



What is driving this growth surge? Overwhelmingly, retailers active in case ready say they need it to keep meat on display. Overheated job markets in many cities have made it impossible to keep meat departments adequately staffed, muting the often-strident labor opposition in years past. Retailers also want to reduce liability for food safety by eliminating in-store red meat processing.

Ironically, the highly touted cost savings projected for case ready programs are elusive, claim many retailers, although many also admit current costing systems are inadequate to pinpoint savings. Furthermore, most stores still have a limited participation in case ready, thus it is difficult for both retailers and processors to achieve economies of scale needed to generate significant cost savings.

What is case ready red meat packaging? What other packages are used for it? Simply, is it any product to that arrives at a retail store ready to put directly into the display case without any handling other than perhaps adding a price label. Two basic types of packages are used: a polystyrene foam tray overwrapped with stretch or shrink film and a modified atmosphere lid sealed barrier tray. The former is more popular because it is like the package now used at most supermarkets. However, it is expected to be surpassed by the barrier tray in a few short years because the latter is leakproof, provides longer shelf life and can be packaged at higher production rates.

What are the major opportunities for flexible packaging converters? The largest by far is for gas barrier films, especially clear antifog lidding to seal to barrier trays. Another significant market is for coextruded sealant films to laminate to foam or plastic trays to provide barrier. Also coextruded films are used to make masterpack bags. These bags are used to line shipping cases. Processors pack overwrapped trays into these bags, then evacuate and gas flush the bag to provide extended shelf life for distribution. There are also opportunities for permeable stretch or shrink films, especially those that tend to resist shipping and abuse.

What about graphics? Currently the need for printed films is small but expected to grow dramatically. Most products use pressure-sensitive labels for two reasons: low-volume for specific products and, more importantly, retailer reluctance to purchase branded products. Since fresh red meat has historically been a key differentiator for retailers, they resist buying branded red meat that could also be at their competitors' nearby. However, Wal-Mart is bucking this trend by purchasing branded meats from IBP, Smithfield and others, although graphics are far more subdued than is typical of processed meats and other branded products. As case ready becomes more commonplace, resistance to branding and graphics is likely to decline.

While the opportunity is large and growing, converters need to get ready if they want to participate. Not only are the films complex, packaging of highly perishable fresh meats is very demanding.

*Huston Keith is principal of Keymark Associates, Marietta, Georgia 770/579-5979, a market research and business development firm in Marietta, Georgia. He co-authored Case Ready Meat Packaging with Dr. Aaron Brody for Packaging Strategies.*