



If you are connected with the beef industry and want an eye-opening experience, visit the nearest supermarket and check out the regular meatcase. It is a reality lesson in what the beef consumer faces on a regular basis.

I'm an Angus breeder, and I recently had that experience when we ran out of our own beef. I had to purchase meat from a local grocery for about a month. Even though I am well-acquainted with the cutting and grading of beef, I found the purchasing of supermarket beef to be frustrating and confusing. In some instances, lower-quality cuts were given deceptive names. In others, meat was packaged to hide sloppy cutting or excess fat.

Grocery stores often stock meatcases with as many as 60 different cuts of meat, making the selection for grilling a sizzling steak or roasting a home-style pot roast seem like an insurmountable task to a lot of consumers. Stores also sell different grades of meat that can add to the confusion. Although the majority of retailers offer USDA Choice grade, meat that has sufficient marbling for taste and tenderness, others sell USDA Select grade, a lower-priced grade of beef with less marbling. Some consumers may not realize there is a difference.

All of these variables can add up to meatcases that are a confusing sea of red. Add in busy lifestyles, inexperience in the kitchen and some consumers' desire to

eliminate red meat from their diets and it is easy to understand why the beef industry has had declining sales over much of the last couple of decades.

In efforts to regain market share, the industry has clearly needed to take some drastic steps to get consumers back into the beef section of the meatcase and, in turn, put dollars back into the producers' pockets.

Industry effort

To that end, the beef checkoff became an industry-funded marketing and research program designed to increase domestic and international demand for beef products. Supported by producer funds, the checkoff is meant to benefit farmers, producers and processors by increasing commodity demand, thereby increasing the potential long-term economic growth of all sectors of the industry.

Consumers also benefit from the program through ongoing research to create new and improved products that meet consumer quality, safety and nutritional expectations, as well as providing product information to help make informed choices.

Does the checkoff work? According to an independent study, year-end demand for beef in 2000 was 3.3% higher than the previous year, and consumer expenditures for beef topped \$52 billion.

Contributing to that increase is a beef checkoff program called "Beef Made Easy." Introduced by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) in April 1999, some of the larger grocery store chains such as Kroger Co. and Kroger-owned chains including Safeway, Pathmark, Wakefern Food Corp. and A&P, successfully tested the program.

NCBA reports that Giant, Publix, Super Valu, Assoc. Foods and Fleming have also tried the Beef Made Easy setup in their meatcases. Many of the chains have reported that the program has reduced consumer confusion and has beefed up sales as much as 10%.

The Beef Made Easy program helps consumers by guiding the retail stores in organizing the beef section into cooking-method categories using color-coded merchandising tools, including rail strips and signs to direct customers to identify categories such as oven roast, pot roast, premium oven roast, stewing beef, stir-fry



► Above: Giant Eagle is one of the markets that participate in the Beef Made Easy program. Colin Snyder says the corporation headquarters sends down case recommendations that individual stores must follow as closely as possible.

beef, braising steaks, grilling/broiling steaks, marinating steaks, sautéing steaks, ground beef, beef kabobs and other value-added items.

Educational brochures that include detailed cooking instructions and answers to frequently asked questions about the new beef layout are also available to consumers. Meat managers report that the program helps shoppers make faster purchase decisions and increases their confidence about cooking beef at home.

Consumer Debbie McCormick, who admits she doesn't know the difference between round and sirloin steaks, recently purchased beef in a Kroger Market in Charlottesville, Va., with the Beef Made Easy setup.

"This past Labor Day weekend, I went shopping at a local supermarket," says the young accountant. "I was preparing for a barbecue for my family, who was visiting, and several friends. My menu was planned around what I hoped would be an outstanding charcoal-grilled steak — tender, tasty and juicy, like the ones I get when I eat at the Aberdeen Restaurant just down the street from where I work.

"I don't have much cooking experience," she continues. "I am single and mostly do quick-fix meals, or I eat out, so I felt very uncertain about choosing the right steak. But with the Beef Made Easy color-coded signs directing me to choose the right kind of steak for grilling and on-pack cooking instructions and timetables, I had no trouble, and it was great."

Other efforts

Other checkoff programs that are providing information to consumers include:

Healthcare Partners. Positive messages about beef are given more credibility since partnering with doctors, dietitians and teachers. The beef industry has developed a pro-beef booklet to help the public eat healthier. Research funded by checkoff dollars has recently reported that lean meat helps to lower "bad" cholesterol, which may reduce the risk of heart disease.

From the customer's viewpoint

Joanne Hart is a regular customer at the Giant Eagle Market in Johnstown, Pa. She buys beef about three times a month for herself and her husband. She loves to cook, making things from scratch, and she has a pretty good understanding of the different cuts of beef and the proper preparation methods.

Today Joanne is looking for a *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand chuck roast to make homemade vegetable soup. When she chooses meat she looks for bright red color, some marbling and a close trim on the fat.

"I have had friends and people I know ask me how I prepare different cuts of beef because theirs don't turn out like mine," she says. "One woman asked me about round steak preparation because hers turned out so tough. When she told me she brought it home from the store and just threw it in a frying pan, I wasn't too surprised that it was tough."

Joanne wholeheartedly believes that people who produce beef should make information available to let consumers know the different cuts of beef and how to cook them, because she knows that many people simply aren't informed.

Although she doesn't pay too much attention to the "Beef Made Easy" signs posted above the meatcases, she says she is sure they probably help other customers who don't understand beef preparation. She does, however, often pick up brochures the store puts out in the meatcase area just to see what is new and different and to add to her collection of recipes.

"Maybe if the packers would put some recipes right on the packages of meat it might help," she says. "I learned just about everything I know (about cooking beef) from talking to a lot of different butchers over the years, and I think it is unfortunate that most people won't do that."

