

# Facing the 4:30 Dinner DILEMMA

BY LORI GILMORE



*Gaining a better understanding of the end user is important for future survival. By identifying changing consumer preferences and needs, the entire beef industry can set out to satisfy discriminating demands by delivering quality value-added products and convenient meal solutions.*

It's 4:30 p.m. Do you know what you'll be serving for dinner tonight?

If you're like many others, it's usually late afternoon before you address this nagging question. According to consumer market research conducted by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), two-thirds of all dinner decisions are made the same day. In fact, 73% put off evening meal planning until 4:30 p.m. or later.

While we know that consumers make food choices day in and day out, complicated and time-strapped lifestyles have presented a predicament known as the "4:30 dinner dilemma." Experts believe the beef industry can respond by delivering quality, convenient meal solutions, ultimately helping beef become the preferred protein source.

## ■ Share of stomach

It's no secret that people have been buying less beef. Since 1980 demand has steadily dropped from 53.9% to 41.1%. During the same period, consumers increasingly chose chicken. Poultry purchases advanced nearly one-to-one compared with beef's decline.

"We are fighting for share of stomach," says Mary Adolf, NCBA vice president of consumer marketing. In addition to beef and poultry, pork and even pasta are vying for meaningful market status. "The numbers tell us the poultry industry is satisfying consumer needs," she says.

In 1975 broilers were primarily sold as whole birds. Nearly 25 years later, only 11% of chickens are marketed as whole fryers. Responding to customer needs by further processing the product helped the poultry industry boost market share. According to NCBA data, 72% of consumers purchase skinless, boneless, ready-to-cook chicken breasts or thighs on a regular basis.

"The poultry industry is listening and hearing what consumers are saying and acting by delivering products to satisfy their needs," Adolf says. "Up until this point, the beef industry has not been very aggressive in responding to consumer needs."

For example, walk into any grocery store and go to the meat section. This area looks

much the same as it did 20 years ago. Today's consumers are unfamiliar with beef cuts and often can't find what they want. According to NCBA research, 32% of medium to heavy users of beef said they have problems finding particular cuts in the meat case. In that situation, 12% admitted walking away and not purchasing beef.

"Consumers are thinking meals, not species," says Kevin Yost, NCBA director of channel marketing. To halt plummeting market share, beef must fulfill consumer desires. "As beef producers, we must start asking ourselves: Are we delivering what consumers are demanding?"

### ■ Simplicity and convenience

Consumers crave simplicity and convenience when determining what's for dinner. "More and more the question is not 'what's for dinner?' but 'who's going to pick up dinner?'" Yost says. This is apparent in the growth of food-service sales, where takeout business has doubled since 1984. In fact, food expenditures from food-service operations recently surpassed grocery-store spending.

According to Yost, in order to resolve the daily dinner dilemma with a meal prepared at home, consumers want to know:

1. Is it simple to prepare?
2. Is it fast and convenient?
3. How easy is it to serve?
4. How long will it take to clean up?

Gone are the days of cooking "from scratch." People prefer "assembly" cooking — following a few easy steps using five or fewer ingredients. NCBA research shows that 70% spend less than 45 minutes preparing a meal.

"If our product takes time to think about and prepare, we are going to miss out," Yost adds.

One trend that has contributed to the "4:30 dinner dilemma" is the growing number of working women. With 70% of females employed today, many are still responsible for a majority of household chores, including grocery shopping and meal preparation. Consequently, these busy people don't have extra time to spend in the kitchen. They want convenient mealtime solutions.

As a result, prepared foods have become a staple in many homes. According to NCBA figures, 40% of consumers view prepared foods as essential, and 30% want to use them more often. Frozen entrées accounted for more than half of frozen food sales in 1995. "We're not talking about TV dinners, but rather outstanding products that can be put in the microwave and taste great," Yost says.

### ■ Meal solutions with beef

"We need to deliver convenient products that can be prepared ideally in under 15 minutes," Adolf says, "so that on a busy weeknight a woman can get a great beef meal on the table for her family that's



something different than steak or ground beef."

That's the industry's challenge: developing quality convenience products, particularly from lower-value cuts from the chuck and round. Traditionally sales have lagged from these two primals.

"People don't know how to prepare products from the chuck and round, and even if they do, they don't have time to make a pot roast," Adolf says.

Future development of easy-to-prepare products is critical for stabilizing beef's consumption. "Through product development initiatives NCBA is working with companies to get products into the home-meal-replacement market," Adolf says. The good news is, according to Adolf, the industry is starting to aggressively address convenient meal solutions through product development, specifically utilizing the lower-valued chuck and round.

