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GETTING STARTED: STEPS TO SQF CERTIFICATION

The SQF family of food safety and quality Codes are designed to meet industry, customer and regulatory requirements for all sectors of the food supply chain. SQF has programs for primary production, through to manufacturing, distribution, food packaging and retail operations. Retailers, manufacturers and food service companies rely on SQF certification when approving their supply chain and for some it is a requirement before any product can be shipped.

Taking that first step is always the hardest. You may not know how to start or where to go. There are a lot of requirements and terms that may not be familiar. However, just like eating an elephant, the SQF Code should be consumed one bite at a time and by reading this tip sheet you have already taken that first bite!

LEARNING OBJECTIVES	APPLICABLE CODE ELEMENTS
O BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE SQF PROGRAM O IDENTIFY THE STEPS TO BECOMING SQF CERTIFIED O PREPARE FOR SQF CERTIFICATION	O 2.1.2.4 O 2.5.5

KEY TERMS

O **GFSI**

The Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) is an international organization of food manufacturers and retailers that brings experts together to address emerging issues on food safety. It is the organization that benchmarks the certification programs such as SQF to a set of food safety requirements.

O **GLOBAL MARKETS PROGRAM**

The GFSI Global Markets Program sets out how companies who lack or have underdeveloped food safety systems can meet the challenge of food safety, while simultaneously reducing hazards in global food supply chains and working towards market access through certification to a GFSI-recognized certification program.

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o SQF PROGRAM

The Safe Quality Food (SQF) program is recognized by retailers, manufacturers and foodservice providers around the world as a rigorous, credible food safety management system. The program follows the requirements outlined by the GFSI and uses retailer and stakeholder feedback to address the many food safety issues we all face every day.

o CERTIFICATION

The issuance of a certificate after the successful completion of an audit conducted by an SQF licensed certification body (CB).

o FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

A pattern of shared values and beliefs throughout an organization that affect mind-set and behavior toward food safety.

o SQF SYSTEM ELEMENTS

Found in Module 2, the System Elements define the core elements of the SQF Code which include the key programs for any food safety system and are required to be implemented by all sites seeking SQF certification. It forms the foundation of the site's SQF System. It includes the commitment of site management to maintain a safe food supply and the management processes that must be in place to do so

o FOOD SECTOR CATEGORY (FSC)

A classification established to assist in a uniform approach to management of the SQF Program. Often referred to as an FSC, the food sector category identifies the activities and auditor requirements for each site.

o SQF MODULES

The SQF modules are the required good manufacturing practices and pre-requisite programs for each site. The relevant module depends on the product(s) and process at each site.

PROCESS STEPS

1. Learn about SQFI and the SQF Code
   a. The first step to certification is to become familiar with the SQF Program so you can get a better understanding of which SQF Code to use and what requirements apply.

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Visit the SQFI website (sqfi.com). The website has many tools and resources; additionally, the Code is free to download and print.

b. The SQF Program has a series of Codes to help you achieve the level of food safety certification that you need, with each Code building on the previous one to provide a continuous improvement, certification pathway.

c. You can join the pathway at whichever level best suits your business needs and those of your market. The choice is yours.

SQF Quality Code
Integrated Quality Management System
Builds on the Food Safety Code
HACCP to manage quality threats

SQF Food Safety Code for Manufacturing
GFSI benchmarked
Intermediate plus Codex HACCP
Accredited certification

SQF Fundamentals - Intermediate
Based on Global Markets Program
Basic plus food safety management system

SQF Fundamentals - Basic
Based on Global Markets Program
Regulatory compliance
Good Manufacturing Practices

d. It might be confusing to know where to start so use the table below to help you determine where you should begin your path to SQF certification.

IF	THEN
You need a program that is approved for small, medium sites and meets the **GFSI Global Markets Program.**	Use one of the following SQF Fundamentals Programs: • SQF Fundamentals for Primary Production, Basic • SQF Fundamentals for Primary Production, Intermediate • SQF Fundamentals for Manufacturing, Basic • SQF Fundamentals for Manufacturing, Intermediate
You need a program that is **GFSI-benchmarked.**	Use one of the following SQF Food Safety Codes: • Primary Production • Manufacturing • Storage and Distribution • Manufacture of Food Packaging
You need a GFSI-benchmarked program that includes **quality.**	Use one of the SQF Food Safety Codes AND the SQF Quality Code
You don't have a buyer requirement, but want a program to measure your food safety fundamental program that is **HACCP based.**	Use the SQF Fundamentals Program, Basic

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If you don't have a buyer requirement, but want a program that measures your food safety program **based on HACCP**.	Use the SQF Fundamentals Program, Intermediate
If you don't have a buyer requirement but want a program that measures your food safety program based on HACCP and includes more **rigorous food safety standards.**	Use one of the SQF Food Safety Codes: • Primary Production • Manufacturing • Storage and Distribution • Manufacture of Food Packaging

    e.   Once you've identified the SQF Code that applies to your product and process, you now have to find the relevant food sector category and applicable module(s). By using Appendix 1 of any of the SQF Codes identify the food sector category or categories (FSC) your product(s) fall under. The FSC will determine which modules and SQF Food Safety Codes you will need to implement.

