

MARKETING YOUR FOOD SAFETY CERTIFICATION

Michigan GroupGAP Network

A project of Michigan Food & Farming Systems,
Fresh Systems LLC, and MGGN Collaborators

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INTRODUCTION

So You're Certified, Now What?

Congratulations!

Food safety certification is no easy undertaking. While there are many reasons to go the certification route, a central reason is market access. Whether you already have a buyer asking for it, hope to gain a new buyer through it, or just want to get ahead of the curve, food safety certification is a useful tool in moving your produce from farm to table.

There is a lot more to using this tool than just passing an audit. Once your certification is in-hand, how do you communicate it to existing or potential buyers? What types of buyers ask for it? While many guides reference food safety certification, they typically only describe how to get certified, not what happens after. This guide aims to show you how your certification can be a catalyst for growth.

Engaging Buyers: Who Asks For It?

A good way to approach this question is to think about where a food safety outbreak would have the greatest impact. A small restaurant might get a few people sick, a chain restaurant might get several, a university cafeteria even more. As you work your way upstream in the value chain, the impact broadens: a small distributor might get dozens sick, a regional distributor might get hundreds, and so on. Additionally, buyers that are serving those with underdeveloped or compromised immune systems (such as schools, hospitals, or elderly care facilities) have a greater likelihood of requiring certification. In a nutshell: the greater the risk, the greater need for verification.

While not all buyers require food safety certification, no buyers will reject it. Showing the work you have put in to systematically minimize the risk of foodborne pathogens in your products says a lot about you and your business. It may be what convinces an on-the-fence buyer to work with you!

A buyer will ask for a copy of your certification. In USDA and some other certification programs, you will also be listed in an online database, which you can direct a buyer to for the most up-to-date information. Buyers may also request further documentation, such as your most recent audit report, proof of insurance, etc.

What Happens if They Want a Different Certification?

Unlike organic certification, there are multiple variations of food safety standards that you can be certified to. The USDA can certify to their GAP/GHP standard and to the Harmonized standard, in both individual and GroupGAP models.

There are other standard providers such as Primus, GFSI, GlobalG.A.P., and Canada GAP. It can truly be a dizzying environment, and some buyers will only accept certain certifications.

If you find yourself in a scenario where the certification they want doesn't match the one you have, *there are a few things you can do:*

1

Ask why they require what they do. Is it because it's just what's on the paperwork? Are they familiar with other standards?

2

Describe why you chose the certification you did. Get their contact info and have your certification administrator talk with them. They are usually more than happy to go over the ins and outs of their standard with buyers.

3

Ask if they will accept this certification for this year, with the understanding that you will transition to the one they require by next year. You have already created a food safety plan, adapting it to another standard should be fairly straightforward.



Marketing Your Food Safety Certification

When it comes to marketing, certification communicates a value statement. It shows you are proactive, transparent, and accountable to a common standard.



WEBSITES & SOCIAL MEDIA

There is a good chance you already have a section on your website that lists your certifications and/or your values. It is probably also in your “About” section on your social media platforms. These are great places to talk about why you chose to become food safety certified. Think about what resonates with your customers, and use that language.



The same goes for social media:

Talk about the process, take a selfie with the auditor (with their permission, of course), and celebrate a successful audit on your platform.

If there is a national food safety outbreak, reassure your customers that you have taken proactive steps to minimize foodborne pathogen risk.



PACKAGING

Most certification providers allow you to use their logo on your packaging. They have guidelines on how and when the certification logo is allowed for use. While your labels may get a bit crowded if you’ve also certified Organic, it’s a good way to communicate your certification with those who may not be familiar with your brand.



OTHER MATERIALS

You can add similar language to any handouts or signage that you use at the farmer’s market or trade shows. Similar to packaging, you can add your certifier’s logo to your business cards, if they allow it. It all comes back to communicating your values to your customers, through whichever medium you decide to use.



Going Further

What next? Now that you’re certified and communicating it to customers, how can you take it further?

RENEWING CERTIFICATIONS

Food safety certification is an annual process; keep your food safety plan up-to-date throughout the year and schedule audits early in the season.

CULTURE OF FOOD SAFETY

Beyond your own food safety program, how can you help elevate the principles of food safety in your community? Everyone benefits when good food safety practices become common and habitual. Food safety is a daily process!

INTRINSIC BENEFITS

Implementing good food safety practices in your business reduces the risk of people getting sick from your food, and that is the primary reason for this certification. But an added benefit is that looking at your business in a systematic way allows you to see things you might not have before. You may become more efficient, or your records may become more organized, allowing you to plan better for next year. This certification process allows you to better prepare for Organic and other certifications, and vice versa. The benefits go well beyond simply reducing food-borne pathogen risk.



Resources:

FSMA Final Rule

- <https://www.fda.gov/food/guidance-regulation-food-and-dietary-supplements/food-safety-modernization-act-fsma>

USDA Gap Programs

- <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/auditing/gap-ghp>

USDA Audit Verification Checklists

- <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/auditing/gap-ghp/audit>
- <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/auditing/gap-ghp/harmonized>

Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

- <https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/>

Michigan GroupGAP Network

- <https://www.freshsystemsllc.com/mgggn/>

MSU Agrifood Safety

- https://www.canr.msu.edu/agrifood_safety/

Michigan On Farm Produce Safety

- <https://www.miofps.org/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/MIProduceSafety/>

