

# CONSUMER CONNECTIONS

*The NichePORK Marketing Conference helps producers make link from their farm to speciality markets.*

BY MELINDA THACH AND DARCY MAULSBY

If you're going to be a niche pork marketer, you must stay focused, be creative and offer quality to consumers. And you have to maintain a passion for what you do, say Midwest pork producers and retailers who've staked their claim in the niche pork business.

"Passion is about as important as anything when it comes to niche marketing," said Iowa's Tim Beeler, president of Beeler's Naturally Pure Pork. "You

can't believe the amount of time, effort, blood, sweat and tears that go into a business."

But if you make the commitment and follow through, it can pay handsome dividends, said Dale Trebesch, a producer who runs Trebesch Premium Pork in Morgan, Minn. Beeler and Trebesch were speakers at the 2003 Pork Checkoff-sponsored "Niche PORK...The Other Opportunity" conference.

Three years ago, Trebesch started producing natural pork products that are antibiotic free. The family operation, which includes Dale's wife, Patty, son, Jamie, and daughter-in-law, Krista, has 650 sows. They market isowean pigs and finish some of their own hogs for products to market directly to consumers.

They market their pork at 10 locations, including a farmer's market in Minneapolis. This winter they also will

Patty Trebesch, of Trebesch Premium Pork in Morgan, Minn., goes to farmers markets and other outlets to sell her family's natural pork products to consumers. They also will begin selling pork through a new natural foods store this winter.





The pork business is a family affair for the Trebesch family. Left to right (top) are Dale, Jamie and Krista (top) and Taylor, Megan and Samantha.

begin marketing their natural pork through a new natural foods store in Minneapolis.

“We raise drug-free hogs and started niche marketing three years ago. It does take a lot of work, but it has been




### New Niche Site Rounds Up Niche Pork Resources

Thinking about getting started in niche pork production? Or looking for ways to make your niche operation more profitable? You can find answers to all this and more on the Pork Checkoff’s new pork niche Web area on the Internet at [www.porkboard.org](http://www.porkboard.org).

“This Web site brings together a variety of resources for one-stop shopping,” said Larry Cizek, director of culinary and niche market development for the Pork Checkoff.

“Before, you had to hunt around lots of different sites to find this information,” Cizek said. “The Web site provides new ways to connect producers, packers and buyers across the country.”



- find answers to questions about niche pork,
- locate sources of specialty pork products,
- learn about unique production practices,
- increase your knowledge of the niche pork market, and
- make connections through the chain.

“The ‘locate a producer’ link provides a way for restaurants and individuals to contact specific producers directly, while the ‘locate a packer’ link lists packers across the country who work with niche producers,” Cizek said.

The site includes links to niche pork information at universities, Extension, USDA, the National Pork Board and more. Producers can click on links to learn more about niche pork labeling requirements, third-party certification, niche pork production manuals, financial assistance, and business development resources.

To contribute news, calendar items or other updates to the niche pork Web site, contact the Pork Checkoff Service Center at 1-800-456-PORK.

rewarding,” Trebesch said. “Our local customers come to us more because we have high-quality products, while consumers in metro areas also really like that our pork products are natural. That is a good selling point with them.”

#### Learning from Others

This year’s NichePORK Conference focused on what pork producers need to know to transform their ideas for marketing their pork into a business plan. Presenters included producers who are marketing their products and

experts who can help producers develop business plans and seek financing.

The 125 participants sought advice from producers with the experience to show them the benefits – and the pitfalls – of niche marketing.

“You’ve got to stay focused on what you do best,” said Don Lewis of Brighton, Iowa. Lewis is a pork producer and co-owner of the Brighton Locker, and markets meat with his “Family Farm Foods” label.

“And just because you come up with  
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## Niche Marketing...

a great idea doesn't mean people will beat a path to your door – you've got to promote your product," said Lewis, who sells his pork at a local farmer's market and through his catering business.

Gary Malenke, president and chief executive officer of Sioux Preme Packing Co. of Sioux Center, Iowa, offered a processor's point of view. When considering niche marketing, Malenke said the first question should be, "Why will a customer purchase product from me and be willing to pay more for it?"

That's one question that should be answered in a business plan. Several presenters offered advice for finding help to develop a business plan, which can be used to help investors understand what you have in mind.

### Finding help

Some of the sources for funding are grants to help plan programs. These can be available from state programs, such as the department of economic development or department of agriculture.

Nationally, the USDA Rural Development offers value-added producer grants, said USDA Rural Development's Jeff Jobe, who was another speaker at the conference. To get started in niche marketing, producers need to have an idea, Jobe said.

## Tips on Getting Started

Here are some tips speakers at Pork Checkoff's 2003 "NichePORK... The Other Opportunity" conference urge pork producers to consider.

- Promote what's unique about your business. If you raise hogs in hoop buildings, for example, turn that into a selling point.
- Realize that some customers will buy only on price. But don't be afraid to charge for a quality product. Then seek out markets where customers are able and willing to pay for quality.
- If you sell at farmers markets, consider cooking pork brats and patties and selling the hot sandwiches. Also, offer samples of your pork.
- If you can offer products like pork snack sticks or bologna, don't overlook markets like convenience stores and specialty shops.
- Be creative, and find ways to use the entire hog. You probably won't stay in business long if you only sell loins.
- When you go after new business, realize that someone else already has this business. You'll have to offer something unique or better to claim some of that market for yourself.

"They need to have in mind what and where they will market, and how they will make the operation work," Jobe said. "Questions to answer include: Who are they going to use as a processor? Who is going to be their market? Are they meeting a need that is in the marketplace?"

USDA Rural Development also provides technical assistance for projects in niche marketing. Jobe said this can be direct assistance to groups that want to form value-added ventures, such as organizing a business and steps that need to take

place in creating a venture. This can include a feasibility study, which helps analyze whether or not the idea can be a good business.

Speaker Jeff Kistner, a business development officer for COBANK's commercial agriculture division, said people considering niche marketing need to recognize the difference between a niche, a brand and just trying to fill a void that's in the marketplace.

"Consumers have needs," Kistner said. "Too many times, we think niches are 'we're going to develop our brand'. But when consumers cannot find a product that they want, there are opportunities available for producers to figure out how to satisfy consumers and meet their needs."

Besides networking by attending such meetings as the Pork Checkoff's recent niche conference, Kistner recommended that producers use resources at universities, such as the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center. For more information, call the Pork Checkoff Service Center at 1-800-456-7675. Or go to the new niche marketing area on [www.porkboard.org](http://www.porkboard.org). ✓

"Niche marketing is a great way for a family farm to reach customers directly," says Dale Trebesch. His grandchildren Megan, Samantha and Taylor (left to right) share his love of pigs.

