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experience



Natural products, growth in ground beef and new cuts will be some of the hot topics at the 2009 Annual Meat Conference.

Prime time

BY CRAIG LEVITT

IN AN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN, IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO CAPITALIZE ON OPPORTUNITIES WHEN THEY PRESENT THEMSELVES. As consumers are eating out less, they are cooking more. That means the iron is hot for retailers looking to grow meat sales.

While the overwhelming majority of meat producers report decreased sales to foodservice, retail sales have either held steady or, in many cases, increased. Helping drive sales at retail are suppliers' willingness and ability to deliver innovative products such as new cuts, provide smaller portions to entice trial and develop attractive marketing programs to increase awareness and take advantage of the latest trends. In March, Denver hosts the 2009 Annual Meat Conference at which suppliers from across North America will address some of those trends which include an expected spike in ground beef sales, a greater push towards promoting natural products and an increased offering of ready-to-eat foods.

General sessions at the show include presentations such as: *Economics and the Impact on Your Business*; *The Power of Meat: An In-Depth Look at Meat Through the Shopper's Eyes*; *Ensuring Food Safety*; and *Building the Best: Meat Training for the Non-Meat Professional* in addition to a Tech Fair and a Product Tasting Reception. Of course suppliers and industry organizations will be presenting their wares as well. Here is a sampling of what is on tap:



have shown significant growth on the beef side through the adoption of Canadian meat as part of their mix," he says. "They also show how we have been able to help work with these retailers to create solid messaging that has shown results. Canada is a strong player in the North American beef supply and consumers are aware of the high quality products that come from Canada."



*GOLD'N PLUMP POULTRY

Gold'n Plump is viewing the show as an opportunity to create awareness for its recently introduced Just BARE brand of fresh chicken products, and will be sampling



*BEEF INFORMATION CENTRE

The Calgary, Alberta, Canada-based Beef Information Centre (BIC) is the beef market

development division of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association. With the intention of maximizing the demand for Canadian beef and optimizing the value of Canadian beef products, the group works closely with U.S. retailers to build programs within retailers' meat case that are designed to help grow the category, while meeting their sales targets. One of the primary messages BIC will deliver at the show is that branded products, particularly products with a Canadian brand, deliver positive images to consumers. That message includes providing in-depth consumer research as well as new merchandising opportunities surrounding new cuts of beef.

Marty Carpenter, director of U.S. market development, says BIC is also showcasing a number of retailer case studies. "These case studies

them at the shows tasting reception. The St. Cloud, Minn.-based company will also be promoting its Gold'n Plump brand.

According to Julie Berling, director of brand strategy, Just BARE products contain only all-natural chicken, are vegetable fed and are raised cage free and on family farms throughout Minnesota. Just BARE packaging features a Family Farm Code which allows consumers to learn more about the specific farm in which the packaged chicken was raised by simply entering a code on the Just BARE website. Clear packaging provides for a near 360 degree view of the product while an easy peel lid makes it simple to open.

"We are pleased to now offer two brands that meet the needs of unique consumer segments," says Berling. "Our Gold'n Plump brand appeals to consumers who want to put wholesome meals on the table for their families. Consumers are looking for a quality offering, such as chicken that is local and/or raised on family farms. They are also looking for products with no added preservatives. Gold'n Plump's line of All Natural chicken fits these needs."



***LAND O' FROST**

One of the goals for the third-generation family business is to offer consumers items that they can't find elsewhere. To that end, the Lansing, Ill.-based producer is introducing a breakfast selection of Canadian bacons. According to president David Van Eekeren, the products are thicker cuts designed for the breakfast consumer and are available in two flavors, smoked and a maple honey.

"We want to broaden consumers' ability to get new, innovative products," says Van Eekeren. "Our Canadian bacon line is a great example. The breakfast category today is basically sausage and bacon, but there is not a lot of variety within the two segments. We think our Canadian bacon products offer something different."

Van Eekeren adds that the Canadian bacon line has attractive packaging and should be easy for consumers to find. He says having a highly visible product has become increasingly important as space for the category has dwindled over the past year or so.

"Ours is a great category and highly profitable for the retailer, so we hope to see it grow over the next few years," says Van Eekeren. "With the Canadian bacon line we want to expand the category, by getting the shopper who doesn't usually shop the lunchmeat category."



***HARRIS RANCH BEEF**

Brad Caudill, vice president of marketing for Harris Ranch, says that as the demand for natural products increases there is an opportunity to attract a new group of consumers to the meal replacement category at the retail level. Caudill says the Selma, Calif.-based company has been offering fully cooked entrées for nearly 20 years but decided to take advantage of burgeoning trends and reintroduced the line as all-natural.

