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## FRESH FOOD: Meat: Master beef backer

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[-By Meg Major](#)



Johnnie's Foodmaster

Heading into a year when price promises to be a bigger factor in meat purchase decisions, grocers, and especially independents, will need as much firepower as possible to keep meat case sales sizzling. While some grocers are anxious about the potential for an especially steep drop-off in post-holiday meat department sales, John Cremens, director of meat operations for Chelsea, Mass.-based Johnnie's Foodmaster—more commonly known locally as simply Foodmaster—expects that the more aggressive planning and forecasting efforts he initiated last year, particularly in the beef category, will

keep the 11-store chain's meat sales humming in the coming months.

"After the first quarter of 2008, we noticed that our beef sales were struggling, and we quickly realized that we needed to make some key changes with our merchandising outlook to better respond and adapt to the economic environment," recounts Cremens. "In order to stay competitive, we shifted toward more value-oriented cuts of beef and grades to drive the sales, and it's been very fruitful for us." He adds, "We posted a record year with beef sales."

Foodmaster, long renowned for its quality fresh meats, has continuously worked to develop new ways to add value to its customers' shopping experiences, through the implementation of new programs. But in a period when "price has definitely been a key factor," Cremens says the grocer "adjusted our buying habits accordingly, to find value items to drive price points on our front-page ad," which he maintains remains "a huge consideration for attracting shoppers to a store and making it a destination shop."

With roughly 85 percent of all of Foodmaster's beef offerings hailing from the Wooster, Ohio-based Certified Angus Beef (CAB) brand, Cremens says as wholesale prices and retails "began creeping up and up, our margins weren't giving us the same returns as they did in the past. So we started more aggressively promoting the middle meats—strips, rib-eyes, tenderloins—to attract consumers, and we've been very satisfied with the results."

Beyond any other category or item, Cremens says, "Front-page meat department feature items are a proven way to capture customers' attention," which in turn stimulates a rising-tide-lifts-all-boats scenario that he says transfers directly to "capturing the peripheral sales in all other departments. It might be an old-school philosophy," he continues, "but I still think it's a good, sound one that works especially well in this kind of widespread difficult economy."

A longtime proponent of the notion "that a strong center-of-the-plate feature drives most customers' purchase decisions," Cremens makes a compelling case. There are few shoppers that will plan a shopping trip around a single produce or bakery item, for instance. But, he contends, "They will definitely do so around a \$1.29-per-pound chicken breast or, even better, a hotel-style rib roast or boneless sirloin strips for \$3.99 per pound," which were among Foodmaster's prominent front-page

features in December.

Cremens' outstanding efforts to boost Foodmaster's beef sales were rewarded with a 2007 Retail Beef Backer Award in the independent category by the Beef Checkoff Program. The Program commended the regional grocer's well-organized seasonal promotions, including multiple summer grilling promotions, a "Beef Bowl Super Bowl" promotion, and a holiday roast promotion featuring disposable pop-up timers that was so successful that the timers became a permanent addition to its fresh meat department.

### **Dads love steak**

Foodmaster's successful summer grilling promotions focused on the prominent grilling holidays—Cinco de Mayo, Father's Day, and Labor Day—via campaigns that employed a variety of POS materials, including posters, bag stuffers, ads, on-pack labeling, and contests/sweepstakes. Foodmaster also conducted in-store beef demonstrations to highlight recipes available in customer handouts found at the meat case.

Cremens also staged a whimsical and highly effective "Love Your Steak, Love Your Dad" sweepstakes for Father's Day that gave children the opportunity to compose essays about why their dads deserved a steak for Father's Day. Promoted by bag stuffers that encouraged kids to get involved, the sweepstakes awarded the winning dad a family pack of steaks, a grill toolset, and an apron.

Foodmaster also featured beef bottom round steak (Western Griller) beef value cuts during the summer grilling season that used the Beef Checkoff's Easy Fresh Cooking (EFC) labels, as well as on-package labels that provide easy cooking instructions and recipes. Cremens additionally initiated labeling Foodmaster's beef packages with EFC labels to offer customers additional recipes and cooking instructions. Posters, special advertisements, and promotional labeling all contributed to increased holiday roast sales.

Moreover, Foodmaster's Beef Bowl promotion featured demonstrations with tasty recipes like Tailgater's Barbeque Beef and Chili Beef Express, and also offered a take-home party-planning brochure designed to help customers get ready for the big game. Leading with ironman signs, wobblers, and special-themed ads, Foodmaster's big game day promotional beef blitz also featured a sweepstakes with tickets to a professional football game as the prize.

According to Cremens, Foodmaster's participation in many other beef checkoff-funded programs centered heavily on getting consumers to test-drive, and thus become repeat customers of, many beef value cuts, including the beef shoulder top blade (flat iron), beef shoulder roast (petite tender), beef shoulder center steak (ranch steak), beef round (sirloin) tip center, and beef round (sirloin) tip side.

Looking ahead, Cremens says he plans to "continue the program we have in place right now, which has been working very well. But like anything in our business, we will need to monitor things closely and adapt to changes accordingly."

## **EXCLUSIVE WEB CONTENT**

### **Raley's rallies support for beef cook-off**

To help get consumers fired up about the 2009 Beef Checkoff-funded National Beef Cook-Off, West Sacramento, Calif.-based Raley's will link its customers to the competition's Web site during the entry generation phase of the competition.

What's more, the privately owned supermarket chain—comprising its eponymous Raley's banner, as well as Bel Air Markets, Nob Hill Foods, and Food Source stores in Northern California and Nevada—will place full-page color ads in its *Something Extra* magazine. It will also distribute Beef Cook-Off entry brochures in its 138 Northern California stores, while the Kenwood and Kunde vineyards have agreed to be in-kind wine sponsors for the chef event, welcome event, and gala awards banquet.

The American National Cattlemen (ANCW), which manages the program, is also raising non-checkoff funds for the event's ground transportation, chef event, and some other activities not covered by the 2009 checkoff budget.

For more about the Cook-Off, visit [National Beef Cook-Off](#).

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