

MEAT&POULTRY

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Winning with branded ground beef

Cargill's Meadowland Farms defies history to find national success

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by Steve Bjerklie

Branded meat, especially branded commodity meats such as ground beef, has a spotty history in the U.S. market. There have been a number of valiant tries, but few brands for commodity products have been able to succeed outside a relationship with a particular supermarket chain.

But Cargill's Meadowland Farms program, which got off the ground in June 2007, is the notable exception to the general rule. Its success in more than 500 retail stores in the Northeast, the upper Midwest and on the West Coast will likely inspire dozens, if not hundreds, of business-school case-studies. The brand, primarily sold to retailers, is also marketed to foodservice customers.

According to Ivan Brown, brand manager for Cargill Meat Solutions, Wichita, Kan., the brand includes various lean points, from very lean 96/4 to 85/15 to traditional 73/27. "In addition to these lean points, we have the ability to meet custom lean points for retailers," he wrote in e-mail to *MEAT&POULTRY*, and the brand also includes source grinds. The Meadowland products are processed at three regional facilities strategically located for maximum distribution: one's in the Northeast, another plant is in the Midwest, and the third, according to Brown, is on the West Coast. "They are located near major metropolitan areas with a combined population of 120 million people. This allows Cargill to offer customers some of the freshest ground beef products available with fast delivery," he wrote. Interestingly, each of the three processing plants produced its own brand of ground beef. "Each brand was of the same quality/specifications, but didn't have a consistent brand name. We decided to

unify the three brands under one name and create a master brand that would extend across the United States, but deliver consistently great-tasting ground beef products to consumers. The development of the Meadowland Farms ground beef brand was the result."

The marketing objective of Meadowland Farms ground beef is "to create one brand of ground beef that retailers across the U.S. would recognize and rely on to drive sales to their fresh meat case. This brand offers retailers the benefit of being a part of the Cargill brand portfolio and takes advantage of the food-safety interventions and proven processes developed by Cargill," according to Brown.

Meadowland Farms is Cargill's first "consumer-facing" brand dedicated entirely to ground beef products. Brown says the company's retail customers "have already had great responses from consumers about the product's quality, and we're very excited about what this brand can offer retailers – a brand of a full line of fresh ground beef products that are produced regionally and deliver on a consistent eating experience. We are gaining momentum with this brand and expect it to be one-of-a-kind."

When the Excel segment of Cargill Meat Solutions was an independent company, it experimented with branded retail product back in the mid-1980s -- an experiment that Excel struggled to succeed with for two years until it finally pulled the plug. Brown writes that consumer needs have changed considerably since that experience. "Specifically, we know through our unique consumer insights that consumers want more information about their beef and the brand. They want to know information such as where the product is produced and what the brand stands for. With in-store merchandising materials, we help provide consumers with the information they are looking for," he wrote. The company is also developing a Meadowland Farms Web site.

An initial challenge within the company was to gain employee support prior to the Meadowland Farms roll-out, admitted the brand manager. "We had launch parties and multiple in-plant communication pieces that helped answer employees' questions. The result of our efforts was an overwhelming immediate support of the brand by the employees who work hard every day to make sure the brand lives up to its name. Now the employees that work on this brand are even more excited about it, as the brand has increased presence in local grocery stores."

For now, Cargill has no plans to extend the brand to beyond ground beef, though. "As the brand continues to grow its distribution, we will continue to review the brand and the products offered under it," according to Brown.