Food For Thought (Best Of)

The grocery store manager came running down the aisle screaming, "What are you doing opening those bags and eating those potato chips inside the store?"

"I'm just following directions," I said, pointing to the label on the chip bag that urged me to, "Taste The Difference." The manager was a bit upset but I was grateful for the opportunity to question him about some of the trends I've noticed lately in the grocery business. I present the repartee here in the familiar Q and A format to see if you can make better sense of it than I could. I am the Q and he is the A.

Q: I notice this can of corn with "No salt added" costs 10 cents more than the can that presumably had salt added to it. Or so the label would imply. If they didn't have to put the extra salt in the corn shouldn't the product cost less? After all, the extra salt must still be sitting in a warehouse somewhere waiting to be sold.

A: What you are paying for is mostly vocabulary. Certain words on a label merely cost more. For instance, the words "lite," "fat free," "no salt" and "hypoallergenic" can add as much as 20 percent to the price of a product. Replace some natural ingredients with expensive chemicals like buta-beta-hydroxy-rhododendron and the cost to consumers can rise as much as 25 percent per syllable.

Q: Wow! So farmers would make more money if their silos were full of adjectives instead of grain?

A: That is correct. But you want to pick your words carefully because some words have higher yields than others.

Q: Such as?

A: The words "New and Improved" seem to be the hot crop this year.
Q: But are the products really new and have they been improved?
A: Of course not. The words merely mean that the manufacturer has taken out all the good stuff and in so doing has "improved" his profit margin significantly.
Q: I may not have all my corn flakes in one box, but I see a huge disparity between what cattleman receive for cattle and what you are charging for beef.
A: It's not just us. Eat at an all-you-can-eat buffet and you may pay \$10.95 for dinner, but dine in a high class restaurant and that wouldn't cover the tip. It's called marketing. Purchase fish eggs at a bait store and they cost \$5.95 but call it caviar and it'll set you back a month's wages. Grind up some dried citrus peals and yard leaves and call it "potpourri" and it's worth more per pound than the whole fresh oranges.
Q: I notice this week that cereal costs more per pound than rump roast. In an effort to improve their beef, ranchers feed grain to their cattle. But with these prices you are basically telling me the grain was worth more per pound than the beef if we had just left it alone and called it cereal?
A: Only if you add enough sugar to the cereal. Sugar is the key.
Q: I still don't get it. Blend some grain and horse meat and call it "gourmet dog food" and it sells for more per pound than the rancher gets for prime beef. I just don't understand why the person who made the plastic toy in the box of cereal got more for his effort than the farmer who grew the grain. It makes no sense.

It's the Pitts

Written by Lee Pitts

A: Not true, it makes a lot of cents. In many cases what you are paying for is the cost of packaging.

Q: Then how do you explain the dirty carrots here in this bin? The ones you have to rip the tops off and bag yourself cost more than the prepackaged, pre-washed, pre-sliced carrots in an attractive package.

A: That's because the loose carrots were "organically cultivated."

Q: Wow, that's nine syllables by my count.

A: Precisely! Magniloquent marketing, if I may say so! (Look that one up in your Funk and Wagnalls.)