

Profit-only culture breeds trouble

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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In recent years, food scandals, including the ongoing tainted lard incident, have not only destroyed the credibility of the food industry, but also damaged public trust in the government as a watchdog for food safety. As the public questions why the industry is yet to learn its lesson, a key problem behind the scandals has come to light — the “profit-only” culture, in which the government plays an essential role.

The latest food scare began when oil producer Chang Guann Co was found to have manufactured lard oil using recycled waste oil, affecting more than 1,000 downstream food manufacturers, restaurants and street vendors.

At the same time, a tea retailer that has been in business for more than a century was found to be mixing lower-priced imported teas and selling them as more expensive, local high-altitude teas.

In April, beef, pork and lamb were found to have been injected with chemicals and water to increase their weight; and in February, popular hotpot chain Tripod King was found cooking its soup with additives, despite advertising its use of only vegetables and fruits.

Last year, the public was overwhelmed by the adulterated oil case, the high-end Top Pot Bakery scandal and the news that Chyuan Shun Food Enterprise Co, a major rice producer, was caught selling low-grade imported rice as high-quality locally grown rice — for the 18th time.

Lack of tighter regulations as well as lax enforcement contributed to the series of food safety crises, but at the root of the problem lies the profit-only culture.

There is an old saying in Taiwan: “There will always be people doing business at the risk of being beheaded, but no one would do business that loses money.”

Undoubtedly, people run businesses to make money, but besides making money, businesses

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must also ensure ethical conduct.

Unfortunately, ethics are not highlighted in education or in government policies.

Taking a look into the undergraduate curriculum of a business school in Taiwan — that of the National Sun Yat-sen University, for example — professional knowledge, including marketing, financial management, organizational management, business law, accounting, information management and business strategy are taught as required courses, but business ethics is not.

At government level, officials and lawmakers are reluctant to toughen regulations on business, often siding with businesses — especially large corporations — when they break laws or when environmental or labor disputes occur.

When organizing events, one of the top priorities is to assess possible economic benefits and how profit can be maximized.

For instance, during each inaugural ceremony for the Hakka Tung Blossom Festival, the Hakka Affairs Council minister always says that the previous year's festival was a success, not because of how it had helped preserve or enhance understanding of the Hakka culture, but rather because of the profits that the participating businesses had made.

When the Tourism Bureau created an uproar among Amis Aborigines in Hualien County as it arbitrarily planned to make the tribe's sacred ritual of Ilisin a tourist event, and even tried to have minority dance troupes from China perform at the Amis event, it defended itself as merely wanting to attract more tourists to stimulate the local economy.

Financial incentives are hard to ignore, but there are more important values that should be prioritized ahead of producing profits.

If we cannot get rid of the tainted culture, we may never be able to get rid of tainted foods.

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