    f.   For example, if you manufacture jarred mayonnaise and your retailer is requiring you to have a GFSI benchmarked program, your product falls under FSC 18 Preserved Foods Manufacture, and you would use the SQF Food Safety Code for Manufacturing, which would require the System Elements (Module 2) and Module 11.

    g.   Once you have determined which Code applies to your product and process, the next step is to learn about the Code requirements. One of the best ways to learn how to implement the SQF Code requirements is to use one of our SQF training solutions. Training will walk you through the Code and provide clarity to the Code requirements while offering examples that other sites have used to implement their own food safety program.

    h.   SQFI provides a couple of options including online training or face-to-face training through a licensed SQF training center. SQFI also has our self-starter guides such as these tip sheets and guidance documents. The choice is yours and depends on your learning preferences, budget, and availability. To find the training solution that is the best fit for you, visit the SQFI website (sqfi.com).

2.   Building Your Food Safety Team

    a.   Whether your site is small, medium or large, having the right staff in place is the key to maintaining and sustaining your food safety system. The first step is to build your food safety team. Designate one of your employees as the person in charge of food safety. The SQF program refers to this person as the SQF Practitioner. Regardless of the title, this person is responsible for implementing and maintaining your food safety system. It's important that they have knowledge of food safety and be familiar of the food safety risks to your products and processes. Each SQF Code has specific requirements for this person so make sure you review the Code that applies to your product and process.

Who will be your dedicated person for food safety/SQF Practitioner? _____

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The responsibility of food safety doesn't fall solely on the shoulders of the SQF practitioner or the person in charge of food safety. It's important that the site have a food safety team that includes members from all areas of the organization, including senior site management, production, purchasing, sanitation and maintenance. Getting everyone involved is the best way to get buy-in as you build and strengthen your food safety system.

Who will be on your food safety team?

Department	Name	Department	Name
QA manager		SQF Practitioner	
Maintenance		Sanitation	
Purchasing		Training	
Production		Consultant	

3. Implement and Document the SQF Code Requirements
   a. Now that you are more familiar with the SQF Code, it's time to implement the SQF Code requirements. You can implement these requirements with your in-house expertise or in some cases; sites use a consultant at this point. While it isn't a requirement to use a consultant, SQFI has provided a list of registered SQF consultants on the SQFI website (sqfi.com). These consultants meet a specific set of requirements and you can search for a consultant by region or food sector category.

   b. There are two parts to the Code: Part A and Part B and several appendices that include the Food Sector Categories, Glossary, Logo Rules of Use and multi-site requirements.

   c. Part A includes information on the Code methodology and Part B includes the technical requirements. To start, focus on Part B. You will also want to become familiar with the food sector categories and glossary. Your understanding of Part A will come soon enough; your CB can help explain that section to you.

   d. Part B is broken up into 2 sections:

      i. System Elements (i.e., Module 2): Depending on the Code you are using, this section can have over 100 requirements. However, instead of looking at them as individual requirements, look at them as 9 sections and focus on building the food safety program. A System Element is the foundation for a successful food safety program. By focusing on implementing the programs to support the requirements in this section you will begin to form your food safety system and organizational culture.

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1. The System Elements have 9 Sections:

   1) Management Commitment

   2) Document Control and Records

   3) Specification and Product Development

   4) Food Safety System

   5) SQF System Verification

   6) Product Identification, Trace, Withdrawal and Recall

   7) Food Defense and Food Fraud

   8) Allergen Management

   9) Training

ii. The second section you will review is the relevant module for your pre-requisite programs such as good manufacturing practices (GMPs), good agricultural practices (GAPs), etc. You identified the relevant module when you selected your FSC earlier.

1. The relevant module typically consists of 11 sections. The headers and requirements may vary depending on the Code you are using. Below are the GMPs from Module 11.

   1) Site Location and Construction

   2) Construction of Premises and Equipment

   3) Personnel Hygiene and Welfare

   4) Personnel Processing Practices

   5) Water, Ice and Air Supply

   6) Storage and Transport

   7) Separation of Functions

   8) On-Site Laboratories

   9) Waste Disposal

   10) Exterior

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To aid in implementing your program, SQFI has many accessible resources. Training is an excellent resource and depending on your learning preference, budget and time, there are online and face-to-face options. SQFI also has guidance documents available that provide more interpretation explaining the intent to the Code. Tip sheets, such as this one, are also available on specific topics such as food defense, pest control, and conducting a risk assessment.