Currently available are all-natural pot roast, meatloaf, stews and short ribs, but plans are in place to expand the line further. "We think this a way to breathe new life into the home meal replacement category at retail," says Caudill. "By upscaling our offering to all-natural we think

we will be able to attract a whole new group of consumers who may have shunned this category at retail in the past."

Staying with the all-natural theme, Harris Ranch is also expanding its premium all-natural Angus fresh beef program. Caudill says they refer to the program as a never-ever program because the cattle never receives antibiotics or growth hormones, they are raised on an all-vegetarian diet and are source and age verified back to the ranch on which they were raised. Harris Ranch helps reinforce the brand by becoming partners with retailers. They provide signage; carry out in-store and out-of-store demos and run radio ads and consumer contests.



***CREEKSTONE FARMS**

"The current economic conditions have impacted everybody and Creekstone is no different," says Jim Rogers, director of marketing. "But we're still staying with the underlying philosophy of the company, which is to create the highest quality beef products in the U.S."

Although not attending the AMI Meat Conference, the Arkansas City, Kan.-based Creekstone offers a complete line of premium and natural beef products to retailers. Rogers says the company's dedication to quality and its commitment to customer service remains, even in the wavering economy. Creekstone supports retailers with point-of-sale materials and recently developed a value cuts recipe book designed to help retailers sell value type items. Rogers also anticipates a strong ground beef year as consumers will likely still want to barbeque come summertime, but may trade down from rib eyes and filet mignon to hamburgers. Creekstone also provides retailers with quality statements for their ads and works directly with them to develop promotional blocks along with ideas that they can put in weekly flyers.

"The Creekstone brand may not be for every retail account," says Rogers. "But for the small independent operator, the guy operating in the market with five stores and competing everyday against the larger national chains, we think the Creekstone brand provides the quality promise that he needs to have for his consumer. That consumer knows if they buy Creekstone it is the best beef in the market."

***CATELLI BROTHERS**

Last year at this time the veal industry was facing record high costs. This year prices have come down substantially, providing producers with an opportunity to rebuild the category and provide retailers with friendlier price points. As one of the largest veal and lamb companies in the U.S., Catelli Brothers offers a wide array of high quality, fresh, easy-to-prepare consumer food products that now includes chicken and beef.

"Right off the bat a lot of the more expensive cuts will be down to a much more reasonable level," says Tony Catelli, president and CEO of the Collingswood, N.J.-based company. "There are still many inexpensive cuts that are a good price for today's marketplace. With these less expensive cuts we can compete with other proteins in the retail sector."



Catelli points out that the veal consumer can be very valuable to retailers as they often purchase expensive cuts of beef as well as other high-end items found throughout the store. Catelli Brothers is continually developing products, such as their Italian Bistro line, that meet today's shoppers' needs. "Not everybody knows how to cook veal," says Catelli. "What we try to do with our Bistro line is put everything in a kit with simple instructions so they can make high quality meals quickly."



***SEABOARD FOODS**

Seaboard Foods has grown from a start-up operation in the early 1990s to an integrated food producer of premium pork products. As an integrated food company, Seaboard Foods controls every step from research and development in genetics to producing high quality meat products. According to David Eaheart, director of marketing, a major part of Seaboard Foods retail strategy involves building relationships with retailers via one on one contact. At the show the Shawnee Mission, Kan.-based company is promoting its new PrairieFresh line.

PrairieFresh products are infused with lean pork protein and fat which is intended to keep the pork moist, tender and juicy when cooked. Eaheart says the product line also meets consumers search for convenience as it cooks in approximately one hour, compared to three hours for similar products.

"The back rib is often a challenge for consumers because they either know how to cook it or they don't," says Eaheart. "It's a fairly high risk purchase as well, up to \$15, if they don't know how to cook it. With PrairieFresh they can throw it in the oven and its ready, there is no skill needed whatsoever."

Seaboard Foods has also teamed with Sweet Baby Ray's barbecue sauce to offer a fully cooked pork loin. The line is a Sweet Baby Ray's branded product, is heat and serve and found in the refrigerated case. The line consists of loin back ribs, St. Louis ribs, shredded pork and pork tenderloin.

show them new cutting methods," says Kober. "We also work with historical premiums to determine when the best time throughout the year is to feature an item. These are basic things a good meat director should be working with, but we find that so many are pushed and pulled in different directions they don't always have the time."



Cook's ham. Always good to the bone.®

***COOK'S HAM**

Jon Lewallen, director of marketing, says Cook's is using the show as a platform to introduce items that meet ongoing consumer trends. The Lincoln, Neb.-based company is considering smaller unit sizes and adding convenience value-added features on existing products such as spiral sliced hams and a liquid glaze.

