

Valuing the Product Safety Professional



Don Mays
Product Safety Insights LLC

Heading product safety for a company is often a lonely and thankless job. When there's bad news to tell the C-suite, you are the unwelcomed door-darkener who has just ruined someone's day. But when things are going well, you are hardly noticed.

Corporate executives often undervalue the role of the product safety department. They may put more trust in their legal department, which works to mitigate collateral damage in the face of a product safety problem. But a well-functioning product safety department can proactively prevent product safety crises altogether. They may use tools such as FMEA and Fault Tree Analyses to assess and mitigate risks, and apply human factors expertise to assure product safety under foreseeable-use conditions. In the throws of a crisis, a product safety team can determine the root cause and prescribe effective corrective actions.

When companies face a product safety crisis, their response is often to cast blame on the consumer for not using the product correctly, or to minimize the problem by citing a small incident rate compared to the number of units sold. Their public response is often, "Safety is our number one priority!" But is it?

Companies place their priorities on making money. In his textbook "*Engineering Ethics and Design for Product Safety*," Prof. Kenneth D'Entremont states that product safety should be a *value*, not a *priority*. *Priorities* come and go but *values* remain. A value is something that professionals hold because it is the right thing to do. Placing value on product safety will help change company culture so that safety is entrenched in every aspect of a company's operations.

How does a product safety professional promote his or her value in a company? Cathy Choffin, Global Compliance and Safety at McDonalds, advocates for refining your elevator pitch. Take advantage of snippets of time when you can herald the work of your product safety team. Heading off a recall or mitigating an unforeseen risk may be good talking points. Communication is key so that your work is not only appreciated, but also valued.

Key takeaways:

Safety should be a company value, not a priority.

Safety professionals should communicate their value throughout the company.

***Don Mays** provides consulting services under Product Safety Insights LLC. He is VP of the Society of Product Safety Professionals, Chairman of ASTM F15 Committee on Consumer Products, and board member for Kids In Danger.*