

Labels Help Consumers See the Possibilities



Product labeling can play a crucial role in ensuring that the consumer is informed, educated, and inspired at the meat case. *By Virginia Lazar*

Labeling performs many important functions for meat and poultry products. Processors utilize myriad materials, configurations, and sizes to label products in the most efficient, consumer-friendly, and marketable way. Creating the parameters for a label that does the designated job is an art.

The art of labeling for packaged food products emerged with self-serve grocery stores as vendors competed for consumer attention and sales within the growing retail markets. Some label parameters are aesthetic, others are regulated, and still others are enhancements. The label can be printed on the packaging film as the design and package parameters are created, or they can

or brand that has made it. Fresh meat and poultry packaged in rigid-bottom trays have been covered with clear film to expose the product to view, and protect and contain it.

Materials Abound

Some of the advances in labeling involve new papers, such as the new FDA-approved food-grade coating for the high density polyethylene V-Max synthetic paper from Valeron Strength Films. Though the inside-the-package application of this product is currently directed towards Latin America where product labels are put under the film so they will survive the distribution network to reach the consumer, there could be potential applications for that type of use in the United States,

printing on this labeling material, and adds that there is a higher-strength Valeron for tag applications such as whole turkeys.

Other developments in the labeling field include advances in printing dates and codes on packages as product exits the packaging line, that enable processors to identify lots and track inventory more precisely. David Allen, business unit manager for Videojet Technologies, Wood Dale, Ill., tells *Meat Processing* that the best solution for primary packaging in cold environments comes with continuous ink-jet printing. "Our products are set up to be in the temperature ranges from 38°F to 50°F. In a frozen facility where temperatures are down between 0° and 15° we use an envi-

ronmental cabinet around the printer to keep the electronics and the fluid at an appropriate temperature." He adds that Videojet uses a fast drying solvent that

Inside the label are a recipe with a list of ingredients and directions to prepare the meat as an entrée, and safe handling instructions. If a consumer looks at the recipe in the store, he or she can shop for the remaining ingredients. Should that recipe not appeal, the label can be quickly folded back and reclosed. (Photo courtesy of NCBA)



be applied to the finished package as it leaves the processing line. Still others may be added at the point of purchase by the retailer.

In a purely functional sense, the package label will tell the consumer what the product is, its weight, whether it is cooked, specific nutritional information as required by regulations, and identify the processing company

according to Shelley Cooper, product sales manager for V-Max.

"Some people are looking for a coated product to allow for better printing and a better appearance," she says, adding that, "Not all coatings are FDA approved. We launched this coating for our high-density, polyethylene synthetic paper for this market." She notes that processors may use direct thermal printing and thermal transfer

evaporates so the ink dries quickly.

The latest development in the company's product line includes the Excel DN ink-jet printer that delivers high-speed, multi-line printing from a single printhead. Allen says this unit enables processors to print multi-line variable codes and messages at high speeds up to 916 feet per minute, and to print up to eight lines of information. He notes that Videojet's units

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are rated IP65, which means they are washdown compatible and don't have to be moved.

Presentation

Though consumers want safety and nutrition information on a label, what they'd most like on a package of raw beef, pork, chicken, or lamb, par-

ticularly if it's a cut that is unfamiliar to them, is vision. Vision entails what it takes to help them envision the meal they will be serving their families from this package, what ingredients they'd need to prepare it, and how to proceed to ensure success. That consumer input was gleaned from the results of a research study co-

launched by the National Pork Board, the Cattlemen's Beef Board, and Yerecic Label. When the results of the Protein Labeling Study were in, so was the evidence necessary to revise and broaden the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's Easy Fresh Cooking Label program, Randy Irion, director of retail marketing, tells *Meat Processing*.

An exciting result of the study was that consumers are interested in varying their family's entrée choices, and with help, they are willing to explore different cuts of meat if they could anticipate good results.

Rich Thoma, vice president of sales and marketing for Yerecic Label, New Kensington, Pa., explains that while he hasn't seen anything really new this year in labeling for meat and poultry, "what we have seen is an evolution of some of the things we've seen coming in the past several years getting more widespread attention." And part of that evolution is the revision and expansion of the Easy Fresh Cooking Label program, which was partially prompted by retailers and is used to enhance retail fresh meat sales.

During the co-sponsored research study, consumers indicated that it was important to them to be able to see an entrée in its prepared state at the meat case through a photograph, and to have an easy-to-follow recipe with few ingredients to use. NCBA's Irion explains that retailers voiced specific requests that they hoped the labels would accomplish. Key to their needs was a broader application to tie the proteins together, and they wanted to be able to present both raw and cooked nutrition information on the label for their customers.

The design and content of the labels, as dictated by the study results, include their shape — triangular, and their colors — "vibrant colors such as blue, purple, or even black are preferred as long as accent colors such as red and yellow are also used," the study reported. Consumers said they preferred photos of finished dishes to



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help them see what they could be serving their families, and cooking instructions so they would be less fearful of an unfamiliar meat or poultry cut.