"Quartered spiral sliced hams are gaining in popularity and have become a staple item around the holidays," says Lewallen. "We also have some boneless items we have introduced that we have packaged for convenience and non-holiday use, just everyday meal occasions." Cook's is also dedicated to promoting the ability and opportunity to serve bone-in-ham steaks for any meal. That includes new label designs illustrating different meal occasions.

In addition to Cook's direct efforts aimed at consumers, Lewallen says there are opportunities for retailers to take advantage of various in-store merchandising programs offered. Included are point-of-sale materials designed to communicate additional meal occasions or opportunities for smoked ham.

"These days we have the younger generation moving up and becoming the household shoppers," says Lewallen. "Often they are less familiar with how to handle and prepare meat so they need a lot more guidance. Anything retailers can offer at POS, whether it is display materials or presenting ideas via the package itself, is going to help drive additional incremental sales."



***CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF**

Certified Angus Beef (CAB), based in Wooster, Ohio, functions as a not-for-profit division of the American Angus Association. The association is comprised of more than 35,000 Angus breeders who are dedicated to producing high quality beef that is superior in taste and tenderness.

"We are the premiere beef brand and we have some interesting things taking place in the retail segment right now," says Al Kober, director of retail for CAB, not the least of which is what Kober calls a rotisserie meatloaf. "Chicken is king but there has never been a really good meat item that has been competitive in carry out."

CAB has partnered with King's Command Foods to produce a Certified Angus Beef meatloaf. The item is delivered raw to retailers, cooked at store level and placed in attractive packaging. Kober believes that adding a product to compete with chicken at the hot bar can only help grow the beef category.

CAB has also stepped up its training and education of retailers in order to help them out with the basics. "We try to help them refocus,



***AGRI BEEF**

Boise, Idaho-based Agri Beef's objective is to provide the highest quality meats in the Northwest. As consumers continue to place importance on buying local, sustainability and lowering their carbon footprint, Agri Beef is working with and developing its business with local retailers, particularly for its St. Helen's Beef brand.

"Traditionally all the cattle, even from this part of the country, would go to the Midwest then back to the Northwest as beef," says Jay Theiler, executive director, marketing. "That uses a lot of energy. We have the ability to keep cattle here and keep the industry viable in the Northwest."

Agri Beef is the parent company of three brands. Snake River Farms offers American Kobe Beef and Kurobuta Pork. Double R Ranch Northwest Beef is named for company founder Robert Rebholtz, Sr. and is an exclusive U.S.D.A. Choice brand. St. Helen's Beef delivers an assortment of high quality, fresh beef cuts and is available in all the major U.S.D.A. grades, including Prime, Choice, and Select. Theiler says a premium Angus beef program is available from St. Helen's as well.

“We really want to develop a strong Northwest brand, particularly with the St. Helen’s brand,” says Theiler. “We are working on tying-in with complementary products like wineries from Washington State to create promotions that tie beef and wine together.”



***CARGILL MEAT SOLUTIONS**

With more than a dozen brands, Wichita, Kan.-based Cargill Meat Solutions offers a wide variety of beef, pork and turkey products. The company’s Sterling Silver Premium Meats line of beef and pork products will be

featured prominently at the show. The Sterling Silver brand is licensed to customers to be used exclusively in a certain geographic area and acts like a retailer’s private label brand. Cargill partners with retailers to provide marketing support to help promote the brand.

While the focus of the Sterling Silver Premium Beef program is on premier middle meats, it also includes alternative choices like flank, tri-tip and flat-iron steak that Ozlem Worpel, Sterling Silver brand manager, says combines eating pleasure and value.

“For both feature proteins in the Sterling Silver brand, flavor and tenderness are key drivers of customer satisfaction,” says Worpel. “The cuts are tender, juicy and flavorful, because of marbling and aging and also because of the high quality genetic base, fed compo-

nents selection and proprietary plant processes.”

In addition to the Sterling Silver brand, Cargill will be showing its line of Good Nature pork products. Officials say that the brand is an answer to consumers’ continued demand for natural products, free of growth stimulants or antibiotics.

***NATIONAL CATTLEMEN’S BEEF ASSOCIATION**

The Chicago-based association is building on the success of last year’s



summer grilling promotion by expanding it this year to cover a longer period of time. According to Randy Irion, director of retail marketing, the initiatives are funded by the Beef Checkoff Program and include promotions throughout the year to help retailers capitalize on every opportunity to sell beef.

“We realized that with our partnerships we are able to help grow beef demand at retail,” says Irion. “This year’s program includes traditional partnerships that have been successful in past years as well as exciting promotions with new partners intended to drive more consumers to the meat case.”

