

Words: Amanda Pawley
Images: Chris Renton

An appetite for success

How KFC's unique approach to quality and supplier management has helped it to stay a billion pound business

As one of the largest fast food chains in the world, KFC is known for many things – its ‘finger-lickin’ chicken, famous ‘Colonel’ and fiercely guarded secret recipe of 11 herbs and spices. But something that hasn’t picked up as much traction in the mainstream media

is the company’s unique approach to quality and supplier management – important elements for any successful organisation, especially in a time of notable food scandals. However, keeping the lion’s share of the fried chicken market is a tough feat and the only way to maintain this valuable position is to have quality in all facets

of the business. Charles Way, Head of Quality Assurance and Research and Development at KFC UK and Ireland, is at the heart of this mission. His job is to ensure the interests of stakeholders up and down the UK are met, by improving continually the company’s methodologies and practices – the core values of good governance and

agile assurance. *QW* went inside the company’s headquarters in Woking, London, to gain a better understanding of how it delivers a quality product and service throughout the UK. Charles talked to us about KFC’s bespoke quality management system, supplier approval process and rigorous internal audit system.

Sustaining success

KFC UK and Ireland prides itself on being a forward-thinking organisation that puts a greater emphasis on the voice of the customer than its competitors, but what role does quality play in this? “Quality is something that’s leading, it’s aspirational. As a brand, we want to be seen as having

a quality product that others are aspiring to copy, aspiring to buy and aspiring to want,” says Charles. “But quality also means consistency in the delivery of that goal every time for customers.” And making sure equipment is up to scratch is a major factor in achieving this. “We have standard equipment in all our

restaurants that we check regularly to make sure it can achieve the safety and quality standards we want to deliver,” explains Charles. “We have to make sure the process in our restaurants is very simple and replicable.”

The organisation uses its own sophisticated quality management system, Restaurant Operation Compliance Check (ROCC), to manage the quality of the service it offers and this helps the brand maintain its reputation as the go-to chicken shop in the UK.

“Whenever you look at safety and quality you’ve got to look at the complete cycle. We don’t have an accredited system but we do have a series of ways of working to make sure that we are set-up,” says Charles. “At the top level we have a selection of policies that determine how we work and what we need to achieve, and below that we have a number of standards – supplier standards, restaurant standards, health and safety standards etc – that we, in our individual market, need to be able to comply with. We also regularly check ourselves and undergo an internal audit process from our US counterparts, who audit us to make sure we’re compliant in what we need to be.”

Rules of supplier management

In 2014 KFC adopted the Red Tractor quality assurance logo on all its packaging in the UK. In addition, KFC’s suppliers are selected, assessed and recognised through the company’s strict Supplier Tracking Assessment and Recognition (STAR) system. The system sets and monitors the standards for suppliers and this involves being audited at least once per year, sometimes more, depending on the supplier’s risk and performance levels. “Everything starts from a quality and safety



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Images anti-clockwise: Behind the scenes at KFC’s UK headquarters, from its reception, cafeteria and meeting rooms to its menu adorned offices and the famous Food Innovation Kitchen



point of view, and making sure suppliers are set up and understand what is expected of them is really important. We’ve got a menu that has stood the test of time and we want to maintain that, but we are always looking at new concepts, ingredients and opportunities as the market changes,” says Charles.

It can take as long as 18 months for a supplier to become approved and in that process the entirety of a supplier’s food safety controls will be assessed, from hygiene, pest control, manufacturing practices and product protection, to quality control and corporate social responsibility practices. “In order to bring somebody on board we’ll go through a number of visits and two key types of audit – a food safety audit and quality systems audit – to ensure they can produce our product safely,” explains Charles.

“A lot of our work revolves around how we bring suppliers on board, how we determine they are going to be able to meet our standards and then working with them throughout the development process on the quality of ingredients – making sure safety standards are built in at that early stage. For example, we have a cutting programme for our meat where we take it apart to make sure our suppliers are supplying us with what we’re paying for.”

For the billion pound business, a supplier’s credentials are important, especially when considering using their services, but what does KFC class as a ‘good supplier’?

