

5-27-11 Just a Hunch

It was anything but a quiet a week in my hometown; my hometown where I work, that is. During that whirlwind of a week, I met an elderly man who, despite cracker-jack wit and mischievous twinkle in his eye, he is willing to sit in his own filth. With team work, we'll find out if we can help this lonely man to live his own life with dignity. Then there was the looking into a couple attics and cellars to see if there was mold or mildew. Thankfully, there wasn't but it was worth the time to be able to reassure the homeowners. Time was up for a family to stop living in a trailer but their reluctant move will actually lead them to being eligible for services. Then, there were instances of one person's right clashing into the neighbors' rights. That one has some band-aids in place but will not change dramatically without time, cooperation and by-law changes. We'll see just how long that will take. There were also some unusual concerns and complaints regarding air quality. After a few interviews, I am still waiting for scientific proof. I have a hunch but I want my hunch to be backed up by facts.

I have learned to pursue a hunch when there is no harm by doing so. Last week my hunch led to a discovery. I wasn't expecting to be asking the question about food items coming from an approved source in a small convenience and liquor store. I can usually tell just by looking and seeing familiar companies, names, logos and proper labeling.

My hunch reminded me of the time when, not too many years ago, the health agents on the South Shore were keeping their eyes open for the "Pepper Man". He was selling peppers stuffed with meat in small jars. They came in two varieties: hot and sweet. The tip to the discovering health agent was the label. It was only a white address label on the jar top reading "hot" or "sweet". That was it; no company name, no nutritional information, not even a logo. The health agent asked to see paper work on the origin of these stuffed peppers. There weren't any invoices because the owner paid cash to the seller who conducted business from his vehicle. He was eventually "caught" and told he could not continue that practice without going through the proper channels for wholesale foods, whereby the food is prepared in a permitted commercial kitchen, packaged in a permitted processing plant and the food has been examined by a certified lab for its nutritional content. Well, the man said he could not afford any of that and so, reluctantly announced he would end his stuffed pepper career. I heard they were delicious.

I also recently discovered someone circumventing the proper requirements of preparing and packaging foods for wholesale. The discovery was not as easy as spying a mailing label. I just had one of those hunches. The graphic design on the front label was eye-catching, well executed and professional looking. The store owner thought he was looking at legitimate receipts documenting its approved source when he made the decision to purchase this product. I had a hunch, though. So, taking the bottle of Bloody Mary mix out of the fridge, I turned it around to look at the nutritional label. Once again, the label looked professional. It did not have any nutritional information, though. That is a requirement and some people need to see the amount of sodium or vitamin C, for health reasons. Other people need to see the list of

ingredients because they might be allergic to some. The label on this bottle in question listed some ingredients and then, toward the bottom of the list, it read, “Secret Spices”. That was the final damning piece of evidence that his bottled product was not from a State approved source. I told the owner my hunch had been confirmed but that I would check out the listed website and attempt to contact the “chef”, “bottler”, mix-maker.

The website told the story of making this mix for thirty years and being urged by friends to market it. It was even being offered for shipping out of State. That’s another No-No without approval. There were pictures of happy clients holding up bottles of the drink mix, ranging from Las Vegas to Halifax. You could buy tee shirts, too! At least that is safe. I contacted the entrepreneur, knowing that I was the bearer of bad news.

Bad news for him, though, is good news for you and me. When we go shopping for food items, we expect and take for granted that it was prepared in a permitted kitchen and a sanitary manner. We expect inspections, and we expect labeling to be accurate.

If you are not blessed with graphic design know-how or friends who are, it is now so easy to buy inexpensive software for making professional looking labels. If the maker accidentally leaves out peanuts on the ingredients list, a person could go into anaphylactic shock from that one error.

I have never gone looking for possible scofflaws in the newspaper or the internet. I am too busy for that. If an issue is brought to my attention, though, then the internet is an amazing tool. You can even find people who know they are breaking the law but advertise it anyway! Amazing! It’s amazing where a hunch will lead.

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