

FLASH

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A return to the family dining hour experience

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The recession has hit Americans with higher prices and relatively less income.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the consumer price index for food purchases for the past 12 months ending in March 2011 rose 2.9 percent. Likewise, the index for gasoline prices rose 27.5 percent during the same time period. To top things off, the current unemployment rate in the United States is 8.8 percent and 6.1 percent in Oklahoma as of March 2011. According to the IRS, the average taxpayer in the U.S. earned \$33,000 in 2008, slightly less than that in 1988.

“This and other factors have led to an increase in grocery shopping along with a shift in eating habits,” said Chuck Willoughby, manager of business and marketing relations for Oklahoma State University’s Robert M. Kerr Food & Agricultural Products Center.

According to The Power of Meat 2011, a report prepared by the Food Marketing Institute and the American Meat Institute, net grocery spending rose about 2 percent from 2009 to 2010, the first increase in three years.

“Although grocery spending is up, consumers have lowered their overall food bill by eating out less, researching grocery sale ads, seeking

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FAPC Manager of Business and Marketing Relations

coupons, comparing bargains across stores, buying private label brands or by simply eating less,” Willoughby said.

Dr. Elizabeth Sloan of Sloan Trends spoke at the 2011 FAPC Research Symposium, cosponsored by the Oklahoma section of the Institute of Food Technologists. During her keynote presentation, she noted consumers now prepare an entrée dinner at home four or more nights per week. Sloan said 61 percent prepare a frozen entrée, while 36 percent will serve a prepared entrée at least once per week.

Frozen vegetables packaged in steamable bags and home-meal-replacement items like whole roasted chicken from the deli or meat department are positioned well to serve this growing trend, Willoughby said.

Other rapidly growing categories in the supermarket include ready-

to-drink coffee and tea, and healthy snack bars. Additionally, consumers make purchases based on health concerns limiting sodium, sugar or saturated fats. These same consumers are more likely to spend less and control portion size and number of portions consumed.

“This offers great opportunity to food products that are formulated and packaged to meet these growing health concerned consumers,” Willoughby said. “With signs of economic recovery, many consumers say they plan to continue to be frugal in spending their food dollar, but also look for time-saving, convenient products that are nutritious and healthy for their families.”

As food manufacturers continue to listen to consumers’ needs, the FAPC is available to help the food and agricultural industry with technical and market challenges.