Color-Coded Tools in the Food Industry

According to the CDC, 1 in 6 Americans get sick by eating contaminated food every year, resulting in an estimated 3,000 deaths. As if the human cost isn't sobering enough, the Grocery Manufacturer Association also estimates the average cost of a recall to a food company is a whopping $10 million in direct costs in addition to brand damage and lost sales. Forty-eight percent of recalls in 2017 happened because of undeclared allergens, and 32% were due to Listeria, Salmonella, or E. coli.

Color-coded tools are a practical, straight-forward way to implement zoning in a facility and may help keep different hygiene levels—such as raw and finished products—separated.

Color-Coding as a Preventive Control

Color-coding cleaning tools can help decrease the risk of contamination or allergen cross-contact incidents that lead to recalls. The process of color-coding in food production facilities has become more important thanks to the regulations in the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) and the guidelines proposed in the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) standards. FSMA and HACCP address food safety by creating systems for preventing, eliminating, or reducing any significant hazards in the entire production process, from raw material to distribution of the finished product.

Color-coding is an excellent example of a control measure. Color-coded tools can be assigned to different critical control points to keep allergens or likely sources of contamination separate. For example, blue may be assigned to the section of a plant that deals with raw hamburger, while the section that handles it post-cooking uses yellow. This easy signifier helps ensure that a brush that cleaned a surface covered in raw beef (and possibly E. coli) isn't used to clean the workbench for the finished product. Color-coding is an excellent and simple solution to ensuring tools and cleaning equipment aren't switched around these raw and finished workspaces.

When color-coding is well implemented in a facility, it's easy to distinguish among zones and know what they represent. Because of this instant visual reminder, separating raw from finished products and keeping allergens separated is much simpler.

Color-Coding as a Universal Language

The environment in a food processing facility can be chaotic. The frantic nature of it is only compounded when you bring multiple languages into the mix. Trying to keep everything organized and streamlined can at times be a daunting task. Having employees use color-coded tools can solve some of these issues.

Whether you have just one employee that speaks another language, or 500 who speak a variety, color-coding can help to keep efficiency high and mistakes low. Colors are universal, no matter what language someone speaks. Employees can be taught in their own language that red tools are used for wheat, for example, and they'll be able to identify the right tool without having to hold a conversation with another employee, who may not speak their same language.

To assist in everyone learning and remember which color goes with which zones or products, posters and/or color-coded tool stations should have each color with its purpose in all languages spoken in the facility.

Though colors are typically a universal language, color blindness can affect about 8% of men and .05% of women. Depending on what kind of color blindness your employee has, choosing colors that have a high contrast might be a solution. In other cases, simply avoiding pairings like red/green or blue/yellow may suffice. Every situation is different, and the most important thing is to know your employees' needs and how to best meet them.

Best Practices for Color-Coded Tools in the Food Processing Industry

Keep it simple. Limit the number of colors you use to around 3-5 in small or medium facilities. In larger food processing plants, keeping the number of colors each individual has to remember daily to the same small range can help keep everyone on the same page.

Pick contrasting colors. Though it might be easier to remember that red is used on raw beef, it can also present a problem if someone drops a tool into product that's being worked on. If this happens, being able to easily spot a tool can mean the difference between a pricey recall and a fixable mistake.

Avoid complicated color assignments. Having customized tools—like a green broom with a blue handle to represent a certain zone and allergen contact—may seem like a good idea, but it will inevitably lead to confusion and chaos. Instant recognition is one of the largest benefits of color-coded tools, and taking that away by complicating it will reduce its effectiveness.

Roll out the program all at once—This will help in avoiding confusion. Make all tool changes at one time, along with an education program and a widely announced start date for the new transition.

Use signage for reinforcement. Don't leave room for ambiguity with color-coding. Let signs, in however many languages are needed, remind workers which color is assigned to which zone.

Having a color-coding program in place can help to limit the language confusion found in food processing facilities. Less confusion means safer practices, and this means better food safety. This can add up to fewer recalls, which saves money and helps any company's reputation.

Here are links to additional resources on color-coding:

- White Paper: Making the Decision to Apply Color-Coding
- Article: Color-Coding for the Color-Blind
- Article: New-Employee-Proof Your Safety Plan
- Article: Selling Your Organization on Color-Coding

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