4. Choose a Certification Body (CB)

   a. A list of approved certification bodies are listed on the SQFI website (sqfi.com). SQF has over 30 CBs that operate in all areas of the world. Some are bigger, or more well-known, while others are small or may focus on specific commodities. Your CB is your partner in food safety so choose a CB that is the right fit for you.

   b. When choosing a CB, first check if you have any retailer or buyer requirements, or regulatory concerns that may restrict which CBs you can use. This would include special addendums, regulatory compliance checks or importer requirements. If there are no requirements then pick three and interview them.

   c. The obvious questions to ask a CB is how much the audit costs and how long it will take; however, there are other questions you might ask your CB to ensure they are the right fit for your site. Below are a few questions to consider asking.

   d. CB interview questions:

      i. Auditor competency

         1. How are auditors trained, initially and ongoing?

         2. What is the CBs and auditor's level of experience in auditing my products, process, country, region, etc.?

         3. Where is my auditor located (which impacts the cost of the audit)?

         4. If you are using an addendum then be sure there is an auditor approved to conduct the audit.

      ii. Complaints and appeals process

         1. Ask questions to get an understanding of what to do if an issue arises during the audit process.

      iii. Database system

         1. How are non-conformities identified and their corrective actions closed out?

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        2. What is the average time for receiving the technically reviewed audit report and issuing the certificate (Based on the last day of the audit, SQFI requires 10 days for the report and 45 days for the certificate to be issued)?

    iv. Can the CB assist me with my specific requirements?

        1. Are there any special needs you have such as entering data into a buyer database such as ReposiTrak?

        2. Are there any exemptions, restrictions or exclusions to my process?

        3. Are there restrictions on scheduling or audit times?

5. Register in the SQF Database

    a. To be considered for SQF certification, sites are required to register in the SQFI assessment database. The database can be accessed from the SQFI website (sqfi.com).

    b. Registration is annual, and there is a fee per site, payable at registration and renewal.

        i. The fee scale is determined by the size of the site and the gross annual sales revenue. To know the registration fee for your site, visit the SQFI website (sqfi.com).

6. Conduct a Pre-assessment

    a. Conduct a pre-assessment of your site to ascertain how your current food safety system matches up with SQF Code requirements. This can be done either by an outside consultant, an SQF auditor on behalf of a CB, or you can do it yourself.

    b. If you want to use outside help, ask your CB or consultant for assistance.

    c. If you decide to conduct a self-assessment, you can utilize one of the SQF's checklists. SQFI has a checklist for each Code and, if needed, there is also a checklist to check regulatory compliance with FDA FSMA regulations. All are available on the SQFI website (sqfi.com).

    d. The checklist will help guide you through your audit and identify those areas that don't meet the SQF Code requirements.

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e. When conducting your assessment here are a few tips.

    i. Define your audit objectives

        1. Some examples of audit objectives include:

            1) Make sure we pass the SQF audit

            2) Reduce non-conforming products

            3) Meet regulatory requirements

            4) Meet customer requirements

        2. Formalize the audit process

            1) Define the audit time and schedule and stick to it

            2) Use the SQF Code checklist

            3) Interview your employees and involve them in the process

            4) Conduct opening and closing meetings with your staff

        3. Communicate

            1) Write up a formal report

            2) Identify the non-conformities

            3) Take photos of good practices as well as non-conformities

        4. Treat this as its own program

            1) Train staff

            2) Include as many people as possible

            3) Develop procedures

        5. Close out the non-conformances

            1) Implement corrections and corrective action

            2) Identify the root cause to prevent reoccurrence

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7. Conduct the SQF Audit with a SQF Licensed Certification Body

   a. Schedule your audit with your CB. In some cases, the initial certification will consist of a document review and a site audit. For the Fundamentals program, the document review is optional and can be done separately or as part of the site audit.

   b. When you schedule your audit, make sure you confirm the scope of certification including what part of the site you want audited and the relevant products. Also consider if there are any addendums that you want to include to meet regulatory (e.g., FSMA or other government) or customer requirements.

   c. The audit duration depends on the size of the site, the number of employees and the type of products that are being audited. SQFI has developed an audit duration guide that can be found in Part A of the SQF Code. This is guidance that the CB and you can use to estimate how long the audit will be.

   d. Once the audit has been scheduled, the CB and the auditor will contact you with the auditor's name, the audit schedule and confirm the audit location and dates. The site audit will typically consist of an opening meeting, and collection of evidence that supports your food safety program. Evidence includes, but is not limited to, review of relevant documents and records, interviews with employees, an evaluation of the site and observation of best practices. A closing meeting will occur which will outline the audit results and identified non-conformities. The auditor will provide you with a list of the identified non-conformities, a timeframe for closing them out and when the certificate should be issued.

RELEVANT RESOURCES

- SQFI
  www.sqfi.com
  - SQF Codes
  - Checklists (SQF and FSMA)
  - Search for an SQF Consultant
  - Search for online training or a licensed training center
- SQF Conference
  www.sqfconference.com
- The Food Marketing Institute
  www.fmi.org
- FDA
  www.fda.org