Food Safety Supervisors and managers (who may be one and the same, but not necessarily so) of larger and Class 1 businesses, and proprietors of small businesses are

the **gate-keepers** of food safety information with regard to dissemination of information to 'grass roots' staff.

- Class 1, larger businesses (including franchises) utilise the information obtained from the FSU and other websites to produce material for their own business. This information is used in a number of ways:
 - As a base for the development of broad based **training** material for staff.
 - Disseminated **electronically** to individual site management.
- **Class 1** also rely on auditors and trainers for provision of food safety information, as well as being orderers and users of other FSU material, such as **pamphlets and posters**, for staff.
- The use of FSU printed resources, such as **pamphlets**, is less prevalent among large businesses and franchises, who make minimal direct orders to the FSU.
- Class 1, large and medium businesses are more likely to impose or encourage the **training of staff** – whether this be formal training (through a recognised training organisation) or corporate development and on-the-job training. For many Class 1 and larger businesses, a formal qualification in food safety is a pre-requisite for employment.
- In **small businesses**:
 - **Personal relationships** – whether with EHOs and/or other small business proprietors/owners – are an important dynamic in the accumulation of food safety information and implementation of safe food practices.
 - Safe food practices, in line with compliance requirements, are generally conveyed to workers on the job **verbally and by demonstration**.
- **Community groups/events** were highlighted as a distinct segment of the FSU audience, largely due to the characteristics that set them apart from established ongoing food businesses. Among the Community segment there is currently lack of awareness and confusion about when a permit is required. Thus, unless a permit is applied for through the local council, there is currently no natural focal point or occasion for provision of food safety information resources.

Format of food safety information resources

Printed resources, in the form of pamphlets, booklets and Fact Sheets, were the preferred format for food safety information for all stakeholders, both intermediaries and food businesses – particularly small food businesses. However, among **staff** of most businesses – particularly small businesses – expectations and preferences were that food safety practices would be taught and learnt by on-the-job demonstration and verbal communication.

Posters, preferably in graphic format, were an appealing resource for many businesses, especially for CALD businesses. These were used as a reminder of food safety practices and displayed in high use and relevant areas of the workplace.

Videos, as a concept, were considered to have some value for training and a number of training organisations, large companies and franchises produce their own. However, little use appeared to be made of them for communicating food safety information in the workplace. Smaller businesses could not see any opportunities for the use of videos, despite EHOs identifying a role for them in this business segment.

The FSU resource '***Food Safety Guidelines for Community Events***' was well regarded and perceived to be useful by potential users. However, there was a lack of awareness of the resource among Community groups and EHOs.

The following were identified as other characteristics associated with the formatting and dissemination of food safety information:

- The survey identified **Newsletters and A4** letters as other commonly used and preferred resources for communicating food safety information.
- Class 1 businesses were more likely to utilise a **wider variety** of resource formats than other businesses.
- **Electronic information** sources (email and websites) were more popular for Class 1, medium/large businesses and franchises, but not a preferred form of communication for small or CALD businesses.
- **Word of mouth** was a strongly established source of food safety information among all stakeholders and different levels of workers.

Quality of food safety information resources

The survey indicated that no difficulty had been experienced by food businesses in obtaining information on food safety, and the amount of information available was considered adequate.

Businesses who had obtained food safety information within the last 12 months rated its **relevance, helpfulness** and **the ease with which it could be understood** highly.

However, a number of issues arose in the qualitative stage regarding the quality of food safety information resources currently available via the FSU:

- Those familiar with the internet commented that the FSU website was difficult to navigate; nor was it in a format which:
 - easily identified what resources were available;
 - drew attention to any new information relating to food safety regulations or compliance; or
 - reflected the structure and segmentation of the food business sector.
- Both intermediaries and food businesses commented that much of the current information was 'generic' and therefore often provided only limited value for many businesses. Information targeted to particular food business segments would prove more effective.
- Some information was considered out of date and/or had less relevance now the legislation had been implemented. Hence accuracy and currency were issues perceived to need attention from FSU in order to maintain credibility.
- Smaller businesses that relied on the Council or inspectors for much of their food safety information had experienced frustrating inconsistencies in the interpretation of regulatory requirements and would therefore appreciate clarification on certain facets of compliance and work practices.
- The terminology and acronyms used in some food safety information resources presupposed a certain level of knowledge on the part of potential users.
- There was no ONE source of which provided details of registered training courses.

DHS/FSU as provider of food safety information resources

Awareness of the Department of Human Services Food Safety Unit was low among most food businesses. Although higher among Class 1 businesses, it was not top of mind as the place to go for, or the provider of, food safety information.

Few food businesses could recall any information produced by the Food safety Unit, except for Class 1.

Direct contact with the FSU tended to be limited to when:

- An EHO, auditor or food business required clarification on a compliance issue and it could not be resolved via other sources.
- A food business had received contradictory interpretation of guidelines or compliance requirements from different EHOs or Council representatives.

In such situations, contact was generally made by phone. However, not all these experiences had been positive, as the FSU had not always provided the clarification required, or been able to answer the enquiry to the caller's satisfaction.

