

meatingplace

Secrets of Sanderson Farms' staying power

Why refrigeration can't be taken for granted

What you need to know about processing pre-marinated meats

Tempest-tossed

The push for immigration reform is under full sail once again – and the political seas are rougher than ever.



As consumers navigate the mysteries of the meat case, processors can provide valued guidance with the right kinds of product labels.



Associated Press

Label CONSCIOUSNESS

By Ann Bagel Storck, managing editor

Beef, pork and poultry processors and their industry trade groups have made plenty of efforts to educate consumers about meat labels and shopping at the meat case. Still, it seems that all those lessons were not enough.

"I'm sure there are great cuts of meat out there, things that are on sale, things that are affordable, but I'm like, 'I don't know what I would do with this,'" said one participant in the Protein Labeling Study II (PLS II). This research, funded by the National Pork Board, the Beef Checkoff Program and Yerecic Label, follows up on a similar survey done in 2004.

However, unlike that earlier, more broadly focused study, the PLS II zeroes in on consumers who identify themselves as "cooking challenged" or having only "moderate" cooking skills — a group that represents 73 percent of the U.S. population, according to the February 2010 Consumer Beef Index Study. The first phase of the PLS II, in November 2009, canvassed

nine mini focus groups — each with five to seven consumers ages 21 to 54 — in Los Angeles, Chicago and Bethesda, Md. A second phase, scheduled for this fall, will gauge shoppers' reaction to meat labels in store settings.

"We're giving people more and more choice," says John Lundeen, executive director, market research, for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, explaining why so many consumers remain mystified by meat. "We're [also] communicating more, but we're not keeping up with the change that's going on. We have to figure out how to make that communication channel even stronger."

"This is a never-ending process," adds Jarrod Sutton, assistant vice president, channel marketing, for the National Pork Board. "As consumers continue to evolve, we need to make sure we continuously focus on educating [them] in the hopes of expanding their comfort level with the multitude of cuts pork offers."

"The meat category is a little more challenging

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IN THE AISLES

Consumers did like the idea of using mobile devices to access coupons in-store, but the practice itself proved to be unrealistic for many.

than most categories," notes Gary Karp, executive vice president of research and consulting firm Technomic. "There are all kinds of ways that the same cuts are presented, which adds to some of the confusion. We think getting back to basics is the way to take out as much confusion as possible."

BACK TO BASICS

A back-to-basics approach is what consumers want as well when it comes to meat labels, the PLS II found. Common characteristics among all effective meat labels listed by those surveyed included basic cooking directions, recipe information, simplified content in a readable size and type font and a photo of the finished recipe. (See "What makes a good label?" right.)

"The label is like a coaching assistant in the store," Lundeen observes.

A big part of what makes a label effective is what it doesn't do, consumers said — namely, cover up too much

of the product inside the package.

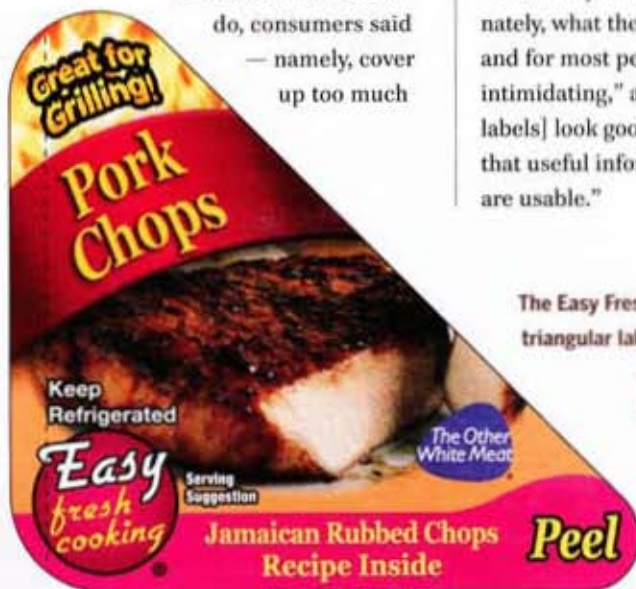
"Fundamentally, one of the things that drives purchase is understanding what I'm buying," Karp says. "Meat is the highest percentage of [a grocery budget] that a consumer [spends], so they want to make sure that they're getting what they want and it's going to be good."

According to the PLS II, the label that most consistently delivers on these demands is the Easy Fresh Cooking (EFC) label, a small, triangular label placed on the corner of many fresh meat products that can be peeled back to reveal more information on topics such as cooking instructions and recipes.

"Visually on a package of meat, I think triangles work better. They are just placed in a little corner of the meat," commented one study participant, alluding to consumers' desire to see what they are buying.

"[The EFC label] kind of disrupts the sterility that sometimes is, unfortunately, what the meat case looks like, and for most people that can be a bit intimidating," adds Sutton. "[The EFC labels] look good, and they're providing that useful information and ideas that are usable."

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Sutton also emphasizes the importance of a less-is-more approach to meat labeling, either through the EFC format or another variation. "We're back to basics when we're talking to a lot of these consumers," he says. "So it's important that we're providing them with quick and easy tips and solutions that any layman in the kitchen can apply."

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

The PLS II also tested two label programs that may see more widespread use going forward: labels focused on product traceability and those using mobile marketing.

The traceability labels included a code shoppers could enter online for more information about a product's origins; while many consumers expressed interest in learning these details, the PLS II found, they were hesitant about going through the process of visiting a Web site and entering the necessary codes.

Despite consumers' reluctance, however, Karp believes those attitudes will change over time.

"I think it's going to be an evolution rather than a revolution," he predicts, "but food safety and traceability are certainly worthy of the meat industry to try to get ahead of that curve."

Labels that tie in to mobile marketing may still be around the bend as well. Consumers did like the idea of using mobile devices to access coupons in-store, according to the PLS II, but the practice itself proved to be unrealistic for many.

"Using your smartphone? Typically I wouldn't do it," one study participant commented. "One, because I wouldn't have time. I wouldn't want to put forth the effort. Two, most stores I go into I usually only get one bar on my phone, so even if I wanted to, I wouldn't have

What makes a good label?

When reviewing Easy Fresh Cooking and other labels, consumers participating in the Protein Labeling Study II provided insight into what makes an effective label:

1. Foundational on-pack information including recipes, basic cooking directions and a cooking chart
2. Various recipes for the given cut or category of meat or poultry
3. Readable size and type font
4. Simplified content
5. Photograph of the finished product
6. A triangle shape with multiple layers, so information can be conveyed on different package sizes while covering minimal product
7. Clearly visible invitation to "peel" the label back for more information
8. Hinged/resealable label so consumers can peel it back without causing the package to appear "handled" or the label to look "ruined"
9. Web address for additional information
10. Tips about storage and defrosting

Source: Protein Labeling Study II executive summary

the option available."

There's little doubt, however, that integrating cutting-edge technology into meat labels will be the wave of the future.

"That's the world we live in today," Sutton confirms. "It's immediate access to answers at your fingertips. We'll continue to evolve toward that."

"There's going to be more fusion between the on-pack part of this and the online world," Lundeen agrees. "How that's going to happen, I'm not quite sure yet. There will be constants [on meat labels], but there will be change all around the edge of those constants." ☺

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