

# What's Important to Consumers?

*Taste and nutrition lead the list as consumers rely on quality brands to deliver.*

BY STEVE SUTHER

Consumers want to feel certain that the food they buy will taste good and will be good for them, safe, affordable, storable, and quick and easy to prepare, according to the Food Marketing Institute. Safety, though third in importance for demand, is an absolute requirement — outranking price. In fact, only 8% of adults surveyed by the Opinion Research Corp. this spring said price was the top priority in meal planning.

The *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreaks in the 1990s led consumers to prefer beef, especially hamburger, cooked to a higher degree of doneness, say Colorado State University (CSU) meat scientists. And since safety is required for demand, the consumer-focused beef industry's "Long Range Plan" now lists it as the primary demand driver, followed by palatability, health and nutrition, and convenience.

A generation ago, consumers took safety for granted and didn't mind buying beef that took hours to prepare to exacting recipe specifications, says George Romig, former director of the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Retail Division. "In the 1970s, consumers, primarily female, were focused on taking care of the family and well-educated on how to prepare meals. Most did not work outside the family."

## The rules change

But societal changes saw the tables turn in the 1980s; most women found outside jobs and a busier lifestyle, even as retail underwent a transition to low-price, lower service, high-volume superstores, Romig notes. Boxed beef of a relatively lower quality grade was typically the only meatcase alternative to chicken and pork, which made significant gains in share of the consumer's meat dollar. Deli and frozen foods were beginning to emerge as important retail departments.

Beef's inconsistency had made it a relatively poor value even before diet and health concerns kicked in to apparently seal its fate, Romig says. Consumers said they wanted lean, but in restaurants they still ate



well-marbled beef and were disappointed when retail offerings didn't perform on the home grill.

The beef industry united in a renewed focus on consumers, who were enjoying an economic boom in the 1990s and could afford beef again. The value-added approach was central to the comeback program, Romig says. "Beef got serious about finding ways to compete."

Pork and chicken had led the way to branding. Even though *Certified Angus Beef*™ (CAB®) product had been at licensed retailers since the 1970s, it was not as pervasive as the pork and chicken brands. "There is still some commodity pork and poultry, but branded continues to grow," Romig says.

## Today's consumer

Consumers, he reports, are still primarily female, shop an average of 2.2 times a week and make 35% of purchases on impulse, 65% of them planning meals just hours before they serve them. "You have about 180 seconds to grab their attention, teach them something about the brand, provide solutions and make a sale that will develop brand loyalty," Romig says. "Consumers

want convenience, but they are confused and turn increasingly to brands.

"The consumer is focused on self and family, doesn't know a lot about cooking and doesn't want it to take up much time," he adds. "They are looking for cooking directions, recipes, number of servings and nutritional information — the consumer is much more educated than we usually give them credit for."

Still, the meatcase was daunting for many consumers until the last couple of years, when retailers began adopting the beef industry's recommended category-by-cooking system. Where meatcases continue to be organized in ways that are convenient only to grocers, beef demand may not recover as quickly, Romig says. "The old cut names mean nothing to consumers; they don't know about chuck roast, and they are not into experimentation. They don't want to pay \$12 for a rump roast and not have it turn out right."

In the nation's restaurants, especially while the economic boom continues, consumers are willing to pay for top-quality steaks, but they have no loyalty when dealt anything short of a "pleasurable eating experience," says Mark Polzer, CAB foodservice director.

"If someone comes into your restaurant and gets a bad steak, the word of mouth can kill a business. He tells 10 people, and each of them tells 10 more," Polzer says. That's why restaurateurs are increasingly buying premium branded products like CAB, he says.

The foodservice industry has seen consolidation similar to that in the cattle-feeding and packing segments, he reports, with large "broadline" companies buying many of the smaller specialty meat purveyors. The challenge is to educate beef specialists within the organizations that have 100 or more people on their sales forces and that carry thousands of food items.

