

Beef Quality and Consistency: A Retailer's Perspective

W.G. Affield

Lueken's Village Foods
Bemidji, MN

The meat industry in the U.S. has evolved dramatically. Twenty-five years ago retail operators received poultry packed in ice, pork loins were delivered with 0.75 to 1 inch of fat cover and beef was sold and delivered by the side, quarter or primal cut. Today, fresh poultry and pork are delivered to many retail outlets prepackaged and ready for retail selling. The poultry and pork industry have developed a substantial market niche for lunch meats, hot dogs and cooked, ready-to-eat items.

In the pork industry, the smoked ham market has evolved from a salty, very fat, skin-and-shank- on commodity ham to today's market of very lean, lower salt, skinless, defatted, boneless or semi-boneless ham. The development of this smoked ham market has taken care of a large percentage of the hog carcass thus allowing the pork industry to aggressively market the balance of skeletal meat (e.g., pork loin and shoulder).

The pork industry has committed itself to making pork the #1 meat in America by the year 2000. "Meat of Choice" is the name of the new promotion. One of the tools being developed is "21 meals in 21 minutes." Does this sound familiar to some of you? The beef industry has an excellent booklet available to consumers entitled "30 Meals in 30 Minutes."

Our focus today is battling back in the beef industry. "The grading is still not very good. The no-roll or Select product is very cheap. Choice is in short supply. This is going to last for a time" (*Beef*, October 23, 1995). This quote, taken out of the Fleming Meat Merchandiser, sums up a large problem in the beef industry - lack of consistency. As a retail operator, I do not have all the answers; however, I see the end product, much of which is excellent quality. We have a long battle ahead of us to maintain dominance in the retail meat case. Beginning at the producer level, we must take advantage of advances in genetic engineering, perhaps moving away from the large, rapidly growing cattle that do not finish Choice until they are too heavy to a moderately-framed carcass. Recently, I was explaining the problem of fast growing, large-framed calves finishing properly to a producer and his reply was, "That's not my problem; I get paid by the pound when they leave the farm." The day Value Based Marketing becomes a reality, these

producers will be scrambling to upgrade their herds.

Injection site blemishes are another problem that must be eliminated, beginning at producer level. The neck area is the only place for injections where the carcass will not be damaged. At retail, during the course of a week when beef cuts are produced, we see tissue damage that we remove and discard in steaks being cut. We never see the scar tissue in roasts; such tissue never becomes visible until after it is baked and being sliced on the dinner table. Imagine your reaction to being served a slice of roast beef with a large section of scar tissue or abscess in it. How soon would you purchase another beef roast?

At Lueken's Village Foods we use USDA choice, boxed beef. Here are the top 12 issues that concern us:

1. *Fat* — Excess waste on cuts is a two-fold problem. First, the cattle are produced and finished too fat. Secondly, packers are keeping the leaner, better yielding cattle for their upscale, value added program (e.g., CAB, user friendly, export).
2. *Improperly broken sub-primals* — At packer level, sub primals are always broken far into the lesser value cut. For example, the top of the short loin is broken at an angle into the sirloin butt, and the packer picks up approximately 1.5 lb, most of which is bone. To the packer, this 1.5 lb of excess on the short loin is worth \$4.50 at today's price. If left on the sirloin butt, it is worth a few cents as bone scrap when the sirloin butt is processed into a butt tenderloin and boneless top sirloin. At retail level, this excess bone must be removed and discarded before taking off the first porterhouse steak. This increased shrink must be built into the retail price. This packer practice of uneven breaks in the complete carcass is universal in the U.S. From my limited exposure to Canadian packers, I believe their breaking standards are far superior to ours and are a much better value for retail operators when addressing the shrink problem of poor breaks.
3. *Misrepresented size ranges on sub-primals* — I purchase from three wholesale distributors, and I have experienced the same problem from all - receiving products that are a heavier weight range

1996 Minnesota Cattle Feeders Report B-435.

than normal at full price. I believe the problem is two-fold. First, the distributor has purchased these heavy products at a discounted price and is trying to pick up a few dollars. Second, the distributor is unaware that the packer has slipped him some heavy product and the packer is picking up some extra profit. At retail, these heavy products must be trimmed of excess fat and presented in the meat case. However, the size of New York strip steak from a 15+ lb strip loin, for example, is dramatically larger than one from a 10 to 12 lb strip loin, and consumers hesitate to buy it for several reasons.

4. *Old product* — At times, we receive a product with over 14 days on it. The product (if boneless) is in good condition; however, we see shorter shelf life and excess purge when processing. If the product has bone in it (e.g., short loins), the product becomes gassy and the bone must be trimmed, making a new bone surface. When processing, this increases shrink for the retailer.
5. *Pricing* — As I stated previously, I purchase from three distributors. Pricing is an important reason. I will, at times, receive price quotes on the same product from different packers for as much as a 10% spread.
6. *Injection-site blemishes* — **We discussed this issue earlier; however, it cannot be stressed enough. Intramuscular injections cause tissue damage and will follow the animal from birth to the dinner table.**
7. *Bruises inside muscle tissue* — Caution must be taken from birth to slaughter concerning sharp corners on rails on retaining pens, transportation and chutes to prevent overcrowding or physically abusing animals. Bruised tissue at retail must be removed and discarded.
8. *Dark cutters* — At times, we will receive a product that is very dark. This product is wholesome, but it cannot be displayed alongside other retail cuts because of its appearance. Dark cutting products are generally used in the ground meat program at a much lesser value.
9. *Short weights* — We do cutting tests every day on product and often come up with a plus 2% shrink factor. Boxed product less than 14 days old should be no more than 1%.
10. *Substituting Select for Choice* — This is another reason for multiple suppliers. If we receive less than USDA Choice product, we can return it and order from another supplier, to be delivered usually within 24 hours.
11. *Trimmed down Y-4 or Y-5 product* — All packers have trimmed down product sold under their special label. The buyer must become familiar with these packer labels and avoid them or receive some excessively fat product trimmed down and represented by the distributor only as USDA Choice.
12. *Leakers* — A product that has lost its vacuum seal is considered a leaker. If this product has lost its seal for more than 24 hours, it develops a dark edge. When sliced, a distinctive brown outline can be seen just below the surface. The meat is wholesome; however, it has no eye appeal for the consumer and must be trimmed down to a fresh edge.

In conclusion, if the beef industry is to remain a leader in the 21st Century, some changes must be made. Consumer education at the retail level is a key to increased beef consumption. Look at the success of the CAB program with the way the beef industry has changed. I firmly believe some check-off funds should be taken from the packer level and from the increased profits packers have realized from their upscale programs (e.g., CAB, user friendly, export) to finance a consumer education program. I believe they would further enhance their profits and tonnage by investing in the end user (i.e., the consumer).

Retail operators are the last link before meat reaches the consumer. It is our responsibility to put only fresh, tender, wholesome product on display but it takes all segments of the beef industry to make this happen.