Meat & Poultry Trends

JERRY KELLY, National Retail Account Manager, Sealed Air's Cryovac

Food Manufacturing spoke with Jerry Kelly of Sealed Air's Cryovac about the 2012 Power of Meat Report, a survey which explores consumer perceptions, attitudes and behaviors regarding meat and poultry, food shopping and preparation.

Q: Thirty-two percent of those surveyed indicated that they changed their meat purchasing habits in 2012, with 92 percent of those switching to cheaper cuts or kinds of meat and poultry in order to cut back on spending. How will this impact the meat industry, and what can the industry do to remedy the situation?

A: The Power of Meat Report has shown a macro change in food shopper behavior since 2008. Consumers are more focused on core items and less influenced by impulse buys. Today's shoppers are less influenced by end caps and in-store deals, and instead spending more time on the front end of grocery shopping, developing and sticking to plans and lists. In order to adapt to these trends, it is important for processors to understand local market trends and consumer preferences.

Even with these behavior changes, there are a number of things processors can do to increase the merchandising and purchasing of both value and premium cuts. This includes increasing on-pack information and incorporating value-added features such as convenient cooking or easy-open (and in some cases re-closable) packaging.

Another way the industry could work with this trend is to utilize undervalued cuts that would typically go into the grind by packaging them in an ovenable material. This allows easier preparation of these cuts and provides a value-added

convenience benefit, resulting in better margins on the cut.

Additionally, shoppers are simply buying less meat and eating smaller portions and helpings as well. As a result, we've seen a decline in the popularity of bulk or family pack meat and poultry items. While these items feature a great price per pound, the total package price is high. Portion-packaging is one feature processors can consider when addressing this trend.

Q: The report found that natural and organic meat and poultry products gained popularity in 2011, with a 4 percent increase in such purchases. What likely caused this increase?

A: When you first look at the data, the growth of natural and organic meat and poultry seems counterintuitive to the data showing a majority of people cutting back on meat and poultry purchases. The likely reason we did not see a decrease here is that the natural and organic category has great customer loyalty and a clientele that is willing to pay more. For these consumers, the production process and factors related to how the animal was raised are important.

Also, we will probably see this category continue to grow as processors expand their natural and organic product lines and offerings. As more processors offer these products, we should see more competition, and if prices in this category get more in-line with other meat and poultry offerings, consumers may be more likely to try them.

Q: According to the survey, consumers have little information when it comes to preparing meat products. How can manufacturers boost educational efforts to assist consumers, and why is it important to do so?

A: This is a big area of interest right now, especially because we have so many young people in the market with limited preparation knowledge and who may be too intimidated to purchase protein cuts outside of their comfort zone. This means items such as roasts and whole birds are potentially being overlooked by one of the fastest growing demographics. In an effort to boost confidence and educational efforts with these consumers, manufacturers are including preparation and recipe information on the product package as well as incorporating these items into point-of-sale collateral like signage, pamphlets and even cooking classes in the store. Also, we've seen this information incorporated into advertisements and on processors' websites. When it comes to educating and informing younger shoppers, manufacturers should post information on social media channels as well.

Additionally, manufacturers can consider product features that focus on convenience and easy prep to help market products considered intimidating by consumers with limited preparation knowledge. For example, packaging made from ovenable film can make cooking roasts or ribs less intimidating as the products are usually pre-seasoned and require little oversight because the packaging maintains product moisture and even distribution of temperature while the product cooks. Pre-marinated proteins have been on the market for years and are one way processors can increase consumer confidence around certain products. Traditional pre-

marinated products can be taken one step further with new packaging technologies that make it possible to keep fresh protein and marinade separate, but in the same package, until the consumer is ready to prepare the item. This adds an element of control to how long proteins marinate and allows processors to create marinades with ingredients that would not be suitable for pre-marinated proteins.

Q: Consumers continue to take an interest in the ingredients and nutritional value found in their foods. How is this affecting the meat industry?

A: When it comes to ingredients and nutrition, customers usually focus in on a few items that they feel impact them the most. For example, the 2012 Power of Meat report found that 51 percent of respondents check their processed meat ingredients for sodium. Additionally, we've seen an increase in food products with fewer ingredients, thus the growth of clean label products promoting fewer preservatives. The challenge here for the meat industry is to create quality products that stay fresh and maintain adequate shelf-life, while taking consumer concerns for ingredients, preservatives and nutrition into account. This can prove more challenging for certain products; however, processors should remember that packaging technologies such as vacuum packaging and active packaging materials are a tool in addition to product formulation that can be used to maintain freshness and improve product shelf-life and quality-life.

Q: What are some of the common packaging issues that affect meat processors, and how can these be addressed?

A: The 2012 Power of Meat Report found that some of the most common shopper complaints were related to leaking and messy packages in the meat department. The report found that 10 percent of survey respondents reported they exclusively purchase leak-proof packaging and

51 percent said they would redirect their purchases to leak-proof packaging if it were available in their meat case. Producers should focus on products with packaging that is leak-proof and that can extend product quality and shelf-life.

Interview by Lindsey Coblentz, Associate Editor

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