

# Branding Beef

*The future of a beef case just might be in the branding.*

by *Kate Hagans*

**A** consumer approaches a meat display and takes note of the variety of beef products. What makes these products different? Labels on meat products trigger brand familiarity in the mind of the consumer. Without spending much time considering other options, the consumer places the product with a branded sticker into the cart and continues shopping.

Branded beef has been widely studied and offers an economic advantage says Travis O'Quinn, Kansas State University meat Extension specialist.

"Ninety-six percent of beef sold at retail is sold under some form of brand name," he says.

O'Quinn explained his study of consumers' perceptions of branded beef products to an audience at the 103rd annual Cattlemen's Day in Manhattan, Kan., on March 4.

Branded-beef products carry labels or registered trademarks for beef commodities. Brands are now readily available in grocery stores and stamped on restaurant menus and ultimately influence the consumer's purchasing decision.

O'Quinn discussed how product identification prior to tasting affects consumers' perception of the quality of the beef they are eating.

Beef provides consumers with a high level of eating satisfaction — a characteristic that sets it apart from other protein. O'Quinn found in his study, conducted in 2010, there were three determining factors — tenderness, flavor and juiciness — used to measure overall palatability.

"There are two types of interaction in these traits — the real physical interaction and the psychological interaction, which is the biggest interaction," O'Quinn says.

Flavor is rated the highest determining factor in a beef product for consumers. Questions were raised on the preference of tenderness being increased in meat.

"I believe flavor is the biggest driver," O'Quinn says. "We are seeing a shift in increasing tenderness, but flavor is ultimately the reason for overall experience."



With this study, O'Quinn desired to answer the question "What motivates consumers to purchase branded-beef products?"

He divided his study into two parts. During part one, consumers taste-tested beef strip loin steak. During part two, consumers taste-tested ground beef.

Of the 112 consumers involved in the study, all were community members of Manhattan, Kan. The age of participants ranged from early 30s to late 40s.

"We qualified a consumer as someone who ate beef at least once a week," O'Quinn says.

In both parts of the study, the products consumers were provided were branded and non-branded. Consumers were aware of the differences between products before rating.

Does appearance and branding change the overall consumer perception? The goal of O'Quinn's blind tasting study was to find the answer.

"Consumers were overall, more accepting and preferred branded beef products after tasting both branded and non-branded," O'Quinn says.

Once consumers were aware of the product they were eating, the overall majority preferred the branded product. Participants were unaware if the meat was rated United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Prime, Choice or Select.

## **Consumer experience matters**

"This study was done with blind taste testing but in the real world, that test isn't blind," O'Quinn says.

In most situations the consumer is looking for a certain product or searching for a main meal ingredient while standing at a meat display.

"The consumer knows a lot about that product before they ever take that first bite," O'Quinn says. "The price, cut, information from a label — all of these factors go into influencing the consumer's perception of the eating experience."

Consumers automatically rate beef products higher on tenderness, juiciness and flavor if the product is branded. This experience is related to the concept of “brand lift.”

O’Quinn also found beef products associated with a brand have little to no chance of failing a blind taste test if consumers know of the brand beforehand.

This indicator of the perceived quality associated with branded-beef programs is far greater than USDA Choice and Select ratings may have.

“If consumers are not associated with that brand and product, there is no benefit to branding,” O’Quinn says. “No matter the product or the brand, trust and high quality are key.”

One qualification of Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®) is that the beef product must meet a USDA Select or higher rating. This is a promise in taste to the consumer.

Price point and eating expectations are main considerations for consumers.

“Branded products have to deliver from an eating quality standpoint,” O’Quinn says.

When CHB was recognized by the USDA’s Agriculture Marketing Service as an official “Meat Grading and Certification Branch Certified Beef Program” in 1995, the first change made was for producers to raise beef to a set standard.

That action soon served consumers with a premium beef product. CHB LLC works to supply its branded beef products in a growing demand.

“What can we do to increase the flavor in beef?” O’Quinn asked his audience. “Marbling is what determines flavor.”

The CHB program encourages crossbreeding and utilizing Hereford-influenced calves in an effort to maximize on-farm profit, potentially using the advantages of heterosis.

The chief operating officer at CHB LLC., Amari Manning, understands that Hereford beef must be progressive to experience growth.

“As a branded-beef program focusing on Hereford genetics, our emphasis is on specification based criteria to qualify for CHB,” Manning says.

Creating and developing the CHB program enhanced the brand’s marketing opportunities in restaurants and stores. The aim is to increase the demand for Hereford-influenced cattle.

### Branding the future

One member of the audience asked O’Quinn about the future of branded-beef programs.

“We’re a brand-associated country and we’re capitalizing more than ever on branded-beef products,” he says.

Not only has this economic value provided growing opportunities for the beef industry, but it has also built trust and a relationship with the primarily audience: consumers.

“Retailers, producers, everyone along the supply chain is trying to catch the value that is associated with branding beef programs,” O’Quinn says.

CHB strives to increase cattle value and consumer demand for the breed through a specification-based branded-beef program which produces consistent, high-quality beef.

By Hereford producer guidelines, the information is developed into strategically designed visuals. Through a marketing concept, these visuals provide consumers with information on the quality the Hereford breed produces through a marketing concept.

Also because CHB products are branded in stores, consumers are able to easily connect with their local Hereford rancher.

“Our goal is to bridge that gap between the ranchers and consumers,” Manning says.

Consumers want to know more about where their beef comes from.

“We strive to make a local connection with consumer experience,” Manning says. “We have a long history and a rich tradition with the Hereford breed.”

Many factors influence the consumer’s perception of added value such as customer service and how the consumer receives messages about the brand.

The beef industry has and will continue to experience more change than ever in consumer perception. Are consumers looking past USDA grades and more toward brand marketing?

“Consumers understand the value of purchasing quality products at an affordable price,” Manning says. “They tend to gravitate toward recognizable branded-beef programs because they know the product will be consistent and have realized value.”

Those folks helping write the story of agriculture understand the hard work and dedication it takes for Hereford producers to meet certified expectations. CHB’s marketing program works to ensure producers receive the credit they deserve.

“Certified Hereford Beef is proud of the dedication to quality from our Hereford ranchers,” Manning says. “This is how we continue the legacy of great beef.” **HW**



Certified Hereford Beef rancher Mark Frederickson, Starbuck, Minn.