Regardless of awareness, most businesses assumed that there was a government body responsible for the regulatory policy, compliance and provision of information regarding food safety. Qualitatively, this government unit was perceived to have greater credibility than any other source in terms of providing information relating to food safety compliance issues. This was borne out by the survey in which the 'Department of Human Services Food Safety Unit' was rated equally credible with local councils as a source of food safety information, and significantly more credible than any other source.

Perceived need for food safety information

The use of food safety information resources was primarily limited to setting up and implementing the mandatory Food Safety Program required by all food businesses.

The **Template** drives the Program and the information obtained during the process of setting up and implementing the Program acted as the first reference point for subsequent clarification and reinforcement of compliance requirements, if and when needed. Thus indications were that the template had been, and continues to be, the major information resource regarding food safety for most businesses.

Few businesses interviewed in the survey had **actively** sought food safety information during the last twelve months. Whilst some businesses had received information from the local council, their head office, a trainer or auditor over this period almost half of all businesses had received **no** food safety information at all. A **minority** of businesses had made any **changes** as a result of the information received.

Very few businesses indicated they had experienced difficulties in obtaining food safety information, if it was needed, over the last 12 months.

Once a Food Safety Program had been set up and implemented, little food safety information was sought by the majority of food businesses. The following were the only situations where a need could be envisaged for subsequent information:

- Changes to the legislation;
- When a non-compliance issue had been identified by an inspector; and
- Avoidance of bad publicity for the business or brand.

Thus, for most businesses, information relating to food safety was deemed to be required on a **'needs only'** basis. The majority of intermediaries and food businesses expressed **no need** for additional information resources.

Whilst examples and data which highlighted the implications of non-compliance and failure to adhere to safe food practices were considered to generate the greatest interest and strongest impact, a key issue for intermediaries and food businesses alike was that currently there is no automatic 'alert' to notify stakeholders of a food safety emergency or changes in legislation. Thus stakeholders are required to be seek out this information for themselves – but in most instances do not know if there is anything new to find, or what they are seeking.

Perceived need for food safety information in languages other than English

The main language of communication for the majority of food businesses was English.

EHOs in areas with a high incidence of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) food businesses indicated a need for resources in languages other than English and claimed the ones produced by the FSU had been of value. However, CALD food businesses themselves indicated minimal need for information in languages other than English, regardless of whether staff spoke other languages. The rationale for this elicited in the qualitative stage was:

- Strong reliance on **verbal** communication rather than written information in small businesses.
- Preference for messages communicated **graphically** and understandable by anyone (illiterate and/or whose first language was other than English).

However, compared to non-CALD businesses the survey indicated that CALD businesses:

- Were **less likely to seek out** food safety information.
- Had found it somewhat **less easy to obtain** the food safety information they needed over the last twelve months;
- Expressed **less satisfaction** with the **amount** of food safety information available;
- Did **not** rate the **helpfulness** of the information as highly as non-CALD businesses.

3. Conclusions

The food safety information resources produced by the Food Safety Unit to prepare food businesses for the new regulations and assist them in developing a Food Safety Program appear to have been appreciated and effective.

Now that the majority of established businesses have a Food Safety Program, demand for existing resources is likely to be limited to:

- New food businesses;
- Small businesses who are slow to meet compliance standards;
- Training of new staff for the food sector.
- When there are any changes to the legislation or regulatory requirements.
- If there has been publicity relating to a food poisoning occurrence.

The FSU has correctly identified a point in time where these resources need to be reviewed and strategies developed for the future.

3.1 Current Food Safety Information Resources

The following reviews the status of the resources currently produced by the FSU and offers options for consideration regarding each resource.

FSU Website

The FSU website was not considered easy to navigate, nor did users find it easy to identify and access information required.

Options for consideration regarding development of the website could therefore include:

- Improvement in the navigation facility of the website.
- Easy identifiers for access to information for:
 - Stakeholder groups – intermediaries (EHOs, RTOs, business segments).
 - Publications.
 - Topics.
- Presentation of the information in a style, language and format appropriate for different stakeholder groups.

Food Safety Template

The food safety Template – hard copy and FoodSmart – is a key resource for food businesses. Satisfaction appears high for this resource. Therefore it is suggested that the current Template resource and the existing channels of dissemination are retained. No modifications appear to be needed.

Brochures

Indications are that there will be a continuing, albeit reducing, need for brochures, as they provide a significant resource for EHOs and training organisations. However, the findings from the study suggest that, despite the volume of orders placed, rarely do they reach ‘grass roots’ workers; and they are rarely read or retained by recipients.

Options for strategies associated with the production of brochures could therefore include:

- Continue to produce hard copy versions of brochures to avoid the perceived cost shifting and problems associated with downloading electronic versions identified by EHOs (and other intermediaries).

- Review and potentially audit the production and dissemination of existing brochures with a view to reducing the volume produced.
- Consider redesigning pamphlets to reduce the text and communicate messages graphically.
- In the longer term, develop a range of brochures designed for specific business segments and/or food types.

