

How audit-led approaches are reinforcing trust in retail food safety

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As food retail and food service businesses across the Asia-Pacific scale up and diversify, food safety has moved from a back-end compliance function to a core business priority. Rapid market growth, expanding ready-to-eat offerings, and increasingly complex supply chains are placing new demands on retailers to ensure quality, traceability, and consumer trust. Against this backdrop, NSF has introduced its Retail Food Safety Audits program across ASEAN and Australia to help businesses strengthen risk management and operational consistency. In an interaction with NUFFOODS Spectrum, Sutida Ketudut, Director APAC, NSF, discusses what prompted the program's launch, the differing levels of food safety maturity across regional markets, and how scalable, technology-enabled audits are helping food businesses move beyond compliance toward continuous improvement.

What prompted NSF to launch the Retail Food Safety Audits program in ASEAN and Australia at this time, and how do these markets differ in terms of food safety maturity and compliance challenges?

NSF launched the Retail Food Safety Audits program in ASEAN and Australia in response to rapid growth in the food retail sector, changing consumer expectations, and increasing regulatory expectations across the region.

In recent years, food retailers—including supermarkets, convenience stores, and franchise food outlets—have expanded quickly, offering a wider range of ready-to-eat meals and fresh produce etc. This has increased food safety risks and placed greater responsibility on retailers to manage quality, traceability, and compliance throughout their operations.

In Australia, food retail operates within a well-established regulatory framework, supported by strong enforcement and mature food safety systems. However, challenges remain in maintaining consistent standards across large store networks, managing allergens, and ensuring continuous improvement beyond basic compliance.

In ASEAN, food retail is growing rapidly but at different levels of maturity. While some markets have advanced systems, many still face challenges related to fragmented supply chains, limited technical resources, and uneven regulatory enforcement—particularly among small and medium retailers. These differences highlight the need for a scalable and practical audit framework that supports retailers of all sizes in strengthening food safety performance, building consumer trust, and managing risks effectively.

How do the three audit tiers, Essentials, Plus, and Advanced, address the evolving needs of small operators versus large multinational food brands in managing food safety risks?

NSF's three audit tiers—Essentials, Plus, and Advanced—provide a scalable and structured framework that adapts to different business sizes, operational complexity, and risk profiles.

Essentials is designed for small and medium-sized food retailers and restaurants, helping them establish strong foundations in hygiene, food handling, maintenance, and brand standards.

Plus supports growing brands using the NSF Food Safety Checklist, and performance insights through NSF Connect, our cloud-based audit platform.

Advanced is tailored for multinational organisations managing complex, multi-country operations. It focuses on advanced risk management, governance, and global consistency.

Together, these tiers enable businesses to strengthen their food safety systems progressively as they grow, ensuring continuous improvement and effective risk management at every stage.

With increasing complexity in regional and global supply chains, how does this program help food businesses strengthen end-to-end food safety and traceability across sourcing, processing, and retail operations?

The program supports food retailers in strengthening food safety and traceability across their entire supply chain—from supplier sourcing and food processing to in-store handling and final sale.

It applies consistent audit standards at every stage, helping retailers verify suppliers, assess food preparation and storage practices, and monitor in-store operations more effectively. Strong documentation and digital record-keeping enable better traceability, allowing businesses to track products, ingredients, and corrective actions quickly and accurately.

By improving visibility and control across sourcing, distribution, and retail environments, the program enables early risk detection, faster response to issues, and more consistent food safety performance. This integrated approach helps retailers protect consumers, maintain brand trust, and meet regulatory expectations.

Can you elaborate on the role of digital platforms, such as NSF Connect, in enabling data-driven audits, continuous monitoring, and faster corrective action for food businesses?

NSF Connect plays a key role in helping food retailers manage food safety through data-driven insights and real-time visibility.

The platform brings together audit results, performance indicators, and corrective actions in one centralized system, enabling retailers to monitor compliance across multiple stores and locations. This improves benchmarking, helps identify recurring issues, and allows management teams to focus on higher-risk areas.

Through automated alerts and cloud-based access, NSF Connect supports continuous monitoring and faster response to non-conformities. Store managers and head office teams can access up-to-date information on audits, corrective actions, and follow-up activities, reducing delays and improving accountability.

Combined with NSF's technical expertise and advisory support, the platform enables retailers to detect risks early, implement effective corrective actions, and maintain consistent standards. In addition, secure digital records simplify regulatory inspections and reporting, helping businesses reduce compliance effort and cost.

What are the most common food safety gaps you currently see in the ASEAN and Australian retail and food service sectors, and how can audit-led approaches help close these gaps sustainably?

In the ASEAN region, common food safety gaps include inconsistent hygiene and sanitation practices, temperature control, varying levels of regulatory enforcement, and limited technical resources among smaller retailers and food service operators. High staff turnover and differences in training standards can also affect day-to-day compliance.

In Australia, food safety systems are generally well developed. However, challenges often arise in maintaining consistent standards across large retail and franchise networks, managing allergen controls, and ensuring that improvements are sustained beyond minimum regulatory requirements.

Audit-led approaches help address these gaps by providing a structured and objective assessment of food safety practices. Regular audits support standardization, strengthen accountability, and reinforce good operational discipline across locations. They also help identify root causes of recurring issues and guide targeted improvement plans.

By combining audits with ongoing training, performance monitoring, and management engagement, businesses can embed food safety into daily operations, creating a culture of continuous improvement and long-term sustainability.

Looking ahead, how do you see retail food safety audits evolving with emerging technologies such as real-time monitoring, AI-based risk assessment, and predictive analytics over the next few years?

In the coming years, retail food safety audits will increasingly shift from periodic compliance checks to continuous, intelligence-driven risk management systems.

Real-time monitoring will enable retailers to detect issues immediately and take corrective action before they impact consumers. AI-based risk assessment will help organisations analyse large volumes of operational data to identify patterns, prioritise high-risk areas, and predict potential failures across their supply chains.

Predictive analytics will further support proactive decision-making, allowing businesses to anticipate risks and strengthen controls in advance rather than reacting after incidents occur. This will improve resilience, consistency, and overall operational performance.

Ultimately, these technologies will enable retailers to move beyond compliance toward building smarter, more transparent, and more trusted food safety systems—strengthening consumer confidence and long-term brand value.

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