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## Meat Department Evolves with the Times

The growing demand for grass-fed, hormone-free, antibiotic-free, all natural, organic and ethically raised meat is changing the look of the meat department. Add to that the rise in demand for Halal meats and for more convenience with marinated and prepared meats and today's meat managers must perform a delicate balancing act to ensure the right assortment.

Accounting for roughly eight to 13 per cent of a retail store's overall sales, the meat department plays a critical role in a store's overall competitive positioning strategy. The Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency commissioned a study of consumer meat buying patterns and found that seven-in-ten shoppers are influenced to select stores based on specials they see in their flyers and, among this group, 78 per cent indicate that attractive meat specials directly impact their grocery store choice. A large portion of shoppers - 75 per cent - highly value an in-store butcher and meat counter. Stores without butcher counters may be at a competitive disadvantage.

While a well displayed counter is key to attracting customers today, so too is

having a wide range of options. Kristin Collins, marketing & communication relations manager for Red River Co-op in Winnipeg, explains the significance of this growing demand for more options by a well-informed public.

"Options such as grass-fed, hormone-free and RWA beef organic and ethical meats have impacted the meat industry in several ways, firstly, in providing the customer with a larger choice when it comes to their shopping experience. Many customers are becoming more shop conscious and aware when it comes to their purchases. In a world where social media, global issues, and health conscious customers are a growing part of the demographic, many people choose to know more about what they consume; not only when it comes to meat but in general. This being said, these are pricier options than the standard, and some customers still shy away from these options and lean towards convenience or

tradition. When it comes to supplying these options to consumers, the larger the market and the more diverse the shopping demographic, the better."

The Red River Co-op Beef is 100 per cent Western Canadian AA aged for 14 days and AAA is aged for 21 days. "At Co-op our butchers cut and prepare all our fresh beef and pork daily. Our ground beef is prepared several times a day for optimum freshness. Raised at Home, all of our fresh proteins such as beef, pork and chicken are 100 per cent Western Canadian and come from the communities we serve."

The price of meat has risen dramatically in the last few years but smart managers cope by adding more varieties that consumers can choose from. "We offer our consumer a wide selection of fresh and processed meat options to meet different consumer budgets. Depending on their preference we have a large selection of meat products that will fit their meal preparation needs," shares Collins.



## Shifting Consumption Patterns

The Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency's recent study of meat consumption patterns found dramatic changes in protein consumption away from red meat and toward white meat / fish. According to the study, 44 per cent are eating less beef compared to five years ago, while a huge 63 per cent say they are eating more fish, and 45 per cent are eating more chicken. Overall, red meat consumption is down 19 per cent since 1999, while pork is down over 30 per cent. Chicken consumption has risen 11 per cent in the same period.

In Victoria, B.C., Dave Hubscher, meat operations manager at Country Grocer, says ethnic meats such as Halal have not made a big impact on his operations. "I don't think that Halal, grass-fed, hormone-free etc. are changing the meat industry much. I think it's just giving consumers more choices. Halal seems to be a trend, but not so much on Vancouver Island. We've tried a few Halal items, but the pickup was very marginal."

Hubscher admits that their focus has

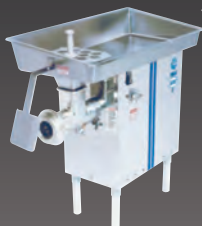
been more on supporting Vancouver Island Agriculture by keeping the meat supply local. "As an option to the mainstream meat items, we carry grass-fed grass-finished beef. It's important to have the grass-finished beef, the flavour profile might be a little different than a grain-finished product, but it's a healthier choice. Consumers that haven't been eating beef in 10 plus years are eating beef again. We also carry from the Island, fresh pork, fresh chicken, frozen bison

and fresh lamb (lamb is seasonal). Even though we carry a little bit of this and a little bit of that, it's hard to be everything Halal, all natural, organic, etc., so our focus in the meat department, has been on keeping it local as much as possible."

As far as how he is coping with the rising price of meat, it's still necessary to be competitive so margins have been squeezed. "The Island is a very competitive market, so we have to be right. Our company is just taking more of a hit on profit dollars and I don't think we're alone here, that's just the way it is. Really the mixture hasn't changed much for us, just the ad specials are up which means consumers are definitely taking advantage of the deals."

Whether it's a co-operative chain of stores or an independent grocery store the demand for local produce, needs of the demographic, and quality are three important factors. Some parts of Canada are more ethnically populated than other areas so the request for specific ethnic meat like Halal will be higher. For certain, the demand for grass-fed, hormone-free antibiotic-free, all natural, organic and ethically raised meat isn't slowing down any time soon. ●

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