Because labels with all of the information consumers were looking for could be sizeable and take too much space on the package, the Easy Cooking Label design solves that problem by offering a layered label with an easy corner peel that lifts and later reseals. Besides condensing the face-space covered on the meat package, this feature answers retailers' concerns that shoppers would pull the label off of the package to see the recipe and the discarded labels would litter the store and be unavailable to later shoppers.

Retailers have embraced the new labeling concept and many have supported the program by purchasing

the colorful triangular labels to mount on packages in their fresh meat cases. They credit this package enhancement with increased sales.

As the application grows, Yerecic's Thoma envisions recipes labels for special occasions such as Cinco de Mayo, or perhaps St. Patrick's Day. "There is such constant change

and excitement in the program and in the meat case," he says. "The next step is starting to do partnerships that offer a full meal solution."

Tomorrow's Focus

Looking ahead, Thoma anticipates "smart labeling that helps the supply chain recognize when something may have been out of temperature or in the case too long." This will enable consumers to feel confident about the wholesomeness of the meat being prepared for dinner, and will offer the meat manager the information he or she needs to rotate stock effectively.

The difficulty with the concept, he explains, comes in controlling conditions. "Right now, there's not a lot of technology that allows back and forth, so if we are printing at room temperature for something that is supposed to turn a color at room temperature, how is that dealt with? Vary it through the supply chain until it hits wherever it's being applied within normal holding temperatures.... How do you make it activate at the proper time?"

Look for Yerecic, Thoma, and others to further pursue this new dream.

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May

1-3: Center of the Plate Workshop, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. North American Meat Processors Association, Internet: www.namp.com/images/namp/2007%20COP%20Brochure%20Email.pdf.

5-10: IFFA/IFFA Delicat Meat Vision Conference 2007, Messe Frankfurt, Germany. Messe Frankfurt Exhibition, Tel: +49 69 75 75-0; E-mail: iffa@messefrankfurt.com; Internet: www.iffa.com.

6-8: Food Marketing Institute (FMI) 2007 Show co-located with MARKETECHNICS, Chicago, Ill. FMI, Tel: (202) 452-8444; Internet: www.fmi.org.

6-9: Federal Food Regulatory Annual Conference, Washington, D.C. Prime Label Consultants, Internet: www.primelabel.com/conference.html.

10-11: Bioterrorism Seminar, St. Louis, Mo. ASI, Jeanette Hugé, Tel: (800) 477-0778, ext. 113; E-mail: jhuge@asifood.com; Internet: www.asifood.com.

16-17: Poultry Processors Workshop, Atlanta, Ga. U.S. Poultry and Egg Association, Tel: (770) 493-9401; Internet: www.poultryegg.org.

19-22: National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show, Chicago, Ill. NRA, Internet: www.restaurant.org/show.

June

1-3: Oklahoma-Texas Meat Processors Association 2007 Convention, Amarillo, Texas. AAMP, Tel: (717) 367-1168; E-mail: info@aamp.com; Internet: www.aamp.com.

3-5: 2007 Dairy*Deli*Bake Convention, Anaheim, Calif. International Dairy Deli & Bakery Association, Tel: (608) 238-6330; E-mail: iddba@iddba.org; Internet: www.iddba.org.

6-8: National Safety Conference for the Poultry Industry, Savannah, Ga. Kristi Spivey, Food Processing Technology Div., Georgia Tech Research Institute, Tel: (404) 894-3412; E-mail: Kristi.spivey@gti.gatech.edu; Internet: www.foodtech.gatech.edu.

6-9: 2007 Beef Improvement Federation Annual Research Symposium & Meeting, Fort Collins, Colo. BIF, Tel: (785) 532-5428; E-mail: twig@ksu.edu; Internet: www.beefimprovement.org.

7-8: POPAI Industry Leadership Conference 2007, St. Louis, Mo. The Global Association for Marketing at-Retail, Lynn Goldberg, Tel: (703) 373-8804; E-mail: lgoldberg@popai.com; Internet: www.popai.com.

7-9: World Pork Expo 2007, Des Moines, Iowa. National Pork Producers Council, Tel: (417) 451-6004; E-mail: wrigley@nppc.org; Internet: www.worldpork.org.

10-13: Meat Processing Xchange, Park City, Utah. Meat Processing Xchange executive director Chris Frost, Tel: (952) 224-4390; E-mail: cfrost@verticalxchange.com; Internet: www.mp-xchange.com.

16-17: 60th Redprocal Meat Conference, Brookings, S.D. American Meat Science Association, Tel: (217) 356-5368; Internet: www.meatscience.org.

July

8-11: International Association for Food Protection Annual 2007 Conference, Lake Buena Vista, Fla. IAFFP, Tel: (515) 276-3344; E-mail: info@foodprotection.org; Internet: www.foodprotection.org.

12-14: American Association of Meat Processors and Suppliers' Convention and Exposition, Milwaukee, Wis. AAMP, Jodie Bartlett, Tel: (877) 877-0168; E-mail: jodie@aamp.com; Internet: www.aamp.com.

Synthetic paper is tougher and stronger. It may be coated with a new FDA-approved food-grade coating to be in direct contact with meat or poultry. (Photo courtesy of Valeron Strength Films)