

‘Always On’ for Team Beef

Beef's a Trip: Part 2 of 2

by **MIRANDA REIMAN,**
Certified Angus Beef LLC

Cattlemen would no doubt get paid less for their product if they didn't have dedicated foodservice distributors on their side.

Not only do these people need to correctly assess demand, they must help create it. They work on education and menu creation, they help smaller restaurants figure pricing and, in general, provide a lot of support. They also age meat and do further-trimming and packaging for all those who don't cut their steaks in house.

When a rancher has had a long day weaning calves, he might be surprised to know his beef counterpart in the nearest urban center has kept similar hours.

Take Dennis Hendrickson, district sales manager for Sysco-Boston. He's often on the road as the sun comes up and continues that trail until all of his customers are taken care of.

“We carry 14- to 15,000 line items for next-day delivery,” he explains. “It's highly probable at least one thing is



PHOTO BY MIRANDA REIMAN

Only two out of 10 restaurants make it, but if Dennis Hendrickson, district sales manager for Sysco-Boston, has his way, that'll change. He's convinced that getting his customers to treat their beef purchases like an insurance policy is one way.

going to go wrong. Whether the chef forgets to order it, you didn't punch it in right, we were out of stock on it — which doesn't happen very often, but it's reality. My wife used to say, ‘Do you ever

have a time when something doesn't go wrong?’”

Here to help

Fridays get busy as restaurant operators

realize what they're running short on for the weekend. Salespeople often get panicked calls when chefs find themselves out of staple items.

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Hendrickson says his clientele relies on him to provide expertise on where the market is going, to help explain new cuts and develop menu items.



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Hendrickson says the mantra among his team is, "We are right here, Mr. Customer. Our job is to make sure you have every product you need to service your customer."

That's only part of their role.

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market is going, to help explain new cuts and develop menu items.

"A lot of them are chief cooks and bottle washers, operators that are trying to make it," he says.

The stats are bleak — only two out of 10 restaurants do make it. If Hendrickson has his way, that'll change. He's convinced that getting his customers to treat their beef purchases like an insurance policy is one way.

"Do you know what the most expensive cost in a restaurant is?" he asks. "An empty seat. Once Friday night is closed down, you take all those empty seats and you can't get those sales back."

Paying another 50¢ to \$1 more than Choice beef is worth it for a premium product.

"The more they get educated, they realize, 'We have to serve good beef.' I can charge \$1 to \$2 more to the customer, but it'll get them in my restaurant," Hendrickson says.

Answering a calling

Hendrickson's "always on" hours aren't the only thing he has in common with ranchers. He also feels a strong calling for his chosen profession.

"I just fell in love with the business," he says. At 15, he started as a dishwasher at a seafood restaurant. He worked his way through high school and a business management degree at Merrimac College.

At 21, new degree in hand, Hendrickson continued his education at the school of hard knocks, helping in a family business and starting his own bar and grill. After major family health issues, Hendrickson sold The Usual Pub and Grill, but today it's like he's the manager of 350 restaurants. He manages salespeople, develops strategies, provides support where needed and, probably most importantly, helps right the wrongs.

Hendrickson wants to change that reality from two in 10 restaurants surviving to at least three in 10.

"If we can help keep our customers in business, that's huge," he says. "Then you become a partner and not just a sales guy."

He also wants to keep his suppliers in business. After riding around in the pickup with a Midwestern cattleman last spring, he feels an even stronger push to represent quality.

"We have to work so that the [ranchers] of this world — their craft gets noticed," he says.

Editor's Note: *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

Beef's a Trip

This is part 2 of 2 in a summary from a recent 30-day blog series explaining every step in beef production. For more on the role of each sector of the beef business, search "Beef's a Trip" on the Black Ink Blog at www.blackinkwithcab.com.