

Understanding the CONSUMER

B Y L O R I G I L M O R E



Wendell Newcomb believes value-added beef products are key to industry survival.

It's no secret that consumers are buying less beef. Cast blame on customer dissatisfaction, changing diets, busy lifestyles or other food choices. Nevertheless, it is all contributing to poor product demand. Wendell Newcomb, president and general manager of Roman Packing Company based in Norfolk, Neb., urges beef producers and others with a stake in the industry to focus on the ultimate customer: the consumer.



"Producers need to think of the housewife, teacher or business executive in Kansas City, Chicago, Houston or Tallahassee as the customer—not the meat packer," says the owner of the northeast Nebraska meat-processing firm. "While doing that, ask yourself, 'What can I make that will encourage the consumer to buy my product again?'"

Producing a consistent, quality product should be a priority, Newcomb says. Consumers expect beef to be tender, but at the same time lean. Fat totally turns them off.

In an effort to understand the end user, realize the average consumer is "uneducated" in beef selection and preparation, says Newcomb. He points to a growing market lacking experience in the kitchen. Many have not received proper training in selection and preparation of beef cuts.

Compounding the problem, most retailers sell lean, lower-quality trimmed cuts as "barbecue steaks" or "grilling steaks." By disguising the actual cut with an attractive name, grocers set up unsuspecting customers for disappointment, Newcomb says. These featured products, typically trimmed pieces of chuck and round, taste best when prepared under moist cooking conditions. Too often, the unknowing consumer places these steaks directly onto a hot fire, then suffers the consequences.

For example, a person goes to the store and brings home four beautiful, bright-red, nicely trimmed steaks. The cook grills the meat, labeled "grilling steaks," for the family meal, and the finished product turns out tough.

"As a result, the consumer is unhappy. Not unhappy with the grocery store particularly, not unhappy with the meat market manager; they are unhappy with the beef industry," Newcomb says. The family doesn't realize why the product was tough.

Since cooking instructions are not printed on most meat packaging, the average consumer doesn't know certain cuts taste best when marinated prior to grilling, Newcomb says. He believes consumers need information and education to properly prepare beef products.

"The consumer needs truth in packaging," Newcomb says. "Each package needs a label describing where that piece of meat originated and the recommended preparation procedures."

Also contributing to the industry's distress is the inability to sell lower-priced cuts at a higher value, says Newcomb. Typically, retailers and restaurants have little problem moving T-bones, sirloins, tenderloins, strip steaks and ribeyes. However, higher-value steaks make up only about 30% of total salable carcass. Marketing the remaining 70% poses a greater challenge.

"Until we are able to sell the cheaper cuts of meat at an increased value, the beef industry will not recover," Newcomb says,

referring to sluggish demand. He believes selling value-added beef products is the key to survival, both in his business and in the industry.

Roman Packing Company, a family business first established as a public meat market in Norfolk nearly 75 years ago, slaughters approximately 3,000 cattle and 7,500 hogs each year. The company serves as a wholesale meat supplier for locker plants, independent meat markets, restaurants and full-service food distributors in Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa and Nebraska. During the past decade, the operation has increased its emphasis on manufacturing cooked and processed meat items.

"Today we are in the business of making center-of-the-plate menu items that fill the need for institutional-type retailers," Newcomb says. "Traditional marketing of carcass or bulk wholesale cuts will continue to be an ever-decreasing part of the industry, as consumers demand more and more ready-to-serve products."

With a background in meat science, Newcomb is constantly working to create prepared beef products derived from lower-price cuts. Specialty meat items manufactured by Roman Packing include a cooked Philly steak, a precooked prime rib and a precooked sloppy joe mix, in addition to various sausage and hot dog items.

For instance, the Philly steak product is made from thinly sliced and seasoned pieces of flank cooked with a mixture of onions and peppers. According to Newcomb the product is prepared and sold to a client who makes and distributes sandwiches in vending machines.

Another value-added item prepared by Newcomb's company is a quick-to-fix prime rib.

"This delicious product is great for the consumer wanting to make a prime rib dinner," he says of the convenience item. The product is frozen in a pouch with beef au jus. The cook simply places it in boiling water, and in seven minutes the precooked prime rib is ready to serve.

As the 21st century nears, those throughout the entire beef chain must concede that gone are the days when families gathered to feast on a pot roast slow-cooked with potatoes and carrots. Modern consumers either don't know how to prepare that roast or won't take the time. They are demanding more convenient food options including specialty beef products. Wendell Newcomb, the third-generation innovator at Roman Packing Company, is focused on filling that need.



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Educate consumers about food safety

Preparing a desirable meal with beef may seem second nature to many within the industry, says Wendell Newcomb, president of Roman Packing Company. Likely, the skill was learned in the home. However, a growing segment of our population is not receiving this instruction and remains "uneducated" in safe food-preparation procedures.

According to Newcomb, the industry can no longer afford to ignore the "uneducated consumer," who may eventually become dissatisfied and stop buying product. Equally important, this lack of knowledge could lead to food-safety problems.

"All of us have to be extremely concerned about food safety, Newcomb says. "It is our livelihood.

"The beef industry has consistently produced and delivered a clean, wholesome product," he says. While Newcomb admits levels of bacteria on beef have been much lower than on pork and poultry, the beef industry has caught the brunt of the bad publicity for food-borne illness.

"Everybody knows that you can't eat raw chicken. We don't eat raw pork because we have been educated that it is an unhealthy item," he says. "But beef has been so clean over the years that we have failed to educate people about how it differs in the safe, flexible ways it can be cooked. A rare steak is acceptable because it is cooked on the outside while the inside remains sterile from harmful bacteria.

"We tend not to cook beef very well," he says. "This creates a chance, even though a slim one, that some pathogenic bacteria will survive the cooking process."

Newcomb believes consumer information is imperative to train the "uneducated consumer." Since only a limited number of youth are learning about food preparation methods in traditional home-economics courses or at home, he believes the industry must go to the nation's schools and push for development of mandatory courses in proper selection and preparation of food products.

"This is a safety issue," he says. "People need to know that you can't leave meat out on the counter overnight uncovered and cook it the next day." Refrigeration and proper cooking temperatures are a must. "Our children need to learn that all of these things are important to their lifestyle, in addition to their safety and healthful well-being."