The campaign started in January with a beer and burger promotion and continues through the summer grilling months. The NCBA is again working with Sutter Home to promote the Build a Better Burger

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contest, which will be promoted via retail displays in more than 10,000 retailers throughout the summer months, and are also partnering with them for a tailgating promotion in September. Partnerships with brands such as Snyder's of Hanover Tortilla Chips, Hormel, CHI CHI's and Herdez to name a few are also on tap for 2009. Throughout the various promotions Irion says more than 61 million coupons will be distributed compared to six million last year.



*** NATIONAL BEEF**

"National Beef is dedicated to innovation," says Keith Welty, vice president of marketing. Acting on the call for creative educational tools, the Kansas City, Kan.-based company has developed and launched

IMPACT (Innovative Merchandising Program Answering Consumer Trends). IMPACT is designed to introduce retailers to new cutting methodology and merchandising. It also provides cutting guides for primals and provides the tools to help communicate new items to consumers while tying into changing consumer preferences for smaller portions, value cuts and leaner meats.

National Beef is also showcasing its spring and summer Grill Masters promotion for its Black Canyon brand. According to Welty, the promotion is an integrated program designed to bring excitement via seasonally relevant themes within the meat case. The promotion includes POS materials and also incorporates new products, merchandising and recipe ideas.

As the need for natural products rapidly expands, National Beef also features proprietary natural beef programs which offer unique attributes to meet various customer needs. "We continue to promote our natural beef product line and pursue the interest that exists in the marketplace for natural beef," says Welty.



*** CARL BUDDIG & CO.**

Carl Buddig & Co. is celebrating its 69th anniversary this year and traces its family history in the meat business back six generations to Buedelsdorf, Germany,

according to Tom Buddig, executive vice president. While Buddig says today's economy presents challenges he believes the Homewood, Ill.-based company is well positioned to address them. One of the challenges is the ever-changing consumer shopper trends. "I think 'brown-bagging' is a trend that will be with us for quite a sometime, says Buddig. "Our brands fit well into the value segment of the meat case."

Last year Carl Buddig repositioned its Deli Cuts products and earned an endorsement from the American Heart Association. The company has put forth marketing efforts to support the re-launch of the product with vehicles such as shelf-talkers, FSI's and retailer healthy eating programs. In addition to its Deli Cuts line, Carl Buddig now produces a number of private label products and is constantly reviewing packaging and sustainable alternatives. For its Old Wisconsin brand, Carl Buddig continues to review existing merchandising vehicles for its line of summer sausage, bites and sliced products.



Volk Enterprises, Inc.

*** VOLK ENTERPRISES**

Family owned since 1960, Volk Enterprises manufactures and sells what COO Ed Gustafson calls value-added packaging materials, including the Pop Up Timer. For years Volk primarily sold the Pop

Up directly to processors. Recently however, the Alpharetta, Ga.-based company decided the Pop Up Timer was a viable product that could help retailers at the store level. Volk can customize a Pop Up Timer to fit a specific need and Gustafson says the beauty of the product is its simplicity. The Pop Up Timer is preset; selected specifically for the product being cooked. The Pop Up Timer pops when the food has reached the optimal cooking temperature.

"What retailers are finding is that the Pop Up Timer is helping increase sales," says Gustafson. "On average our customers are seeing anywhere from a 10% to 12% bump in sales by implementing the Pop Up program at store level."

Volk works closely with its customers to teach them what temperature goes with a particular cut of meat as well as where it should be inserted. Gustafson says they are constantly striving to make sure the effectiveness of the program is optimized.

"Customers are also telling us that the Pop Up is giving them an opportunity to engage the consumer again," says Gustafson. "Consumers are asking 'How do I cook this?' What's nice about the Pop Up is retailers can instruct consumers how it should be cooked, in a simple manner."

*** TYSON FOODS**

The Springdale, Ark.-based company plans on being very busy during the show, with several new items on display. First and foremost, Tyson's fully frozen line of whole muscle center of plate cooked products will soon have all 100% natural breeding. "This is a nice benefit in the health and wellness platform," says Scott Rouse, senior vice president, customer development. "The all-natural breeding accounts for a significant reduction in sodium, up to 30% depending on the item." The line starts shipping in April and will be available to consumers at a mainstream price.



In the fresh meat and pork area, Tyson is introducing its slow cooker creations and skillet creations, basically a line of fresh products like an all-in-one beef chuck roast kit with fresh vegetables and a seasoning pack that's ready to cook. There are five varieties: chuck roast, pork roast, beef stew, beef steak chili and a fajita kit.

Tyson is also bringing a line of boneless ham products to market including a boneless quarter sliced ham and 100-calorie ham steak. "We've got a whole line of specialty and boneless ham items that we are bring out under the Tyson and Wilson labels," says Rouse.

Tyson will once again highlight its Star Ranch Angus Beef and Chairman's Reserve beef and pork as well. □