"I mainly buy CAB to make sure I get a consistent product," Joanne says. "Buying meat out of the regular meatcase is like playing roulette. One time it can be really great, and the next time, even though it looks great, it will be tasteless and tough."



► Consumer Joanne Hart says beef producers should make information available to educate consumers about the different cuts of beef and how to cook them.

Youth Education. Educational material funded by checkoff dollars is distributed to more than 5 million students each year. Positive beef messages are presented through brochures and videos that help teach youth to make correct meal choices and stress the importance of beef in a balanced, nutritious diet.

Consumer education is also ongoing through advertising on television and radio, and in print. Those who watch television have probably heard Sam Elliott's voice and the tagline, "Beef. It's what's for dinner."

Messages of this type are targeted at mothers ages 25-54 who have children at home. This segment accounts for about 56 million women deciding what's for dinner each night. Reaching about 94% of this targeted group, the advertisements convey that consumers can feel confident about beef's being a nutritious and convenient choice.

The American National CattleWomen (ANCW) are also an excellent source of consumer education. Acting as industry ambassadors, they provide samples of

convenient beef products for trade shows and in-store demonstrations. These samples provide nutrition and food safety education to consumers and introduce them to many convenience products, supporting the industry's goal of adding value to the chuck and round.

At the state level, educating the consumer and promoting beef has been undertaken by just about every state beef council and cattlemen's association in the United States.

The New York Beef Industry Council (NYBIC) recently introduced "Beefman," a cowboy superhero, to state fair attendees. "Educating children about good nutrition and the importance of maintaining a balanced diet, which includes the appropriate amount of beef, is a main priority of America's beef producers," explains Don Gray, a beef producer and chairman of the NYBIC.

The Texas CattleWomen make consumer education an ongoing project by sponsoring the Texas Beef Cook-Off, beef gift certificates, beef for Father's Day, beef

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education booths and programs, in-store beef promotions and a 4-H beef ambassador contest. The group also cooperates with the American Heart Association, American Cancer Association and American Diabetes Foundations, Ag Day Projects and Great Grilled Beef Demonstrations.

At the meatcase

Not to be overlooked as a great source of consumer education are the butchers who man the service meatcases in larger supermarkets. Colin Snyder, assistant manager of the meat department at the Giant Eagle Supermarket in Johnstown, Pa., says he has daily interaction with customers when working at the meatcase, which also includes the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand.

During the eight years he has worked in the meat industry, he has seen many changes in both the customers and the products.

"I think the customers seem to be a lot more aware of price and want more information and a higher-quality product than when I first started in the business," he says. "In turn, stores seem to be doing a closer trim, and the meat in general is a lot leaner to accommodate healthier lifestyles."

Although Snyder says he finds nothing wrong with customers' wanting leaner beef, he wishes they would re-educate themselves on preparing the leaner cuts.

"I often watch customers digging through the beef case searching for the leanest piece of meat they can find, preferably one without visible fat or marbling. They are happy when they find a piece of meat that suits them, but then they take it home and

overcook it and wonder why it is tough. They need to learn that you can't cook a piece of meat without fat or marbling the same as you cooked meat before. I don't really think that most consumers realize the fat and marbling are what gave the meat its flavor."

Giant Eagle is one of the markets that participate in the Beef Made Easy program. Snyder says the corporation headquarters sends down case recommendations that individual stores must follow as closely as possible.

"I think the cooking recommendations help customers make selections, because when things are all spread out, it makes it harder for them to make choices," he says.

Giant Eagle also attempts to educate customers by displaying prominent signs showing the various cuts of meat and brochures clipped to the rails that show the various cuts for customer reference. However, Snyder says he thinks many people are in such a rush that they grab the information and take it with them with intentions of reading it later, which probably doesn't happen.

He says giving customers the opportunity to come to the meatcase to talk to the meat cutters helps many of them to learn about meat cuts and preparation.

"If we see a customer looking confused or unsure of what they want, we will make suggestions by asking how many people they will be serving and how they are

intending to cook the meat. We make suggestions on how much meat they need and the proper cuts for how they are intending to prepare the meat, such as grilling, roasting or whatever. Many of these people come back and tell us it was great and worked out good, so I definitely think the more they can talk to the actual cutters, the better it is."

Snyder says he also finds people will choose only meats they know how to prepare and will shy away from anything different. In attempts to entice customers to try new things, Giant Eagle does beef preparation in the store at various times, handing out samples and recipes.

"I think at the time it helps teach consumers that there are new ways to prepare meats and new recipes," he explains. "But I really think most of them are afraid to try new things, or if they do try something new and it doesn't turn out as they expect it to, they revert to their old ways."

"If there were one thing I could change in the beef industry, it would be to have a more consistent product for our customers," he continues. "We sell CAB, and I know that it is a reliable, consistent product that would probably give me eight really superb steaks out of every 10. But in our regular meatcase, it would be a far smaller percentage, and once customers get a few bad pieces of meat, it will often turn them away from beef. So in essence, not only do I feel consumers need to be educated to choose the right cut of meat

and know how to prepare it

correctly, I feel the product they end up choosing should be of consistent quality to fulfill their needs."

Working toward that goal, the beef industry unveiled its Brand Mark in an attempt to fulfill the demand by consumers for branded beef products that deliver convenience, consistency and good taste.

Dozens of branded beef products have entered the marketplace in the last few years, says Carl Blackwell, NCBA executive director of new products. "The new Brand Mark is like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval for beef. It says a product carrying this mark has passed a series of checkpoints."

Currently, more than 20 retail beef products have been awarded the Brand Mark.

