

# “Keeping Meat on the Table – The Food Skills Opportunity”: World Meat Congress explores consumer opportunities

Representing the IMS, Human Nutrition and Health Committee, Canada Beef’s Director of Consumer Marketing and Professional Home Economist, Joyce Parslow, recently delivered a thought provoking and information filled presentation on “*Keeping meat on the table – a food skills opportunity*” at the 20<sup>th</sup> IMS World Meat Congress.

As marketers, we’re always on the lookout for trends and how we can latch onto the waves to build momentum for messages.

One of the waves gaining momentum is ‘food skills.’

In a broad context, food skills is just about what it takes to get a meal on the table. This includes:

- Knowing food from the ground up – as basic as knowing what a food is and how it got to your table.
- Nutrition, being able to read a label, know what foods to put together to make a wholesome meal and including knowledge of safe food handling.
- Meal planning, food preparation on a budget, and things such as creative use of leftovers and adjusting recipes.
- Mechanical techniques such as preparing meals, chopping/mixing, cooking, and following recipes.

At one time, food skills was taught in both the home – from mother to child typically – and in school in Home Economics, which may sound quaint and old fashioned until you consider it in different light.

Today, people are increasingly talking about a ‘culinary brain drain.’

Cooking skills have been stripped out of school curriculums and increasingly, they’re not being taught at home. Young millennial-led families either don’t make it priority to teach food skills or don’t have the skills and/or time to do so – or often a combination of all three. Not limited to the millennial demographic, researchers from a prominent Canadian grocery retailer captured some startling statistics — not only were 70 per cent of Canadians under 29 years of age not kitchen-confident, so were more than half of those over the age of 50. We have kids who don’t even recognize what a potato looks like.

From a public health and government view, food skills are increasingly seen as key to food security providing stability for families, and controlling health costs for society as a whole.

Consider these startling facts — two-thirds of Americans are obese and because of this, the lifespans of this coming generation are expected to be reduced by 10 years. The three leading causes of death in the U.S. are heart disease, cancer and stroke. All are diet related.

Study after study cite two causes — sedentary lifestyle and changes in eating patterns over the last 30 years.

An article in the Journal of Public Health Nutrition referenced Statistics Canada figures that show there has been an 18 per cent increase in calorie intake over the past 30 years. What’s

interesting is that there has been a general shift in our eating patterns with an increase in calories coming from seven food groupings: cheese, chicken (which is frequently breaded and deep-fried), rice, oils, soft drinks, flour and salad oils. These are the very foods that are key ingredients in energy-dense convenience foods and food court items: pizza, chicken fingers and sweet baked goods. Over the same period, consumption of traditional foods such as beef, eggs, and milk have declined.

In a recent survey by a major Canadian food retailer, Sobeys tracked that 62 per cent of caloric intake was coming from ultra-processed food. Eating highly processed food has become the norm — with only 18 per cent of Canadians having one meal a day prepared from scratch.

This problem is being recognized world-wide and there is an increasing call for action in the arenas of policy making, public health, the media and even pop culture. Japan has even gone as far as enacting the law of Shoduku (Food Education), with the goal of ensuring the general population acquires knowledge about foods and the ability to make appropriate food choices. The Japanese initiative works across government, schools, fishermen and farmers and businesses.

And in Brazil, new food guidelines have been developed based around cooking from scratch and eating meals together. This is in stark contrast to how most other food guidelines have been developed focused on Food Groups and nutrients. The Brazilian philosophy: Families that Eat (and cook together), eat better.

The world is beginning to recognize the links between food skills, food literacy, food security, family economies and health. We're hearing a rally cry for a return to scratch meals prepared from 'real foods' and shared at the family table.

All this buzz creates an opportunity for the meat industry and it needs to be our 'a-ha' moment. We need to ride the food skills wave. Meat is a wholesome, single ingredient, 'real food' after all, and research has shown that as part of scratch meals, meat anchors a healthy plate, encouraging a wider use of vegetables, grains and healthy eating habits.

But to take advantage of the possibilities, we need to address the limitations to meat use that result from the decline of food skills. Recent research sourced by Canada Beef demonstrated that a lack of food knowledge limits one's ability to purchase and cook with beef. 54% of Millennial parents admit it is hard to buy cuts in the meat case, 39% admit it is hard to understand how to prepare beef cuts and 50% stated that they would purchase more beef if they understood more about beef cuts. At the meat counter, consumers see a Sea of Red – they are in a 'Meat Muddle' that discourages purchase and use.

Meat marketers will need to focus on some key strategies to ensure meat keeps its place at the table and benefits from the Food Skills wave. Helping consumers figure out how to buy and cook meat is central to this. Some of the key areas of focus for marketers to consider in the food skills arena:

- Public Policy and Opinion
- Product Considerations
- Promotions
- Partnerships
- Personnel (and personal)

Examples of some strategies in each of these areas of focus include:

In the area of **Public Policy and Opinion** in Canada, as part of our marketing efforts we support groups lobbying the government to bring food skills courses and training back into school curriculum. We take part in supporting bills on food security and we take part in ‘building the buzz’ or amplifying the message about the importance of Food Skills with government and opinion leaders in culinary, education and health arenas. As part of public education, Food Literacy programs and curriculum give us the opportunity to build positive links to consumers around meat as an agricultural product that is a ‘real food’, linking back to the positive image of those that raise it. There is a heritage message and story that resonates with consumers.

**For Product Considerations** – think of ways to make meat speak to consumers from a convenience angle and cut products in ‘convenience formats’ that won’t disappoint them when they cook at home. Through packaging and cutting modifications, build a convenience halo into meat – while still keeping it true to being a ‘Real Food’.

**Promotions** – need to be information rich to help consumers build their food skills. Recipes are more than just inspiration for consumer purchase, they need to be thought of as the ‘carrier’ for ‘tried and true’ standard cooking instructions for your cuts each and every time.

**Partnering** – is key to amplifying food skills messaging – retailers are key to getting food skills messaging right where it is needed the most – at that point of purchase.

**And personnel** – your organization needs food-centric professionals whether they be communicators, marketers, meat merchandisers or in business development – a food passion is key to developing an empathy for the meat muddle consumers face.

As marketers, food skills opportunities are just about everywhere for fresh meat — it is to our collective benefit that we personally we embrace the food skills opportunity within our organizations, our own homes, our social circles and our lives. At a very grass roots level we can build an opportunity for fresh meat centred meals at home. Let get kids in the kitchen and help them build confidence in their food skills. These are skills that will last a lifetime.

Cooking and food are about sharing and thinking about those that we care about. These help define us, bind us together, and empower us as individuals and families.

Let’s get on the wave of promoting food skills to keep meat’s place at the table.