

# Fastest growing supermarket chain publix supermarket

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Publix Supermarket, Inc. is the largest and fastest growing employee-owned supermarket chain in the United States whose mission is to be the “ premier qualityfoodretailer in the world.” To achieve this, Publix commits to be: passionately focused on customer value; intolerant of waste; dedicated to the dignity, value and employment security of its associates; devoted to the highest standards of stewardship for the stockholders; and involved as responsible citizens in its communities.

Its dedication for quality, customer service, community involvement, volunteerism, and workforce diversity won the company numerous awards such as the Diversistar Award for excelling in promoting workplace diversity practices (2003), Outstanding Business Award for recycling efforts from Recycle Today, Inc. (2004), and the United Way of America National Spirit of America <sup>®</sup> Award (1996). In 2006, the company’s retail sales reached \$21. 7 billion. Today, Publix has a total of 142, 000 employees and 915 stores located in Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, and Florida, where 72% of its stores are located.

To display the company’s commitment to providing quality products for its customers and its concern for its customers’ well-being, Publix conducted a number of product recalls whenever the company released a potentially unsafe product to the market. Findlaw. com and businesswire. com report that on July 13, 2001, the company voluntarily recalled Publix Premium Coffee Almond Fudge Light Ice Cream half gallon carton with a sell-by date of November 15, 2001 as the product may contain undeclared peanuts which

could be dangerous for those who are allergic or gravely sensitive to peanuts.

Although the company received only one complaint regarding the product and only 216 carton were distributed to a certain number of stores, Publix recalled all the affected products purchased in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama. Similarly, last August 21, 2001, the company voluntarily recalled Publix Bakery Chocolate Chip Cookies which were purchased from August 13 to August 20, 2001 in Jacksonville division stores in Florida. It was discovered that the product may contain undeclared pecans and almonds, which may give rise to a potential risk of serious or life threatening allergic reaction to the people who are allergic or severely sensitive to these products.

Although no complaints were received regarding this product, all the products purchased during the indicated dates in North Florida, Southeast Georgia, and in Beaufort and Hilton Head in South Carolina. Publix did the same thing with Publix 1-gallon and 2.5 gallon drinking water. On June 3, 2005, the products, which have the manufacturing plant code PLT 12-595 and the code dates May 2, 2005 and May 4, 2005 (for 1 gallon), and April 27, 2005 and May 3, 2005 (for 2.5 gallons) were voluntarily recalled as they may not meet the quality specification for taste and odor. The customers sent the company notifications regarding the taste and odor of the drinking water.

Fortunately, no reports of illnesses have been received. The products with the specified codes were recalled from the stores where they were

distributed, including Broward, Miami-Dade, Indian River, Martin, Monroe, Okeechobee, St. Lucie and Palm Beach, Florida. A related incident occurred on January 4, 2006 in Miami, Florida. Although there was no reported case of illness, the company voluntarily recalled the prepackaged Publix Cinnamon Raisin Bagels (4-pack) located at its stores in South Florida (Key West to Vero Beach) due to a packaging error.

While the cinnamon raisin bagels package does not declare eggs, the product was inadvertently packaged with egg bagels, which placed the people who have an allergy or critical sensitivity to egg at a serious or life-threatening risk. All of the voluntary recalls of the products became successful by conducting an internal quality assurance process. Through this process, the company was able to determine the affected products that could cause serious allergic reactions and accurately locate them.

To resolve the situation with accuracy and expedience, Publix worked very closely with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the company's manufacturing facility. They also informed the consumers of the issues through the help of FDA. The company encouraged all the customers who bought the affected product to return the product for a replacement or a full refund. The voluntary recalls conducted by the company reflect how much the company prioritizes and values the satisfaction and safety of its customers. It shows company's commitment to its mission of providing premier quality food.

Even if the recalls cost them thousands of dollars, Publix understood very well that if the affected product caused any harm to the customer, it could

cost the company its reputation and lose its loyal customers' well-established trust. Hence, in dealing with ethical issues concerning the safety of its products, Publix has proven its ability to resolve the situation with accuracy and expediency.

