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## SPECIAL REPORT

### The Future of Meat Packaging

*By Lynn Petrak, con*

#### **The spate of today's new meat and poultry packages are a portent of materials and formats to**

If there were a timeline for the evolution of meat packaging, it might read something like this: carcasses in open marketplaces, sides of beef or whole chickens bundled loosely in paper and bought in markets or through small provisioners, boxes of primals and subprimals portioned at neighborhood supermarkets wrapped in white butcher paper, foam trays covered with overwrap applied in the grocery store back room, packages of fresh meat and poultry unloaded and set into retail displays, hot entrees placed into recloseable containers at self-service bars, frozen meats sold in zippered, standup pouches and processed meats piled in extra-recloseable tubs, sold everywhere from convenience stores to supercenters.

Such a timeline, featuring these and other noteworthy developments, would certainly have a lot of points in the past decade, as case-ready technology and the introduction of a range of value-added items crowded into relative small space in time. Meanwhile, the open end of the timeline that leads to the short-term and long-term future is also likely to feature clusters of key changes affecting a broad spectrum of products and channels.

Indeed, the axiom that one shouldn't judge by appearance does not hold true when it comes to particularly perishable products that are bought based on the perception of freshness, quality and convenience. A reason that packaging is one of the "Four Ps" of marketing and why packaging is right at the top of new-product development and improvements.

Packaging in the industry, admittedly, has become more diverse only in the past decade or so. During the commodity look of the retail meat case has slowly given way to more branded and case-ready packages. Prepared-foods sections also feature a slew of new formats and delivery systems for take-home or immediate consumption.

To be sure, there is a receptive consumer audience for such packages that are created from processor thinking outside the literal and figurative box.

"Consumers are becoming more comfortable with newer packaging formats. This is evident when you walk through virtually any part of the grocery store today. The meat case has evolved significantly over the years and will continue to do so," says Dr. Randy Huffman, vice president, American Meat Institute Foundation.

The reasons for the evolution are varied, centering on a mix of convenience, food safety, labor-saving factors. Fresh, frozen and processed meat and poultry products that are sold in trays, chubs, films, sleeves, tubs or boxes mirror the wishlists of both those that sell and buy such items.

"Packaging technology has been one of the things that has allowed us to extend shelf life, and packaging is not only for food safety but also for the appearance of the product," notes Randy Irion, director, retail marketing, National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), Centennial, Colo.

Huffman agrees that today's — and tomorrow's — packaging features a host of attributes that benefit all

"Consumers expect convenience and attractive appearance in packaging, and processors will continue to use packaging formats that maximize shelf life during distribution and in the consumers' refrigerator. Retailers want to want a wide variety of product and packaging options to meet the diverse needs of consumers," he notes.

While the operational issues affecting processors, retailers and foodservice operators have driven many changes in recent years, the buyer is the one who ultimately determines the fate of a product or product line. Whether it is fresh meat, deli meat, refrigerated processed meat, ready-to-eat meat, protein-based meal solutions or other meat.

"We need to be focusing on consumers' wants, needs and desires," remarks Jarrod Sutton, director of marketing for the Des Moines, Iowa-based National Pork Board. "We can come up with all of these brand strategies, but consumers will tell us what they want and how they want it."

Such an assessment, Sutton adds, was echoed by many suppliers and manufacturers at a recent industry conference he attended. For one, H. Kenneth Johnson, industry consultant and president of H. Kenneth Johnson & Sons, Winfield, Ill., agrees. "No. 1, the product that is offered, whether it is beef, pork, chicken or another protein, and the type of packaging has to lend itself to meet consumer needs," he says.

Where all of this gets tricky is defining those consumer needs at a time when this country is more diverse and demographics and lifestyles can't be — to borrow a relevant term — wrapped up in one neat package. Shoppers, for instance, are primarily abiding by the mantra of convenience, in product and packaging, and lifestyles. Others want to be able to keep protein-based products longer before they use them. So processors are looking for sustainable packages based on their environmental concerns.

"What's happening with everything we do is that it is becoming very fragmented," points out Dan Emery, director of marketing for Pilgrim's Pride Corp., of Pittsburg, Texas. "You have to figure out how people want their products, and you can't put them in one big bucket anymore."

Navigating the array of available packaging materials and systems and their compatibility with a company's operations and resources is also more complex today than it's been in the past, given the great possibilities available. On the positive side, advances in packaging capability are synched with the industry's need to meet the needs of a diversified consumer base.

"I think there are enormous technical driving forces and marketing forces to drive change," says Dr. Robert Brody, president, Packaging/Brody, Inc., in Duluth, Ga., and adjunct faculty member at the University of Georgia.

Huffman, too, says that new technologies are continually developed to meet the changing tide of market demand for meat packaging. "Of course new technologies will emerge, and they will have to go head-to-head with existing technologies and packaging formats to see what consumers prefer. The marketplace will make those decisions," he says.

Sutton agrees that more sophisticated packaging systems and materials are in use and are being embraced by processors. "You have to give credit to suppliers and manufacturers — they've done a great job of maintaining the taste and flavor of products, not to mention shelf life," he says.

Looking down that timeline, what will 2017 look like — or, for that matter, 2008 or 2012? If Brody, who lectures to his university students about optimal product packaging and merchandising, had his way, the industry's packaging would reflect commitments to quality, safety and a willingness to look forward.

"I'd have a system that begins with choice grade animal, and it has got to track everything and follow a rigorous regime that is rigorous and a sanitation regime that is twice what we see at the average plant. I'd want more advanced packaging and I'd want low-oxygen package with a nice label," he shares.

Another industry consultant allows a glimpse into his crystal ball for the future of meat packaging. "Packaging will continue to evolve," predicts Huston Keith, principal of Keymark Associates, in Marietta, Ga. "Case-ready packaging is growing, though not as steadily as the last 10 years, as more and more retailers realize the benefits of it."

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