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American consumers are continually changing. Population trends include, among others, increasing numbers of teenagers, elderly/retired, single parent households and meals consumed away from home.

In the last election campaign the term "Soccer Mom" came to represent demands and desires of today's families. During a match last week the "Soccer Moms" talked about capital gains taxes, Joey's shin guards, retirement, the loud soccer coach, hiring a new department manager, what's for supper, raffle tickets, violin lessons and the player on the other team who "must be too old for this league." Meal planning didn't get much coverage.

As American demographics change so does the way we eat. More than 1/3 of all meals are now consumed away from home with restaurant and food service meals accounting for over 52% of all food sales.

Microwave ovens in minivans give a whole new meaning to the term "fast food." Even meals at home are frequently consumed in shifts as some family members leave early or return late. Many of the changes in the way we eat are driven by the need to fit food into a busy schedule. Nevertheless, as lives become more hectic, the desire for a traditional eating experience seems to be increasing.

A traditional meal with family members sitting around the table can require considerable planning and foresight. With very little time allocated to such planning, the challenge for the food industry is to find ways to provide for convenient at-home and away-from-home dining experiences. Food marketers are beginning to think about consumer needs in terms of "Meal Solutions." A meal solution might be thought of as a combination of foods and services which fulfill consumer desires for a particular meal.

Variety is the unifying principle for providing meal solutions. Convenient meal solutions include ready-to-eat, ready-to-heat and ready-to-cook foods. Ready-to-eat items (hot or cold) are consumed on the spot or taken home, often for immediate use. Since most meal planning occurs less than 1 hour before the meal, retail displays are often

designed to suggest whole meal solutions.

At the prepared foods deli à la shopper might pick up a rotisserie roasted broiler along with the salad and side dishes needed for a family dinner. Ready-to-heat foods are partially prepared, precooked and chilled or frozen so the shopper will heat and serve the meal at home. Roasted turkey breast or chicken nuggets might form the center of a ready-to-heat meal which can be picked up on the way home from work and prepared in less than 15 minutes.

Ready-to-cook items give the cook an opportunity to be fully involved in food preparation without much preplanning. When merchandising ready-to-cook items the retailer may add seasonings, marinades or stuffing to provide a distinctive flavor or presentation. Ready-to-cook chicken breast roulade, Cajun marinated turkey tenderloins and others may be offered in either refrigerated or frozen form.

Adjacent display space may be used for bagged lettuce salad, fresh green beans, prepared sauces and other ingredients or condiments. By offering a wide range of meal solutions the retailer is able to match his service to the varied lifestyles of his customers.

Until recently the focus on "meal solutions" was mainly at the retail level. However, as this market category grows major poultry processors such as Tyson and Perdue and many smaller companies have begun to offer new products.

Retailers and food service operators now have a wide selection of seasoned, marinated, formed, glazed, breaded, stuffed or cooked poultry products from which to choose. Hardly a week goes by without the release of a new prepared poultry product designed to be part of a meal solution.

And this may be just the beginning. In a recent presentation to a food industry group Bernie McGorry, Food Service Business Manager for Hershey Foods, suggested that all food industry growth in the next 7-10 years will occur in food service (including supermarket prepared foods). If that is true, it means even bigger changes lie ahead for the poultry industry.

Next time Assuring Safety and Value (taste, convenience, availability) of meal solutions

Christmas Tree Growers To Meet

POTTSVILLE (Schuylkill Co.) — Christmas tree growers and individuals interested in growing Christmas trees are invited to a program sponsored by Penn State Cooperative Extension. Registration is required to attend this afternoon meeting.

Dr. Larry Kuhns and Tracey Harpster, Penn State University, Horticulture Department will discuss round-up herbicide plot, trickle irrigation, and sprayer calibration. Dr. Paul Heller, Penn State University Entomology De-

partment, will discuss insect problems found in 1998.

Rayanne Lehman, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture will discuss how to control scale on Christmas trees.

The meeting will be held Tuesday, June 23, from 12:30 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. at Whispering Pines Tree Farm, Breingsville. This meeting will qualify for credits toward pesticide recertification.

For more information, contact George P. Perry Jr., extension agent/horticulture, (717) 622-4225.

