

Study: Shoppers Still Need Help with Cooking

By MATTHEW ENIS

Many shoppers still lack basic cooking skills and struggle to come up with new ideas for preparing meals at home, according to a recent protein labeling study sponsored by the National Pork Board, The Beef Checkoff program and Yerecic Label.

The study's findings were based on nine consumer focus groups conducted by Shugoll Research on Nov. 5-13 in Chicago, Los Angeles and Bethesda, Md.

Although the recession has led many shoppers to conserve their food budgets by cooking at home more often, most say they are unfamiliar with even the most basic information about many cuts of meat, or which cooking method they should use for different cuts. According to the Beef Checkoff program's February 2010 Consumer Beef Index Study, 73% of Americans describe themselves as "cooking challenged" or say they have "moderate cooking skills."

The result? Many shoppers feel stuck in a rut with their standard rotation of home recipes, and they're hoping that suppliers or supermarkets can supply them with ideas and cooking information, Merrill Shugoll, president of Bethesda-based Shugoll Research, explained during a presentation at the 2010 Annual Meat Conference, organized by the Food Marketing Institute and the American Meat Institute.

The consumers in Shugoll's focus groups generally preferred to find recipes on package labels, noting that since these recipes match the cut of meat or poultry in the package, it takes the guesswork out of selecting a recipe and then finding the right cut. It also stays with the product until it is used, and helps the shopper make dinner decisions and select other ingredients while shopping.

One younger, "millennial" respondent said that on-package labels "might actually entice me to buy that cut of meat, if I'm like, 'Oh, that recipe looks

good!'" Another respondent said that she often picked up recipe cards and brochures offered at many supermarkets, but had a habit of misplacing them. Other sources for recipes included the Internet, cookbooks, magazines and newspapers, cooking shows, and word of mouth.

These consumers also generally preferred simple recipes. The "ideal" described by these shoppers is a recipe that takes 30 minutes or less to prepare, uses commonly known and easy to find ingredients, uses familiar terms and requires familiar tools and cookware in the kitchen, and uses lists, numbers or bullets to break down the steps required to prepare the recipe. Several of these respondents also said they preferred recipes that required five or fewer ingredients, and that they liked having a picture of the finished meal.

"A photo takes cooking from being an intellectual exercise to an emotional exercise," Shugoll told SN, explaining that photos gives customers a

point of reference for what the dish should look like.

The focus groups also had some interesting things to say about 3D barcodes and GS1 traceability numbers that can be used for consumer applications, such as electronic coupons, or for providing traceability information.

While these consumers agreed that they were interested in more information, some said that inputting a 16-digit code into a phone or computer to get food safety or traceability information is asking a lot from shoppers.

One millennial focus group member noted that smartphone users sometimes encounter technical issues in supermarkets, such as spotty cell-phone service, noting that: "For me, typically I wouldn't use my Smartphone on a label application]. 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 the option available."

However, another young shopper said that promotions that ask customers to text a promo code and then show their phone to a cashier are "a good thing." So, pairing new phone-based label applications with promotions that help customers save a bit of money may be one key to helping them catch on.

"There's a seriousness that people have when they are shopping for meat," said Art Yerecic, president of Yerecic Label, one of the study's sponsors. "They don't want contests or drawings."

Regardless, Shugoll noted that most forms of outreach and communication are still appreciated by grocery shoppers.

"The convenience of on-pack [recipes] is what these consumers found most valuable," she said. "But, doing one thing is not successful. Supermarkets don't want to take away signs or recipe cards in your meat department. They should do all they can within reason," to help their shoppers learn to cook.