Regulator steps in to improve quality of food ordered online

E-Comm Cos Selling Packaged Stuff Need To Register

The apex food regulator in the country, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), is aiming to improve the quality of food sold through online channels, after consumers complained about expired food products being sold on ecommerce sites.

In doing so, the regulator has adopted a two-pronged approach - e-commerce entities selling packaged food will have to register with the regulator - and all e-commerce companies selling cooked food will have to take licences.

"We welcome the change by FSSAI and have ourselves been diligently working on the restaurant hygiene through our Food Doctor Programme," said a Food panda spokesperson. "While we constantly work towards improving and maintaining standards, we have already set the process in motion to update the licence numbers
and are already halfway." Last week, TOI reported about thousands of consumers on citizen engagement platform –Local Circles -demanding ecommerce sites should mandatorily disclose manufacturing and expiry dates of the packaged food products sold on their sites.

Subsequently, FSSAI announced imported food items with less than 60% of shelf life will not be allowed to enter Indian market.

"We have held talks with Amazon and Snapdeal," Pawan Agarwal, CEO of FSSAI told TOI. "We have also asked them to come up with their own solutions."

"We appreciate FSSAI for their progressive outlook in conducting a comprehensive stakeholder consultation on the guidelines for all ecommerce food business operators," said a Snapdeal spokesperson. "With a view to enable compliance with food safety and quality standards, we shall take steps to ensure adherence to the guidelines and also facilitate required communication to the sellers and the consumers."

While an Amazon India spokesperson did not reply to an email questionnaire, after looking at the guidelines, Albinder Dhindsa, cofounder of Grofers, said, "Yes, we will be getting registered." The FSSAI guidelines also said food products offered for sale by any ecommerce entity "shall be liable to sampling at any point in supply chain". This brings cloud kitchens under the scanner.

Rashmi Daga, founder of online kitchen Fresh Menu, which runs kitchens in many cities across the country, said her company has all necessary licences in place. "The new guidelines will have implications for companies that list restaurants on their sites and deliver food," she said.

Hari Menon, co-founder and chief executive of Big basket said, "We already have FSSAI licences for all our warehouses, for our last mile delivery unit, the licence numbers are prominently displayed on all our private label products. We also ensure that we sell food products of companies only if they have an FSSAI licence. It is a mandatory requirement for listing products on Big Basket."