



## HANDLING CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

Responding to customer complaints is an important part of a successful food safety system. Customer complaints can indicate a breakdown in process controls that have been established to prevent or eliminate the risk of quality deterioration and food safety hazards. They need to be investigated as soon as possible to determine if food safety has been compromised and to ensure these breakdowns are identified and resolved. Having a documented procedure ensures customer complaints are addressed in a timely manner, and all relevant information is gathered, allowing for a thorough investigation and an appropriate resolution. Below are key steps for handling customer complaints.

1. Have a reporting mechanism for customers to report complaints in place. This can be a phone number, email address, website or postal address.
2. Have a designated and qualified person respond to the initial complaint, gather relevant information and have a formal means to record this information, either paper or electronic options will work.
3. When responding to the complaint, the following information must be gathered and recorded:
  - Date, time and how the complaint is received (e.g. call, email)
  - Name of the person recording the complaint
  - Name and contact information of the complainant
  - Product information including the name, size, lot code, quantity and how long the product was opened for
  - When and where the product was purchased
  - If the complainant has evidence to aid the investigation such as a sample or clear picture
    - i. If dealing with a foreign object complaint, ask for the object and packaging back or a picture of the object with a ruler for scale
  - A detailed description of the complaint
  - If the complainant has experienced any illness or injury



# FACT SHEET

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4. Once the complaint has been recorded, it should be evaluated and categorized by quality assurance as a low, medium or high risk depending on the type of complaint (e.g. safety, quality, composition, quantity or other regulatory concern). If food safety has been compromised, the investigation must begin immediately to determine the root cause, if other products or packaging were affected, and if a recall needs to be initiated.
5. The investigation will include a review of all relevant paperwork associated with the production of the product to ensure safety and quality control measures were recorded. The investigation should involve operators/line staff as they can usually tell right away what happened by looking at the returned packaging/foreign material or they remember something going wrong that day.
6. Details of the complaint including calls with the complainant, CFIA or other authorities, and all correspondence must be recorded.
7. Once the root cause is determined, the company must develop corrective and/or preventative actions and establish responsibilities and time frames to ensure the cause of the complaint is resolved and will not reoccur. The company should monitor future complaints for the same issue more closely until they are confident the issue is resolved. For example, ask the person who receives the complaint to notify the QA department right away if there is a re-occurrence.

**Tip:** Refer to Perennia's fact sheet on How to Conduct an Effective Root Cause Analysis on our [website](#).

8. Follow up with the customer when the investigation is complete. If the investigation is expected to take time to resolve, touch base with the customer to acknowledge you are continuing to investigate and correct the issue. The response must include the date, instruction on how to return the product or disposition of the product, the resolution to the complaint and a signature from the QA department.
9. It is important to track customer complaint data and analyze them for trends as they are often a source for continuous improvement. An increase in complaints may indicate that a review of the quality and food safety system is required.
10. Customer complaint trending should be communicated in management meetings to ensure the entire team is working towards continuous improvement.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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