While Publix regards its customers with the utmost care and attention, the opposite could be said about the manner in which the company treats its employees. Despite garnering awards for being a caring employer, the company faced a number of lawsuits for the past 12 years. In an article in the New York Times by Allen Myerson, the company faced a lawsuit which involved sexual discrimination in 1995. It was considered as one of the largest discrimination cases in U. S. history.

The lawsuit covered more than 100, 000 women who have worked at Publix supermarkets in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama since 1991. It was filed in the Federal District Court of Tampa, Florida in 1995 by 12 female employees who reported that they were clustered at the cash registers where potential for advancement was minimal. Meanwhile, the men were placed in sales and inventory, which were positions that had more potential for advancement. During that time, although more than half of the workforce consisted of women, more than 95 percent of the store managers were men.

Some of them also added that women only tended to be promoted in traditionally female departments such as the bakery and cashier sections. The women reported that they were denied fair training, pay, and full-time status as well. To defend itself, the supermarket chain overloaded its employees with materials that arguing its case, discouraged the female

workers from joining the class-action, and collected more than 6, 000 sworn statements of support. Still, the company agreed to pay the settlement worth \$81. 5 million.

However, the company did not admit any wrongdoing and stated that its practices were in full compliance with all fair-employment laws. In fact, the company contended that it is committed to fair promotion practices, stating that "any lawsuit that suggests otherwise is out of touch with reality." Publix even added that the relative absence of women in higher managerial positions could be attributed to their lack of interest. Publix settled the case to avoid further " distraction and expense," as millions of dollars have been expended in fighting the suit.

Upon settling the case, the company promised to change their policies on promotion. The company stated that the number of females in managerial positions would be increased. Regardless of their sex, interested employees will have to file a simple application to be considered for promotion. If the interested female employees meet the objective qualifications, the company promised to promote them in the same proportion as men. In the same year, Publix also agreed to pay \$3. 5 to settle racial discrimination claims filed by EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) on behalf of all black employees. The lawsuit emerged from the accusations that job opportunities were denied to blacks in the same way it was denied to women.

Kris Hundley'a article in St. Petersburg Times reported that on December 2000, a class-action lawsuit was filed by six African-American former employees of Publix Supermarket in Tampa, Florida, alleging this time both

sex and race discrimination at Publix warehouses and food plants. The plaintiffs complained that they were unfairly disciplined, fired and passed over for promotions and pay raises.

One of the plaintiffs shared that she was wrongly accused of stealing a candy bar the day after she filed a complaint to EEOC that declared her allegations regarding the higher pay rate of white workers. Another plaintiff reported that he was unfairly terminated after working for the company for two years just because he forgot to clock out for lunch. The settlement cost the company \$10 million dollars.

According to Myerson's article in the New York Times, large corporations have turned out to be more sophisticated and aggressive in defending themselves as employees become emboldened about discrimination allegations. Today, there are many companies that require employees to sign arbitration agreements which would compel them to give up " their rights to take bias complaints to the courts," while " other companies buy ' employment practices liability' insurance."

These lawsuit cases reflect persisting sexual and racial discrimination within the company. It has become a sickness that needs to be cured. One could not help but feel disappointed about the ironic issue since one of the objectives of the company is to be " dedicated to the dignity, value and employment security" of its employees. Although it does not seem to negatively affect its relationship with its customers, discrimination in the workplace is a cause of job dissatisfaction, which, more often than not, results in high employee turnover.

This could be detrimental to the optimal performance of the company. Publix should do something about the rampant sexual and racial discrimination in the workplace and change its policy regarding this matter. The leaders of the company should set standards to eliminate these biases and conduct group activities to promote the value of equality in terms of sex and race. Display of any form of work-related discrimination towards any employee should have grave consequences. A committee or department should be formed to effectively implement this policy and monitor discriminating actions of the employees.

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