A positive aspect of working with the big companies is gaining greater access to



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

**"If someone comes into your restaurant and gets a bad steak, the word of mouth can kill a business," says Mark Polzer, CAB Program foodservice director, adding that's why restaurateurs are increasingly buying premium branded products, such as Certified Angus Beef™ product.**



**In the 1990s beef got serious about competing for consumer preference, says George Romig, former director of the CAB Retail Division.**

national chain restaurants. Steak & Ale recently signed on as a line-item CAB licensee for top sirloins, and Blake's Lotaburger in the Southwest recently went 100% CAB ground beef, Polzer says.

Gary Smith, Colorado State University meat scientist, says, "It seems obvious to me people are returning to beef, and they are not nearly as concerned with the fat associated with marbling as they were. I would say we are going to go back to higher quality, demanding fewer Select cattle and more in the upper two-thirds of Choice."

In a sense that's like going back in time, he says. "Over my lifetime, we had that kind of quality. Then we got so conscious of fat and cutability that we tried to make beef

## Following doctors' approval

One of the unique markets within foodservice is the institution and hospital trade. Traditionally, hospital food has been nothing to write home about, but Via Christi Regional Medical Center in Wichita, Kan., aims to break with that tradition.

Patti Dollarhide, the hospital's director of nutritional services, says it made sense to sign a license to provide *Certified Angus Beef™* (CAB®) products for both patients and staff. Charged with making a profit, she recently added "Meals on Wheels."

"Nutrition and health are connected," she emphasizes. "We train our staff to distribute meals quickly, within 45 minutes being the standard."

The business is 35% patient feeding, 51% employee cafeteria (the hospital's "restaurant") and 14% catering. "In feeding patients, you have to deal with salt, calorie and sugar restrictions, as well as taste preferences," Dollarhide notes. "Nutrition is actually still an emerging science."

The cafeteria serves 3,500 tickets a day, at an average of \$2.82 each, so these are not steak dinners. Catering involves a lot of meetings at the hospital, she explains.

When first required to make hospital foodservice profitable, Dollarhide counted the obstacles: the negative hospital-food image, inconsistency of the meat supply, the public's perceived "knowledge" of nutrition, lack of employee cooking skills, and the need to move food over distance and time (lean meat dries out).

"The empty-nest housewife from the baby boom generation had skills, but they are retiring," she explains. "Cooks now are from diverse backgrounds, representing 11 different countries and with varying skills."

Trying to prepare a meal using inside round, the crew burned two roasters full of beef. Thinking about that and how even properly cooked beef was drying out en route to patients' rooms, Dollarhide decided to try CAB product. "It's much more forgiving," she notes. "The hospital had done a disservice in trying to provide Select beef because it was not being eaten."

"Using CAB product also helps improve taste, consistency and quality of the ground beef," she adds. "The CAB has less gristle, more predictable color, and its higher fat content makes it more tender, juicy and flavorful. We are also interested in the value-added products."

"Identifying us with products served at upscale steak houses appealed to patients, as well as doctors," Dollarhide reports. "The boss likes it when people compliment the food, even though he knows nothing about beef."

One of the heart surgeons wanted CAB steak and sold the idea to the dietician, so it is now available for doctors, Dollarhide says. "Take all the fat out of the desserts, the Via Christi doctors say, but not out of the beef."

Are doctors' attitudes changing regarding patient meals? "I see it turning around to where they don't pay much attention in most cases. Loosen up — they are only here three or four days. Why torment them? Beef is a great source of zinc and other essential nutrients — if it's good enough that they will eat it."



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into great big chickens, and now we are coming back to quality."

Smith credits the "Dr. Atkin's Diet," while not endorsing it, for "keeping people comfortable with the idea of eating beef." People try the protein-oriented diet, and

many do not stay on it, "but they feel a lot better about eating beef. And they realize in order to have satiety, to really feel full, they do need some fat in their diet."

