



The Brand Name Bandwagon

By Jo Robinson

By the year 2005, industry experts predict that half of all the fresh meat products in the supermarket will carry a brand name. No more anonymous, shrink-wrapped beef and pork. The reason for the branding is simple: merely adding a name to the package can increase sales by thirty percent or more.

Why do brand names carry such clout? Part of the answer is "word association." The right words can trick customers into believing that meat that comes from a confined, medicated, and hormone-impregnated steer is the most wholesome product they can buy.

Here's how it works. Imagine that you're the owner of a large feedlot operation in Iowa, and you're wondering if jumping onto the branded meat bandwagon will boost your sales. To find out, you hire a team of marketing consultants. The consultants inform you that adding a brand name can be very effective as long as you follow their advice. First, they say, your brand name should include the name of a specific farm or person. If you call your meat "Marvin's Beef," for example, customers are going to assume there's a Marvin somewhere who cares about his reputation, and, therefore, his beef. Without having to make any overt claims, there is the unspoken assumption that Marvin takes care of his operation a little better than a nameless feedlot operator, or he wouldn't put his name on it. (Of course, the fact that Marvin doesn't exist and that the name was selected by your consultants remains your little secret.)

You will boost sales even more, they tell you, if you add "Iowa" to your label. Most people have a positive association with where they live. They harbor the illusion that shady dealings and shoddy products are found somewhere else, surely not in their back yard. (For years, I avoided Arkansas chicken and paid more for "Washington grown," assuming I was feeding my family a more wholesome product. Then I toured a confinement poultry operation in Washington State and learned the grim truth.)

To further enhance your brand name, your consultants tell you, it would be wise to add a bucolic term or two. Most consumers are so estranged from the land that they yearn for anything that suggests country living. How about "Farmer Marvin's Iowa Beef?" you ask. They tell you this is an excellent choice of words because "Farmer Marvin" evokes the past as well as the countryside. ("Old McMarvin had a farm...") You give your graphic artists the go-ahead to design a logo with a red barn and haystack to reinforce this link with the past.

Great. With just four carefully chosen words, you've managed to imbue your feedlot meat with integrity, local pride, wholesome country living, and the nostalgic past. But what about those legions of "green" and health conscious consumers? Has your brand name lured them in yet? Not really. So, say your consultants, it's time to reach for some of those ubiquitous words linked with health, nature, and wholesomeness. Luckily, the USDA allows you to add the words "fresh" and "natural" to any unfrozen animal product that has not been altered subsequent to slaughter. Prior to slaughter, of course, your animals may have been stressed, implanted with hormones, fattened on stale pastry and urea, and fed a steady diet of sub-therapeutic antibiotics. Nonetheless, once they are butchered they become "fresh and natural" in the eyes of the feds.

So, now you have: "Farmer Marvin's Fresh 'n Natural Iowa Beef." (Note how that "'n" adds a little extra folksy charm? Your marketing consultants are earning their money!) But just when you're ready to spend tens of thousands of dollars to trademark your name, design your labels, and begin your marketing campaign, your advisors say that they're beginning to hear about something called "pastured products" and "grass-fed meat." They think that this quaint concept—keeping animals home on the range—might be the new, new thing in meat products. Once again, they have the solution. Simply add the words "meadows" or "prairie" to your label. These words conjure up lush fields of grass without actually saying your animals eat any of the stuff. Image is all.

Unfortunately, all this branding and grandstanding of feedlot beef is going to make life much more difficult for the hundreds of pioneering farmers who are raising their beef on pasture without the use of hormones or antibiotics. The very qualities they embody—name accountability; local production; and a more natural, wholesome, and nutritious product—are going to be blazoned on half the meat sold in the supermarket. What's more, the big guys are going to spend tens of thousands of dollars on image development and marketing. How are consumers going to tell one pound of hamburger from another?

I have some advice for shoppers. Look beyond the brand names and fancy labels. Call the meat producer's 1-800 phone number and say that you want to come for a visit. Tell them you want to see with your own eyes: 1) where the animals are raised, 2) what they are fed, and 3) how they are treated. Settle for nothing less. This is the one arena in which factory farming cannot compete. The producers of Farmer Marvin's Fresh 'n Natural Meadow Beef will not allow you to tour their feedlots. They know full well that seeing hundreds of cattle standing around in a dusty feedlot surrounded by manure lagoons will not help sales.

Money can buy the image, but it cannot buy the real thing.