



CAB Corner on Quality
(graphic file logo for heading
available on request)

April 2004

Quality Confusion

By Al Kober, CAB Retail Director

This column is about quality—but just what is the definition? “The totality of features and characteristics of (everything about) a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs.”

Now look at the confusing messages found in the variety of definitions found in beef industry marketing material:

- 1. Where it is bred makes it quality beef.** “Traditional wholesome food direct from the farm. The animals are bred and reared on our farm.”
- 2. Where the company is makes it quality beef.** “Premium quality from the heart of Beef Country.”
- 3. The size of the herd makes it quality beef.** “Quality beef from small suckler herds.”
- 4. What is in the feed makes it quality beef.** “High energy diet produces higher quality beef.”
- 5. Where they feed makes it high quality beef.** “Putting cattle out to pasture produces quality beef.”

One brochure points out, “Traditionally the beef industry has defined quality beef at the processor’s plant with focus on safety, trim specifications and order fulfillment.” But attempts at branding have led to using the breed in the name (Hereford, Angus, etc.) to imply a different level of quality, and as if they were flavors like chocolate or vanilla.

Answers from a focus group when asked how to identify high quality beef: “It is a bright red color,” “There is very little fat,” “The package is not bloody,” “The package is wrapped tightly,” and simply, “It looks good.”

These answers have little to do with intrinsic value or quality.

With marketing definitions off the wall, it is no wonder the consumer is confused about the meaning of quality beef. By a partial definition, everyone who sells beef offers some “quality” of beef. But what quality is it? High, low or in the middle some place.

The government has a grading system to determine quality, starting with USDA Prime, Choice and Select, but those are based on marbling scores only. We need more information to really determine total quality.

That's where branding comes in. Beef marketers try to identify their level of quality by associating it with a name to stand for that level. They want consumers to identify with that brand and pay extra to get that quality.

Sometimes, words are devalued. The most common ones used to sell beef are "tender, flavorful and juicy." Low quality programs use them even though the words have little to do with the actual product. They use the words to imitate higher quality branded beef programs. They try to convince the consumer that their lower quality product will deliver the same level of satisfaction, causing "quality confusion."

Add this to the great number of Angus brands and it's easy to see why the consumer is totally confused and brand names lose value. Many marketers have tried to use the name "Angus" to imply some kind of a difference in quality. That's like saying a vehicle is great simply because it is a "Car." Those who drive a Mercedes know there is a difference.

Confusion deepens when marketers use unsubstantiated claims about convenience, consistency, nutrition, safety and pricing to suggest their beef is of better quality than the next brand. Again, these statements have little to do with quality.

Enforced, science-based standards are required to identify true quality beef—specifications that go way beyond the USDA grade and yield system. The Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program is built on such standards.

We must remember consumers don't all think and act the same. Some "eat to survive," some "eat to live" and others "live to eat." Those who eat to survive do not use as many distinctive parameters of quality as do the live-to-eat consumers. And those "eat-to-reward-yourself" customers have very defined standards for meat choices.

It all comes back to the original definition. Identify the perceived needs of the quality-conscious consumer. Identify the market share of that need, and then develop a program that will deliver the highest quality product possible, one that meets that need better than anyone else. That is what the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand has done, why it has been successful for more than 25 years, and is still growing.

END