A number of value-added products are already in the marketplace. For example, under the *Certified Angus Beef*™ brand, consumers can purchase several heat-and-serve items. According to Russ Johnson, value-added products specialist for the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program's Retail Division, the CAB Program offers consumers delicious alternatives from frankfurters to deli meats.

In fact, RMH Foods, a CAB Program-licensed manufacturer, sells two award-winning flavored and precooked *Certified Angus Beef* products — pot roast with gravy and a roasted prime rib of beef. The company, based in Morton, Ill., received recognition from NCBA last year for having two of the top five best new beef products available in America. Recently the CAB Program cooperator introduced a precooked meat-loaf-and-gravy product.

"These are excellent products because they provide a convenient solution for consumers," Johnson says. "Many people walk into the grocery store after work and have no idea what to fix for dinner. With these products available, a person can walk up to the beef counter, purchase the microwavable meal and in just 10 to 15 minutes serve an outstanding meal to their family."

In the future, says Johnson, look for *Certified Angus Beef* products not only in the fresh meat and deli departments but also heat-and-serve items in the convenient-meal-solution section of grocery stores.

In order to remain viable well into the next century, the beef business must become consumer-driven, says Yost. Consumers are sending signals they want convenience in a consistent and quality product. Now it's the beef industry's turn to respond.

It's 4:30 p.m. once again, and you still don't know what to prepare for dinner. Don't worry, beef can be a delicious, easy-to-fix alternative. Who knows, it may even become a trendy choice.

## Consumer trends: looking at the larger picture

*"Considering consumers vote on products with their dollars, it's important to identify trends," says Kevin Yost, director of channel marketing for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). Customer preferences ultimately affect food purchases.*

*Russ Johnson, value-added products specialist, Retail Division for the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program, agrees. "Cattle producers are not really in the business of producing live cattle, rather providing food," he says. "Since they are feeding and marketing a product that eventually winds up on the table, it's important to understand consumer desires."*

*NCBA researchers study consumer attitudes and behaviors that produce trends. The following five macro trends, or large issues, may drive future buying behaviors, particularly of beef.*

### My generation

The world population, exceeding 5 billion today, will continue to expand. At the same time, a growing segment will become older. According to NCBA research, between 1995 and 2005 the group between ages 45 and 64 will increase by 18.6%.

As the baby boomer generation matures, they'll strive to live longer, more productive lives. As a result, health, quality products and disease prevention will all contribute to purchasing decisions. In the future, consumers will more likely choose moderation vs. total elimination of items from their diet, Yost says. As always, quality will remain absolutely essential in food selection.

### Culture swap

Marketing to ethnic niches in the United States will play a broadening role. In the next few years Hispanic-, Asian- and African-American populations are expected to increase significantly. In fact, by 2015 the number of Hispanic residents in the United States is expected to double from the number in 1990.

Relating to the food industry, ethnic restaurants accounted for nearly one-third of all dining establishments in 1996. Today tortillas are the fastest-growing segment in the baking industry. According to NCBA research, this growth is expected to continue at an

estimated rate of 54% over the next five years.

### Technomania

With 80 million people, or 45% of the adult population, having access to online services, consumers are wired. Today the use of this technology is no longer gender-specific. According to NCBA, two-thirds of Internet users are female. Just a few years ago, women accounted for only one-ninth of online customers.

Consumers are looking for convenient alternatives to grocery shopping. Many believe their time is more valuable than money. This trend is solidified by the acceptance of convenience shopping — picking brands online and having products delivered.

### Girl power

Today 70% of women are in the work force, compared with 42% in 1960. In addition, employed females are putting in more hours on the job than 20 years ago. According to consumer research, a majority of time-crunched working women are also responsible for a large share of household chores, including grocery shopping and meal preparation. Hectic schedules and increased job demands have produced the "4:30 dinner dilemma."



### Home oasis

Both men and women are packing more activities into each workweek. Consider job requirements and family responsibilities, then add information overload and workplace competition, and the result is often stress and pressure and little time remaining for leisure activities. During any available free time, many families are retreating to their homes and viewing it as an "oasis."

Research shows 32% of consumers said they are eating dinner at home more often, and nearly eight in 10 consumers dine at home with family members at least five days a week. To protect precious "family time" in the future, consumers will "buy" time by giving up routine tasks such as cooking and cleaning after a meal. This trend is apparent when analyzing the growth of takeout meals from restaurants and retail. In 1984 the home-meal-replacement market represented 16% of sales; in 1996 the number hit 30%; and by 2005 it is expected to exceed 50%.