

Regulations apply to big or small firms; Producers on tight budgets don't have to navigate maze of rules alone

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Byline: Derek Sankey

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Nutrition labelling became mandatory for all food products made by large companies in Canada in 2006, small companies were given until 2008 to comply. But the rules are continually being updated and modified, potentially creating confusion for smaller companies.

"Small manufacturers came to us and we developed nutrition labels for their products," says Ron Kuriyedath, chief chemist for SGS Canada Inc. in Vancouver, a global consumer testing company that scrutinizes everything from potash to sneakers to food products.

"We're still doing the same testing, so [the size of a company] doesn't matter to us."

Navigating a potential minefield of regulations on consumer goods and food products is a complex process for large companies, and the same rules apply to small businesses with smaller budgets and consumer testing laboratories caution these fledgling producers to use every available resource to avoid costly complications.

"The more you're aware and the more issues that come out, it comes down to the testing laboratories," says Mr. Kuriyedath, who oversees food testing at SGS.

You can never be too careful when it comes to compliance, even for small producers and manufacturers. Technological advancements make consumer testing an evolving field.

Take melamine levels. A few years ago, federal regulations required food products to have no more than five parts per million of melamine, but that level has dropped to 0.1 ppm.

"It's a huge decrease," Mr. Kuriyedath says. "The technology has increased and just in the last year, it's been used to go down to lower limits."

When new research reveals the need to adjust regulations for any given product, amendments are made and incorporated into reputable testing laboratories criteria.

While SGS focuses mainly on larger companies that export and import, companies of all sizes have regulations to deal with and Mr. Kuriyedath encourages small producers to be proactive.

"We try to cater to all needs," he says. "Today, this person is small, but tomorrow they could grow and become a bigger player, so we cater to the small [companies] too."

One of the best ways for smaller companies to develop a clear understanding of what's required is to tap into the expertise of consultants and industry associations.

The **Small Scale Food Processors Association** in B.C. represents a wide range of farms, vineyards and other producers who ship products throughout Canada and the world.

It offers assistance with food safety through education and funding initiatives, such as a joint program between the federal and provincial governments called the Food Safety Systems Implementation program.

It also helps smaller producers connect with consultants -- often at little or no expense -- to ensure compliance.

Nancy Ross teaches a course on food laws, regulations and quality assurance at the University of British Columbia, but also acts as a consultant to smaller operators.

"They are basically getting free consulting services, so these tools have been developed and these people, like me, have been hired to go out to the food plants," she says.

Similar initiatives are underway in Alberta to enhance food safety by providing funds to provincially registered food plants to develop thorough food safety programs. Food safety has come under particular scrutiny in the past two years as a result of some high-profile cases, but each industry has its own unique set of regulations, whether it's minerals or make-up.

The Food Development Centre (FDC), a special operating agency of Manitoba Agriculture, even has a pilot plant where small companies can rent equipment and space to produce and package products for test markets.

This allows startups to work out any problems on home-scale quantities before they are sent out to market once labs test the products for compliance.

"It always helps to join these organizations," Mr. Kuriyedath advises.

Entrepreneurs often launch ventures with passion and enthusiasm, but pay scant attention to the details and doing their homework, setting them up for disaster.

smallbusiness@nationalpost.com