

# Door-to-Door Meat Sales

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Most consumers purchase their meat and poultry from retail stores. Some purchase meat and poultry from dealers who knock on their door. Are consumers pleased with door-to-door meat and poultry sales?

*They are if they do their homework.* Consumers must know important information about the dealer and the company before making a decision they might later regret.

In today's rapid pace world, shopping at home can be both convenient and timesaving. And for many senior citizens, stay-at-home parents or shut-ins, it may be the only convenient way to shop. For most shoppers, it can be an enjoyable experience.

The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline helps potential buyers do their homework. Some callers ask the Hotline what tips to look for when buying meat and poultry from a door-to-door salesman. Other consumers call to complain after the purchase has taken place.

"Sometimes, consumers begin to have second thoughts about whether they have made a wise purchase because the quality of the meat or poultry is not what they expected it to be. These are not the delicious cuts of meat touted by the salesman," says Mary Wenberg, technical information specialist on the Meat and Poultry Hotline.

Unfortunately, many unhappy customers have little or no information about the door-to-door sales company, so redress may be difficult or impossible. However, if the customer has received information about the company, in some instances help can be obtained.

## **Inspection and Grading of Meat and Poultry**

Although inspection of meat and poultry is *mandatory*, grading is *voluntary*. All meat and poultry transported and sold in interstate commerce must be inspected by the Federal government. The box or package of meat must bear the plant's inspection number. The Food Safety and Inspection Service carries out USDA's responsibilities under the Federal Inspection Act. These laws protect consumers by assuring that meat and poultry products are wholesome, unadulterated, and properly marked labeled and packaged.

State inspection is mandatory for meat and poultry being transported and sold within a state. The state inspection programs must enforce requirements at least equal to those of Federal inspection laws.

Companies must pay to have USDA grade their meat and poultry products. USDA grades are based on nationally uniform Federal standards of quality and are assigned by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service.

For example, the highest *beef* grades are **Prime**, **Choice** and **Select**. Lower grades—*Standard*, *Commercial*, *Utility*, *Cutter* and *Canner*—are ground or used in processed meat products. The top grades for *lamb* and *veal* are **Prime**, **Choice** and **Good**. *Pork* is not graded. **Grade A** is the top *poultry* grade.

## **Recommendations from the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline**

Before buying meat and poultry in quantity from a door-to-door dealer, become an informed consumer by getting to know important information about the company and dealer. The Hotline recommends these tips to keep in mind.

*Check the dealer.* Ask for literature and take plenty of time to read it. If you lack the time to check into the distribution practices of the company, consider not purchasing from them.

*Ask for a brochure.* Reputable companies will have a local sales office with a published price list that includes the address and phone number of the company. Along with the price list they may offer recipes and nutrition information using their products.

*Check for grading information on the product.* Companies can choose to have the meat and poultry that they sell graded by USDA. This is the only mark of identity you have for knowing the quality familiar to you. If a meat or poultry product is graded by USDA, there must be a USDA grade shield or mark on the carcass, package or product label. Only the official USDA grade can be used as a guide to the quality of the meat.

Meat and poultry companies may label products with a company's private quality label. If a product is labeled with a term such as "restaurant quality," ask the company which USDA grade is comparable.

*Understand the cuts.* Know which cut of meat or poultry you are buying when making a meat or poultry purchase decision. Check the label for proper identification of the cut of meat or poultry you are purchasing. For example, you don't want to pay top dollar for tenderloin and receive a cheaper cut such as a shoulder roast.

*Read the label on the package or carton before you buy. Insist on having the establishment number where the meat or poultry was inspected.* USDA and state inspected products are required to give information about the product on the label. On raw products the species, the cut, the net weight, the ingredients statement and the safe handling statement are required. No ingredient may be added to fresh meat or poultry unless the ingredient is listed on the label. Some companies may offer less tender cuts, or lower grades of meat or poultry for lower prices because the product has been tenderized with a marinade or flavoring agent. Beware of any dealer who wants you to purchase bulk quantities of meat and poultry that are not properly labeled. Always ask the dealer to leave the box or labeling information if individual products are not labeled.

*Ask to see a retail permit.* Remember, in most states salespersons are required to have a state license or permit to sell products door-to-door. Ask to see the salesperson's license to sell.

*Always check to be sure the product has been carried in a refrigerated vehicle.* Never buy meat or poultry products that are carried in an unrefrigerated truck or car trunk. The product may be unsafe because bacteria that cause illness multiply rapidly above 40 degrees.

*If you change your mind.* The Federal Trade Commission Cooling-Off Rule gives you three days to cancel purchases that are made in your home or at a location that is not the permanent place of business or local address of the seller. The Cooling-Off Rule does not cover sales of \$25 or under. Under the rule, *the salesperson must orally inform you of your cancellation rights at the time of sale.* You also must be given two copies of a cancellation form and a copy of your contract or receipt. The contract or receipt should be dated, show the name and address of the seller, and explain your right to cancel. The contract or receipt must be in the same language used in the sales presentation.

*You have three days to cancel your sale.* Also remember that using a charge card does not guarantee a refund. To cancel a sale, sign and date one copy of the cancellation form. Make sure the envelope is postmarked before midnight of the third business day after the contract date. Saturday is considered a business day but Sunday and Federal holidays are not. Because proof of the mailing date and receipt are important, consider sending the cancellation form by certified mail. Keep the other copy of the cancellation form for your records.

*If you have a complaint about the company.* Try to resolve your dispute with the seller first. Make sure you act quickly. Send a letter of complaint. A letter is important because it puts your complaint on record and lets the company know you are serious about pursuing the dispute. Be sure you keep a copy for your records. *In general, beware of claims that are too good to be true. They usually are.*

#### **For Additional Help:**

- Check with your State Department of Agriculture to see if the company is licensed.
- If you encounter "bait and switch" practices, contact your local or state Consumer Protection Office.
- Call your local Better Business Bureau to help you establish if you are doing business with a reputable firm or if complaints have been filed against the firm or individual.
- Call USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline 1 (800) 535-4555; TTY, 1 (800) 256-7072. It is staffed

by home economists, registered dietitians and food technologists from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time year round. An extensive selection of food safety recordings can be heard 24 hours a day using a touch-tone phone. The media may call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at (301) 504-6258.

Information is also available on the Internet from the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service Home Page at <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/>.