“It’s really quite an interesting subject – how do you turn a supplier into a truly good supplier? Being able to produce the product safely and to the standard we want is crucial, but we’re also looking for those who can work to what our sourcing policy will dictate, which is around the ethics of sustainability – particularly in the poultry industry,”

explains Charles. “We also monitor other sources of information that might help us understand how our suppliers are performing, whether that be financial or social media. Also, if a supplier is supplying to us as well as other major retailers then on any given day our auditor will go in and look at the system of the overall business. He will focus on our line, checking that the supplier is operating it to our standards.”

The importance of auditing after suppliers have already won their business is not lost either. “We do our auditing through a second party audit system – so a party on our behalf is going out and auditing to our standards – and then we use third party audits to give us extra assurance. We have a close working relationship with them, so we’re always made aware of any issues and have regular catch-up meetings to go through the challenges,” explains Charles.

“The reason we do it this way is because they are specialist auditors using their skills to check the core processes. This then allows my team to really focus on areas in which we’d like some extra attention, whether that is because we’ve had a specific issue or because we’re looking at something new – such as a technology or process. Working in a balance of third party, second party and first party audits gives us a really good spectrum of understanding about how a supplier’s performing.”

Transparency and trust

The organisation has a team of ROCC inspectors who conduct (unannounced) quarterly visits at all 885 KFC restaurants in the UK and Ireland. Their job is to make sure things are happening as they should and to look at the quality, food safety, and health and safety factors at each restaurant to see where improvements could be made.

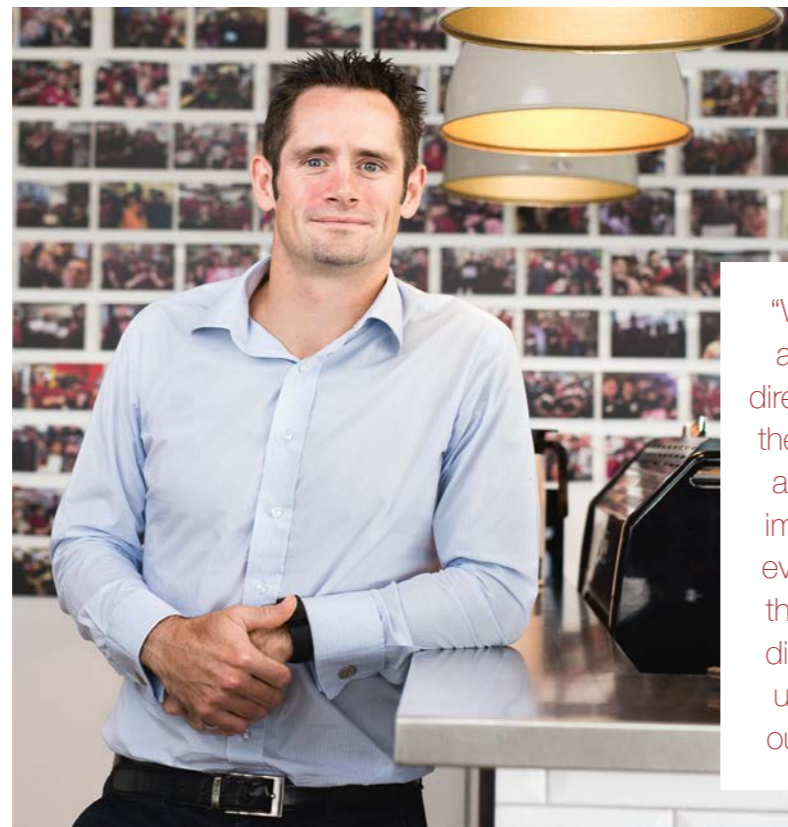


Image: Staff are encouraged to share their thoughts about the company on the reception chalkboard (pictured above) using the hashtag #whyiworkhere

