



Contract Packaging Info Series: SQF vs. AIB



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SEARCHING FOR THE RIGHT CERTIFICATION COMPARING AIB AND SQF

There's a lot of buzz in the contract packaging industry right now about different quality certifications. And we can relate to this firsthand. We've spent months over the past year researching certifications to decide which one was right for both ProStar (in Pottstown, PA) and our sister company, South Atlantic Packaging (in Winston-Salem, NC). In the end, we chose different certifications for our two companies. Seems odd, right? Well, not really. In Winston-Salem, we chose to retain our AIB International certification. One of our key customers required it, and we found it was a great fit for our other projects, even those that were not related to food. For ProStar, we chose to obtain our Safe Quality Food (SQF) certification. It's a great fit for food packaging, and there is a high concentration of food and beverage manufacturers in Pennsylvania. So after having now achieved both SQF and AIB certifications, can we say definitively which certification is the better choice for manufacturers and for contract packaging companies like ours? The answer is, "It depends."

For us, our decision ended up being based on 1) what our existing key clients needed and 2) our geographic regions. SQF was definitely the right fit for the Philadelphia area. AIB was a great fit for North Carolina. Whichever audit you choose (whether it's for compliance with FDA/FSMA, USDA, etc.), it is important to take all aspects of your business needs into account before making a decision on one. The general requirements for all schemes are similar in that they require a competently implemented, regularly evaluated, continually improved, HACCP-based food safety management and quality system.



THE ROLE OF THE GLOBAL FOOD SAFETY INITIATIVE (GFSI) IN CREATING TRANSPARENCY

The Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) was originally set up as a result of food safety scares in early 2000. Its primary purpose is to ensure the safety of food reaching all consumers internationally, but it also aims to develop efficiencies, promote transparency, guide cost savings and become a platform for continual improvement in the area of food safety. It does this by leading the global food industry toward a unified approach to food safety management systems.

→ Continue to page 2 for more info on food certifications



WHICH CERTIFICATION IS RIGHT FOR YOUR COMPANY?

	Process Verification	Document Detector	Auditor's Process	Do nonconformances need fixing? Are they published?	Especially good for ...
	Physical inspection at a single point in time	Dozens of docs	Half day and review	Not required — No	Companies looking for a good third party to review their processes and procedures
	Written verifications provided over time	Hundreds of docs	Stringent desk audit, followed by physical verifications over two days	Required — Fully visible to the public	Companies looking for a more detailed audit, stricter guidelines and a high level of oversight

IS WORTH IT?



CERTIFICATIONS MAKE CONTRACT PACKAGING MORE TRANSPARENT, BUT ... We can tell you from our own experience, the certification processes for both AIB and SQF are demanding. These are expensive and time-consuming endeavors for all companies, including contract packagers. The daily, documented audits require a tremendous amount of paperwork and training. In addition to the general fee for each certification, you may have to add staff members with experience in quality assurance. Is it worth it? Absolutely. Why? Because in today's business world, more and more businesses are requiring their suppliers and/or business partners to be certified to ensure the products or services they deliver meet industry-specific international standards. More importantly, certifications require discipline and diligence, and highly consistent operations. So certifications are like a scorecard proving good operations. Having stringent certifications shows that we are serious about quality. And we are.

→ See deep dive info on AIB on our next page



First Up: AIB Certification

As you now know, our sister company (South Atlantic Packaging) is an AIB International certified facility, so our company is very familiar with how this certification process goes. The AIB International certification consists of five key components:

1. Operational Methods and Personnel Practices
2. Maintenance for Food Safety
3. Cleaning Practices
4. Integrated Pest Management
5. Adequacy of Prerequisite and Food Safety Programs

On the right you'll find a note about the difference between an audit and a safety inspection. In our experience, the AIB process is more inspection-based than audit-based. The physical inspection occurs first on the AIB inspection and then the records and other documentation.

Once the physical inspection is complete, the inspector will compare the specific non-conformances found to the written program that allowed the issue to occur. For example, a dirty piece of equipment would lead the inspector to the cleaning schedules, cleaning procedure and training program. A damaged piece of equipment would lead the inspector to the preventive maintenance program and so on.

The process of tying the issues back to the program is the “audit” portion of the AIB Inspection. We find AIB to be focused more on issues found and the areas they were found in, not the complete program. Also, AIB seems focused on only nonconformances —not everything you are doing correctly or your food safety program in full. There are no nonconformances that need to be answered within a structured time period to close out the audit; therefore most companies only focus on a score, not what needs to be improved or how it affects food safety. From audit to audit the previous nonconformances are not followed up on; each year the audit is like the first time. Nonconformances are not required to have been mediated before you can receive your certification.

Side Note: What's the difference between an audit and a safety inspection?

An audit is an organized evaluation of food facility documentation and systems to determine if programs and related activities achieve required expectations. They ensure that you are doing what you are saying you do and have documented proof to back it up. An auditor will request and look at data over time to see if positive or negative trends are developing, and that corrective actions have been put in place and have remediated the nonconformance. An audit focuses on documentation review.

An inspection is a thorough physical walkthrough of a food facility to assess what is actually happening at a given moment in time. This gives the realistic assessment of conditions that can be both positive and negative for food packaging. An inspection focuses on physical review. This is included in your audit.

Important note: Every contract packager should do daily self inspections. We do. If you're a customer working with a contract packaging company, make sure your contract packager is fully transparent. They should be willing and eager to have your quality assurance team spot check the operation at any point to ensure inspections and corrective actions are always part of the routine.

Find out more about SQF on the next page

GREAT FOR FOOD: SQF Certification

We chose the SQF certification for ProStar Packaging. It's a complete examination of written programs first to see if they are ready for full audit because they are divided into two separate audit phases: documentation and facility. SQF ensures that suppliers' food safety and quality management systems comply with international and domestic food safety regulations. As the SQF standard incorporates the complete supply chain, suppliers can assure their customers that food has been produced, processed, prepared and handled to the highest possible standards every step of the way.

SQF is the only program to integrate a quality component as well as food safety. This reduces or eliminates the need for multiple, redundant audits. It also helps protect a company's brand integrity and creates transparency to the customer. This assures customers the processing of food and/or packaging is continually monitored to improve quality and safety.

SQF auditors review all of your programs and processes prior to a facility walkthrough. If any nonconformances are found, they will then look through your documented proof that the program is being followed correctly and all of the necessary training has been completed.

Most importantly—every nonconformance is published for the public to see. That's a very high bar.

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ProStar Contract Packaging is an SQF 8 certified, full-service contract packaging company located in Pottstown, PA. We offer cutting-edge track and trace capabilities through PackManager. From labor management to quality controls, to our use of leading technology—ProStar can solve headaches and get the job done on time. Contact our chief sales officer Pat Grantham for information on doing business with us.

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