



Service You Can Count On

At Federal Markets, CHB® is sold with an emphasis on exceptional service.

by Sara Gugelmeyer



Stepping into a Federal Markets store is like stepping back in time. Instead of promises of rock-bottom prices, Federal promotes its top-quality products. Instead of frustratingly searching up and down endless aisles, customers are provided with service from the moment they walk in. And instead of one-size-fits-all products, customers can get what they want, how they want it at Federal.

"It's like an old-time butcher shop," says Niagara Falls store manager John Hirtreiter. "We know a lot of the people by name. They

come in and tell us their stories and it's more of a personal experience," he says.

Federal Markets has been doing business this way since 1930 and, for the last decade or so, has offered its customers the top-quality consistency of Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®).

Unique commitment to service

Federal's Supervisor of Stores Tom Benzin explains that if you're looking for quality meats in western New York, Federal is the place to go. There are 10 locations within about a 30-mile radius of Buffalo, and Benzin says it's a type of store that is unique.

"Everything that we do is very little self-service. It's a one-on-one relationship between clerk and customer from the door to the end."

That relationship is based on providing the customer with the best meat available, and meat is the focus of the store.

"You can't come in here and buy a box of Cheerios," Benzin says. "We might have a few hot sauces, breads and a few things like that, but we're in the meat business."

He explains that in 1930, when the store was founded, that's how all markets were. If you wanted meat, you went to the butcher shop; for breads you went to the bakery, and so on. There were no giant superstores open 24 hours a day.

"The competition is tough today especially for a market that's not open seven days a week," Benzin says. "We are a Monday through Saturday from 8 to 6 operation. Our customers are dedicated people and we rely on their loyalty. We work very hard to keep them satisfied."

Although Federal doesn't offer the convenience of 24-hour-a-day one-stop shopping, there are many advantages to shopping its stores. "We have the ability to cut whatever the customer is looking for," Benzin says. "If they're looking for a steak that's one and a half inches thick or a steak that's exactly 12 ounces, we can do that. We also can wrap them individually for freezing or however the customer wants."

Hirtreiter says, "It's a service-oriented emphasis. Anything they want we'll do. They want it chopped up in itsy-bitsy pieces and wrapped up a quarter pound in a package and we do that, no extra charge."

"We also get questions, often on cooking. A lot of the customers aren't sure how to cook something. They ask us about cooking and once in a while will even come in with a cookbook and say, 'I need this; do you have it?' If we don't, we can get it. We'll order anything."

Compare that with a supermarket atmosphere where most of the meat cutting isn't even done on the premises, and Benzin says they don't really even consider that as competition because what they're offering is so much different.

Passionate about beef

The quality is what drew them to Hereford beef, Benzin says. "We had always been a Choice beef store and we just weren't happy with it. It was starting to get watered down and there was all these programs where they siphoned off the top end of the Choice. And frankly, the biggest disappointment was it just didn't taste like anything anymore."

Benzin says they looked around and tried some Angus programs and natural meats and eventually settled on CHB from Greater Omaha Packing Co. "Between the flavor and consistency, it was a perfect match for us," Benzin says. "We had finally found something that tasted like

beef from years ago. When you eat a Hereford steak you don't need a bottle of A1 steak sauce or ketchup to try to mask some sort of flavor coming off that piece of meat."

Both the Federal employees and shoppers have been pleased ever since. "I swear by it and we get passionate about it. We have pork and chicken, but we're known as a beef house," Benzin says, "If you want the best beef in town, you've got to go to Federal Markets to get it."

It's also important to remember that Federal operates on quality, not necessarily quantity. Benzin jokes, "We don't want all the business; we just need a piece of it."

That's not to say Federal doesn't set some trends, however. "Quite a while back, the owner wanted to try cutting the tenderloin into portions and wrapping a piece of bacon around it," Benzin says. "We'd never seen anything like that before around here. He wanted to display it in our meat cases."

Benzin cautioned that it was a risky idea because once the meat is cut and in the case, if it doesn't sell in a day or two, it loses its effectiveness in the counter.

It was a risk, but the customers loved them. Now the "gourmet tender," as Federal calls it, is its most popular cut. What's more, though, is the supermarkets are now offering that option. "Obviously they do come in our stores and see what we're doing, because now you see them in the supermarkets," Benzin says.

"If you ask someone that's lived in Buffalo all their life," Benzin says, "'Where's the most expensive place to buy meat?' They would say Federal Markets. If you asked them, 'Where's the least expensive?' They would say everywhere else."

But Federal's customers are willing to pay more for exceptional customer service, meat quality and consistency. And that's how Benzin feels about dealing with CHB LLC and Greater Omaha, as well.

"If I have a question and I want to call Brad (Ellefson, CHB LLC account manager)," Benzin says, "it's not like I get a recording and push this button and that button. Nine times out of 10 when I call he actually answers the phone and it's the same with Greater Omaha. To me, that's important. We have a relationship. With the little account we are, he still checks in and makes sure everything's OK. It makes us feel special."

Making customers feel special is what keeps Federal in business. And great-tasting CHB helps. Hirtreiter says, "The consistency is always there. We have no complaints on our steaks, ever. With the amount of steaks that we sell, we never get a complaint. So I am totally sold on Hereford beef." **HW**

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