Do Your Homework When Hiring Environmental Professional

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — If consumers or developers are in the market to purchase farmland or a former industrial site, hiring an environmental professional to inspect the site should be a high priority, according to experts in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"If you are about to purchase property that has not been used as a residential area in the past, you should make sure there are no environmental problems or financial liabilities associated with the land," said Jim Garthe, instructor in agricultural and biological engineering. "By spending money now to assess any possible problems, the buyer can save a lot of time, money, and legal fees down the road."

In most cases, buyers should hire an environmental professional to perform a Phase I site assessment, which includes a site tour; descriptions of all buildings,

tanks, drums, ponds, pits or disposal systems; and a report of significant environmental liabilities. It also entails a background history of the property; a records search for state, local, and federal violations; a title search; and environmental liens and evidence of past use.

"The safest route is to have an assessment done even if you feel the property is clean," said Jennifer Shufran, research technologist in agricultural and biological engineering. "No one should go into a large purchase with blinders on." Garthe and Shufran suggest a few guidelines to heed if consumers plan to hire an environmental professional.

• What is an environmental professional? This is a person who has credentials and experience in environmental science and works with environmental management, planning, impact assessment, en-

vironmental protection, or compliance. Shufran says environmental experts can have varied scientific and educational backgrounds. She suggests checking telephone listings under "Geologists," "Engineers — Environmental Pollution Control" or "Environmental and Ecological Services."

• Estimates. Contact at least two or three firms or consultants for estimates. Expect to pay between \$800 and \$1,000 for an inspection.

• Ask for a statement of qualifications. Each company should provide a professional resume that includes education of owners and employees, relevant work experience, projects the firm has recently completed, references from past clients, preferably on similar projects, and professional memberships. Garthe said look for membership in the Institute of Professional Environmental Practice, American Academy of Environmental Engineers, or the National Association of Environmental Professionals. Also, ask for a history of the company and listing of employees and their specializations.

• Make a preliminary phone call. "Describe in detail what you need," Shufran said. "The company can tell you if your project is smaller than their typical assignment or much larger than they can handle."

• Ask about other experts. Garthe said clients should ask if the company or consultant employs or has existing professional relationships with specialized environmental professionals such as hydrogeologists, water quality analysts, or environmental soil chemists.

• Ask for a written proposal. "The document should be a step-by-step description of what the company is going to do. It should include some rough estimates of costs as well," Shufran said. "If you receive an estimate that is well above other estimates, be sure to ask what services are included to warrant the higher price," Shufran says. "If those services are important to your project, it might be smart to go with the higher estimate."

• Ask for detailed documentation after the assessment is done. Garthe said the report should include a summary of each procedure the firm performed and a detailed explanation of the company's findings. "You don't want a report that says 'we walked over the property and found nothing,'" Garthe said. "It should tell exactly what the environmental professional did during the assessment of the site."

Underground Fuel Tank Deadlines Approaching

EDGEWATER, Md. — Farmers who want to utilize the Maryland Department of the Environment's (MDE) Underground Storage Tank (UST) Upgrade and Replacement Loan Program must submit a completed application before the June 30, 1998 deadline.

The UST Upgrade and Replacement Fund was established in 1991 to assist tank owners in financing the upgrade, replacement, or removal of their motor fuel USTs in order to comply with federal requirements.

Owners of farm storage tanks with a capacity more than 1,100 gallons, located on a farm and devoted to the production of crops or raising animals, and have been registered since July 1991, are eligible to borrow up to \$50,000 per site. The term is for a maximum of 15 years.

Farm tanks with a capacity of 1,100 gallons or less are exempt from all technical regulations, federal, and state. However, if an oil release occurs, MDE must be notified at (410) 974-3551 within two hours after the discovery.

"Storing fuel on the farm is just not a necessity but also a liability.

Although there are costs with meeting fuel storage requirements for underground tanks, contaminating someone's water supply could cost even more," said Melvin Baile Jr., president of the Maryland Grain Producers Association.

Maryland has been delegated to administer the federal Resource Conservation & Recovery Act Program for the US Environmental Protection Agency. The Department of the Environment is now strictly enforcing the federal standards for leak detection and insurance requirements.

After December 22, 1998, MDE will also be enforcing federal standards for corrosion protection and spill and overflow protection for UST systems. The Department calculates that about 80 percent of the owners of the approximately 35,000 tanks have complied with the requirements.

For more information about the UST Loan Program or to obtain a "compliance outline," farmers should contact the Maryland Department of the Environment, Oil Control Program, (410) 631-3386.



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