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Independents Speak

By Robert Buonomano

Saving the Butchers

Developing a strong meat department puts you a cut above the rest.

Food retail is a battlefield, and if you've been an independent retailer like I've been for the last 28 years, you will understand just what I mean.

Over the years, I've fought many battles. Every time another chain store or supercenter opened, the fear of loss would make me feel like I was fighting for my life. The question was, how could I win? I had to find a way to differentiate myself from the competition, a way that not only would help me survive, but also actually grow my business.

The year 2000 marked the beginning of what I refer to as "the one battle that an independent can win" — the battle to promote our perishables, especially our meat departments.

For some time now, Walmart has had superstores that sold meat but didn't have any butchers in the store cutting it, and I wanted to make my customers aware of that. I started by just telling my customers what I had to offer them: fresh-cut meat that didn't have anything added to it, just like Mom was able to buy years ago. I told them that we still had butchers that could help them if they had questions, and cut them a special cut if that's what they wanted. I told them that we still cut meat fresh every day, and that our hamburger is ground fresh in the store daily. This is the same thing I've been doing for years, and I'm sure other independents have been doing exactly the same thing.

But I realized some retailers weren't too forthcoming about their meat departments, and this is a big mistake. Just because you have a service meat department, don't assume that your customers know about it. It's something that's worth repeating, even if they do know. Today's consumer seeks more and more information about the food they put into their family's mouths, and this is a perfect opportunity to give them this information.



What we realized in doing this was that not only were my customers listening, but my employees were listening, too. They started showing increased pride in their jobs, in the fact that they had knowledge and a skill that was being appreciated.

Our customers started holding us to a higher standard, and my employees were living up to it. We had created a niche for ourselves, grabbed our customers' attention and were giving them a reason to keep coming back. In

order for any marketing program to really

be successful, it must benefit the consumer

while increasing sales, and for us it did both.

Our goal is to fill our customers' freezers with fresh-cut meat before they go to the superstores. If you give your customers a good value on a quality product, their word of mouth becomes your best form of advertising.

I started the "Help Save the Butchers" program in 2000 to help other independents preserve the knowledge and provide the service that our customers still want and deserve. The program consists of free educational information, videos and recipes on the program's website (www.helpsavethebutchers.com), as well as (full disclosure) fee-based consulting services aimed at developing marketing tools that provide customers value while maintaining gross profits.

Over the next few issues, I'll be sharing some of this information with *Progressive Grocer Independent* readers in a series of columns aimed at helping you to make a good meat department become an outstanding one in your customers' minds.

I hope to work with you in helping save the butchers! **PGI**

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