Fact Sheets

Conclusions regarding Fact Sheets are similar to those discussed above for brochures. Fact sheets are a resource used by intermediaries and gatekeepers, especially EHOs. However, indications were that they have limited value to food businesses unless they address a specific need or message.

Thus options could be as follows:

- Continue to produce hard copy versions of Fact Sheets to avoid the perceived cost shifting and problems associated with downloading electronic versions identified by EHOs (and other intermediaries).
- Review and potentially audit the production and dissemination of existing Fact Sheets with a view to reducing the volume produced.
- Re-design the Fact Sheet range so each one provides information on a specific:
 - issue of compliance;
 - business segment;
 - food type; or
 - ‘emergency’ (avoidance of bad publicity) situation.
- The information contained in a Fact Sheet is presented as briefly and concisely as possible.

Posters

Posters are a highly utilised form of reminders of food safety practices for staff in food businesses. Therefore it is suggested that a range of posters for food businesses continue to be produced. However, given the low awareness of the existing brochures among the majority of food businesses and the preference for graphic communication, the following may be considered:

- Create broader awareness of the range of posters produced among intermediaries and food businesses.
- Re-design posters so they communicate key safe food practices graphically and are therefore universally understood by staff that may have minimal literacy skills and/or speak other languages.

Videos

Little use was identified for this resource by businesses with established Food Safety Programs. Stakeholders who have a genuine use for videos, such as training organisations, larger businesses and franchises are most likely to produce their own as part of a more comprehensive in-house induction program. The use of videos as a means to disseminate food safety information could be reconsidered.

3.2 Future Information Resource Strategy

Barriers to access and use of Food Safety Unit information resources once the Food safety Program has been implemented are multi-dimensional and can be summarised as follows:

- The perception that no information is needed.
- Lack of awareness.
- Difficulty associated with finding appropriate information.
- Lack of content relevance or currency.
- Terminology.
- Too many words.

These, together with other issues identified by intermediaries and food businesses surrounding information needs, suggest the following are considered in the strategy for future information resources:

- Automatic and/or easily identifiable updates and reminders of food safety regulatory requirements **and** information resources.
- Regular checks to ensure information is updated, accurate and current.
- Simplification of terminology/language used in communications for food businesses.
- Emphasis on graphic representation of food compliance practices and messages for food businesses.
- Clarification of commonly disputed or queried regulatory issues.
- Consistency in interpretation of what constitutes food safety compliance
- Segmentation of businesses by type.
- Information resources produced for specific segments or food types.
- Practical information and recommendations on 'food safety' products such as chemicals and thermometers
- A comprehensive overview – timetable, costs venues, etc – of training courses available.

Indications were that dissemination channels will not change and therefore the main flow of information will remain the same as it is currently:

- The FSU and other websites will be the primary source for intermediaries, Class1, large/medium and franchise business management.
- Changes in regulatory requirements and printed resources will be disseminated to:
 - New and small businesses via local Councils.
 - A range of students and food business workers via trainers.
- Work practice information will be communicated verbally by management to 'grass roots' workers on an ongoing basis.

3.2.1 FSU Positioning

Awareness of the Food Safety Unit is low. Not all experiences with queries made direct to the Unit have been positive or achieved the desired outcome. Yet as a government body it is perceived to be responsible for ensuring food safety compliance. In the study stakeholders identified a need for **one** source of reference to eliminate the inconsistencies in interpretation of regulatory compliance issues. The FSU was perceived as the appropriate body to take on this 'leadership position' and, as the regulator, it is perceived to have the credibility to do so. The FSU could therefore consider:

- Adopting a 'leadership' role as the provider of all current and relevant information relating to food safety regulatory requirements, and the key source for:
 - Clarification of commonly disputed or queried regulatory issues.
 - Consistency in interpretation of what constitutes food safety compliance

3.2.2 Additional Business Segments

There are two business segments which, from the findings of the study, suggest a need for the development of specifically focused and independent strategies. These are:

- CALD businesses
- Community events.

CALD Businesses

Despite the translation of food safety information resource material into other languages, this does not seem to have been effective in educating CALD businesses and ensuring they maintain compliance with food safety requirements. Indications are that printed material alone is insufficient. Face to face contact and community relationships have more influence. Thus, we suggest the following are considered for this food business segment:

- Training offered by bi-lingual/culturally compatible trainers.
- Floating bi-lingual/culturally compatible EHOs for various CALD groups.
- The recruitment of a 'champion' in local council areas with high incidence of certain CALD business types. Someone who has achieved a highly regarded level of food safety compliance and is respected by the community.

Community Events

Indications are that much of this segment has not reached the stage of awareness of other food businesses regarding food safety requirements. Thus the priority would appear to be a need for wider community education in order to create awareness of the criteria for a permit. This could be through advertisements or articles in local newspapers; information nights or mailings for businesses in the area by local councils.

Food safety information training and resources for organisers and volunteers could then be channelled via the Council through the permit application process.

The current resource produced by the FSU "*Food Safety Guidelines for Community Events*" would appear to be an effective resource for this purpose, at least in the short term.

Dissemination & Flow of Food Safety Information

