



Fanfare to Start, Results to Continue

Sysco LA exhibits “top down” commitment to the brand.

by *Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

When imagining the perfect story about national herd rebuilding and keeping supply, demand and beef prices in balance, an office building in the heart of Los Angeles might not be the first setting that comes to mind. Yet, that’s exactly where this story is unfolding. It’s one that combines record *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand acceptance with greater market penetration in one of the most populated — yet largely untapped by the brand — U.S. consumer markets.

When salespeople at Sysco Los Angeles came to work on March 14, their ordinary office complex was temporarily transformed into a sort of Wild West palooza. They were greeted by a tent in the parking lot and two life-size steer statues in the lobby. From the chuckwagon beef breakfast to the side of beef hanging by an engine hoist as they entered the conference space, the whole team knew it wasn’t going to be business as usual this particular Friday.

“We didn’t want it to be a rollout just like all the rest,” says Sysco executive Darlene Antoci. “We wanted them to see that this was something that we were embracing as a partnership.”

Major league soccer player Alan Gordon of the LA Galaxy rounded out the list of motivational speakers, which also included Sysco LA president Bryan Allred and Mark Polzer, vice president of business development for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). Sporting the companies’ logos on his jersey and talking about parallels between playing for the best and selling the best,

Gordon kicked signed soccer balls out into the crowd. A balloon drop followed.

“The balloons were flying everywhere,” says Cody Jones, CAB executive account manager for the region. “It was pretty dramatic.”

All the fanfare was met with equal enthusiasm for education.

CAB staff presented rotating sessions on the brand’s product specifications, overcoming sales objections, and using online marketing tools. At the same time, Sysco detailed an incentive program for the top salespeople.

“The whole idea of these launches is to

create awareness for the sales team of what the brand is and what it can do for them,” Polzer says, “and, most importantly, what it can ultimately do for their customer in terms of customer satisfaction for the restaurant or the diners that are coming in.”

Strategies for success

That hope of what the product can do started all of this for the Sysco team. The promise of what that group of motivated individuals will do with the product got CAB interested.

Partnerships like this are not taken lightly. Brand staff first evaluated statistics like foodservice dollars spent in major metro areas and then did comparative analysis to determine LA was an underserved market.

“In a sense, there’s basically 12 million people open to getting CAB that haven’t been before,” Jones says.

Longtime partner Newport Meats Co. serves a different clientele in a wide area that includes LA and other western venues from Utah and Nevada to Hawaii.

“When the Newport truck pulls up to make a delivery, it’s got to be a large customer that can buy a lot of meat,” Polzer says. CAB needed a broadline distribution partner serving the metropolitan areas. “The Sysco LA truck can pull up to Joe’s Diner, who is not nearly as big, because they are not just selling them meats. They are also selling them napkins and sacks of rice, flour and sugar, and all the related items.”

Last fall, the idea went from discussions to making licensing a reality.



►From the chuckwagon beef breakfast to the side of beef hanging by an engine hoist as they entered the conference space, the whole team knew it wasn’t going to be business as usual this particular Friday.



“We asked them to put together a plan of how they would go to market, how they would promote the brand and how they would train their team to sell the product,” Polzer says of the process, which included interviews with the executive team and a trip to the CAB headquarters in Wooster.

“Our work is done so that we don’t license someone and they fumble the ball,” he explains. “[The work is done so] they are effective in getting our message out and, more importantly, that it works for them, that it creates additional profitability for them and their customers.”

Going for it

Long before dunk tanks and “strongman” games filled a parking-lot tent, and before an airplane passed overhead with a “proudly presents” CAB banner, the Sysco team laid out big goals.

They want to set a new record for the best inaugural year in the history of the brand. The mark to beat: 3.3 million pounds of sales.

“From the distribution side, there’s a saying that he who owns the center of the plate, owns the account,” Antoci says. “Anybody can sell you ketchup, anybody can sell you mayonnaise, but the protein category is the point of differentiation.

“It’s not only where restaurants make their money, but it’s also where they make their name,” she says.

To keep the momentum going, Antoci says it’s very important they continue to show leadership “from the top down.” They’ve already added ranch photos throughout the building, run targeted promotions and wrapped delivery trucks in brand imaging so the entire city sees that they’re on board. The president even wears CAB cufflinks.

In that first month, they sold more CAB

than any first-time licensed distributor in the history of the brand.

“Some of it was the glitz and glamour, and a lot of it was really hard work behind the scenes,” Polzer says. For example, Sysco had to create product codes and have aged product ready to go immediately following the launch.

“We’re not going to get everyone on board and jazzed up and then we leave,” Jones says. “The launch is just Step 1 in our relationship together. It’s not just the brand of the week.”

They’re planning follow-up training sessions and promotions, and Antoci says she wants Angus producers to know they’re in it for the long haul.

“We understand that it’s not just a box that we pick up off the shelves,” she says. “We understand the hard work and dedication on their end, and we want them to know that we’re on the forefront representing the quality.”



► Talking about parallels between playing for the best and selling the best, Alan Gordon kicked signed soccer balls out into the crowd. A balloon drop followed.

The supply for the demand

It’s no coincidence that added distribution is coming at a time when herds are also adding females.

“During the last three-plus years when supply has been tight, the existing distribution network has done a great job of selling everything we had,” Polzer says. “The last thing we needed to do was create shortages for those who are working hard to sell product and then all of the sudden their delivery truck shows up and only half their order was on it.”

CAB acceptance rates have trended higher in recent years, with as many as 30% of eligible cattle qualifying for the brand.

Combining that with steady carcass weights and more cattle, the brand expects increasing supplies in the next few years.

“We need to make sure we get all of that supply sold to keep our premiums at a high level and growing,” Polzer says, noting the \$50-million-per-year tally of packer-paid bonuses for cattle that grade CAB.

“We don’t need to build demand,” Polzer says. “Demand is there; we just need to make sure we satisfy that with proper distribution.”

Currently, of the 1,600 or so foodservice distributors in the United States, only 126 are licensed to sell the brand.

For Antoci and the rest of the Sysco LA crew, they’re happy to be in that exclusive group.

“This is not just an additional item in our selection, because we have so many,” she says. “This is now part of our culture to support the brand. Not only because it’s the right business decision exclusively, but also because it’s something we believe in.”



Editor’s Note: Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.