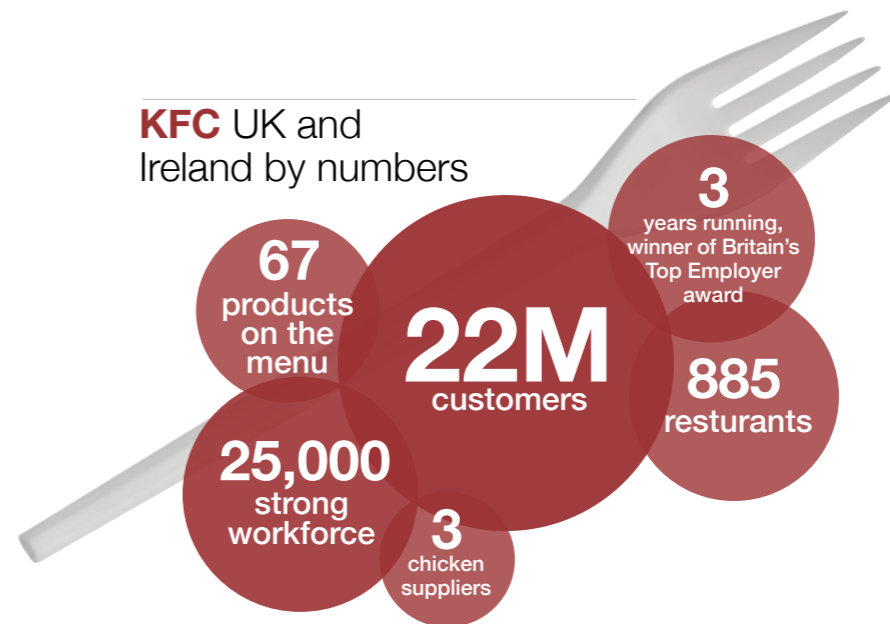
“What we do at HQ has a direct impact on the restaurants and it’s really important that everyone from the managing director down understands our products”

“We get a lot of information from these inspections and can identify common issues or trends from the data. My team’s job, in terms of the quality and health and safety side, is to review our processes and procedures to make sure they are fit for purpose,” says Charles. “It’s down to us to determine how we get that balance right between making our processes easy for staff in our

restaurants to use and making sure they drive that consistent high standard we want.”

KFC’s inspectors use 136 questions in these unannounced spot-checks, scrutinising everything from store cleanliness and customer service to whether food standards are being met and if the brand standards are there. “It’s important that we have these independent

KFC UK and Ireland by numbers



checks for all our procedures and processes, because if you don’t check what you’re doing and audit yourselves, then you will find challenges. We need to know if we are delivering what we believe we are delivering. Therefore, just making sure people are doing what’s expected in the right way is key,” explains Charles.

Back-of-house processes are examined in detail – checking temperatures, quality of products, equipment, hygiene standards and more – and these checks help generate the final score that determines how a restaurant is performing. If a store’s score is below average then it will go into emergency measures and staff will have a certain amount of time to improve before the next audit.

“If we have a restaurant that falls into emergency measures then the restaurant general manager, area coach and regional coach have got to come back to us with an action plan within a couple of days and then implement it,” says Charles. “The restaurant will then be re-audited to make sure that the action plan has delivered the results we had expected. This can involve changes in procedures and re-training staff, and in much more drastic situations,

looking closely at the competency of the people to make sure we have got that right level.”

Building a better workforce

With a workforce made up of approximately 25,000 staff, training in brand procedures and standards has been crucial for the business to continue to be successful. Training covers criteria such as product handling, employee hygiene, ingredient and product temperature management, and knowledge on safe food preparation and how to avoid cross-contamination. “There are a number of checks staff have to make in order to ensure we have the food safety and quality set-up ready for the day – from checking the cooking temperatures are okay to making sure equipment is working as it should,” explains Charles. “For example, when the first chicken comes out of the fryer in the morning, the restaurant general manager will be assessing it to make sure the colour, quality and cook is right, and he/she will do this across all our products.”

Ensuring the competency of staff at all levels has been a particular objective for the company, with a strong focus on improving its people and rewarding

them for their efforts. Everyone who joins the London headquarters team will undertake training in one of KFC’s restaurants in the UK or Ireland to learn what it means to be a team member and to gain a good understanding of the company’s processes and procedures.

“What we do at headquarters has a direct impact on the restaurants and it’s really important that everyone from our managing director down understands our products,” says Charles. “In this on-site training you do watching, you do action, you do a follow-up and then you get signed off on procedure. And we go back out to our restaurants whenever needed to make sure we are really supporting the guys who are putting the hard work in on the ground.”

With various accomplishments under its belt – such as winning the UK’s ‘Great Places to Work’ award – the organisation has become synonymous with a family-like company culture, and recognising people’s efforts in the business has been at the core of this. “We’re asking people to follow specific procedures and processes but making them feel valued for doing this is key. We want people to come to work and feel they are adding value,” explains Charles. “People really do like a simple thank you and the impact of that is endless. When things get tough, it is that culture of people wanting to succeed and work for a brand they believe in that really has power.”