

Where's the OSHA Store?

Government requirements are not always easy to come by

One man's nightmare became his dream business: Helping make compliance with mandatory U.S. government standards easier for business owners.

By Meredith Barzen

In 1997, Paul Abel had a lot of things going for him: A loving family, several successful Bruegger's bagel stores and years of experience to bolster his confidence as an up-and-comer in the franchise community. The bagel business was all fun and games—until someone lost a finger.

In his first year with Bruegger's, the San Diego businessman opened three factory stores, got married and became a father. Life as a franchisee was treating him well: "I loved the people I worked with," he says of his time running the bagel shops. "It was a great benefit to pick up the phone and call another franchisee in the country about a problem I was having because they understood the issue. We were all in the same boat."

But the S.S. Franchisee sprung a leak that day in '97 when what Abel calls "a simple accident" threatened what he had built.

"An employee had a finger amputated while cleaning one of our bagel machines," Abel says. "Another employee, (while) mopping the floors, plugged in the machine—not wanting the outlet to get wet and not realizing that someone was cleaning it at the



House Rules

There's a new sheriff in town, and he doesn't plan on letting non-compliant businesses off easy: President Obama's new administration has vowed to make stringent enforcement of OSHA rules and regulations a top priority, and to increase worker safety in general. The White House's recently released budget proposal includes more funding for OSHA, which would allow the organization to increase inspections and crack down on enforcement.

time. OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) was notified of the injury, which resulted in an inspection."

Abel—who was by no means new to the franchise game—believed he had taken the necessary steps to make his restaurants compliant with health and safety regulations. "I thought I had all my i's dotted and my t's crossed," Abel says. But his Bruegger's store was missing some vital safety and accident-prevention

Tools of the Trade:

If you're a first-time franchisee, here are some items you might need to make your business compliant with OSHA standards:

- State and federal labor law posters—these are mandatory for all workplaces
- First Aid kit and Emergency First Aid poster
- Workplace harassment prevention DVD and poster
- "No Smoking" sign
- "Fire extinguisher" arrow sign
- "Exit" signs



materials. "When the OSHA guy left and gave me a citation, he gave me a list of things I needed," Abel says. "I didn't know that I needed all of these things."

He then asked the OSHA inspector what seemed like a simple question: "Where is the OSHA store?" Surely, he thought, there must be a place where a business owner can go to learn about and purchase all that he needs to be compliant with OSHA regulations. But there was no one-stop shop.

“It was a difficult process to get compliant, (there was) no one to help you and it was very confusing,” Abel says of the resulting scramble to conform his bagel stores to OSHA standards. “That is when I decided if I ever get involved in another business, I want to create an OSHA store. I wanted to make a mandatory process much simpler to comply with. I wanted to help employers with instructions and to make available all the products that I was personally sued and fined for not having.”

Creating Compliance Central

Thus, MyOSHASTore (www.MyOSHASTore.com) was born. Abel’s business model works like this: A franchise association, a chamber of commerce, or any other industry association can sign up with MyOSHASTore.com. In return, the association receives information—often in the form of e-mail newsletters, written in layman’s terms by lawyers, with updates on new or changed OSHA regulations relating to that association’s members—and a link to buy any prod-

ucts that might be required by these new rules.

The individual franchisees aren’t necessarily aware of MyOSHASTore.com. To them, they are buying updated labor law posters from their own franchise associations. “Typically, a franchisee would have to visit four or five different Web sites to find the mix of products we offer,” Abel says. “We also provide guidance on the products they need to help them get compliant. Basically, we make (the associations) look good by providing (members with) guidance and easy access to mandatory, difficult to understand products at much lower ‘member’ pricing.”

Though all the products sold on MyOSHASTore.com are compliant with OSHA regulations, the store isn’t affiliated with the government organization in any way. “OSHA’s role is to assure safe and healthful working conditions for working men and women,” Abel says. “Our role is to assist employers in meeting their required obligation by providing them access to affordable safety products and services.”

“He seemed like he had some good ideas, like he was going in the right direction,” says Mike Martinka with OSHA’s California branch who talked with Abel after giving a recent presentation on the risk of heat stress in outdoor work.

Martinka explained that OSHA isn’t printing as many of its own materials these days, so MyOSHASTore.com could conceivably fill that void. And though he hasn’t visited the Web site and points out that OSHA doesn’t officially endorse any product or company, he can see MyOSHASTore.com filling a much-needed niche to provide mandated safety products to small employers.

Abel’s No. 1 tip for franchisees: “Don’t depend on the franchisor for assistance regarding safety and compliance issues. It is your responsibility to know the laws that pertain to your state and industry.”

And as Abel knows a little too well, don’t wait until someone has an accident to get in compliance. **FT**



For additional information contact Paul or Penny
888.369.9013