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Meat market in Appleton offers taste of days gone by

Meat sold at 60-year-old butcher shop is all-natural; sausage made fresh daily

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In some ways, stepping into Jacobs Meat Market in Appleton is like stepping into the past. Its residential neighborhood location and personal service are straight out of the Eisenhower era.

But spend a few minutes talking to 24-year-old Luke Jacobs, the third-generation Jacobs involved in the store, and you'll discover this popular corner market is well-prepared to do business in the 21st century.

"You have to change with the times," said Luke Jacobs, who returned to Appleton two years ago to join his father, Ed, and aunt, Dolores Hurley, as co-owners of the family business at 544 N. Lawe St.

Since then, Luke has implemented small but significant changes to meet the needs of modern customers.

First, he convinced his dad to accept credit cards. Although Ed was wary of fees, he agreed to try it. "Someone will ask if we take credit cards, and when I say yes, they say, 'okay, throw in an extra steak.'" Luke said. "I know that that's helped us a lot."

Next, Luke overcame Ed's reluctance to have a Web site. Ed said, "I told him people don't go to a



Luke Jacobs and his father Ed are shown with a selection of their sausage, prior to it going into the smoker. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

Web site to find out about a grocery store."

Luke decided to try it anyway. He built the site, www.jacobsmeatmarket.com, himself. "I update the specials every week," he said.

"People walk in with it printed out."

The Web site's guest book has been signed from as far away as Texas and Georgia.

A recent remodeling project replaced the

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— Luke Jacobs,
Jacobs Meat Market, Appleton

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market's old meat cases with newer, more energy-efficient models. "It was either that, or raise our prices," Luke said.

Ed Jacobs good-naturedly accepts that his son's ideas sometimes differ from his own. "I'll let Luke do almost anything he wants, but if I don't think it will work, I'll tell him," he said. "He's right about 95 percent of the time. There have been times I've put my foot down, though. I mean, I've been here 40 years, I know some things," he said with a laugh.

Luke realizes that despite recently-added modern conveniences, the core success of Jacobs Meat Market comes from providing the high-quality products and one-on-one service his

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grandfather began 60 years ago.

"Where can you go to a big grocery store and have someone wait on you, whether you want two hot dogs or 20?" he said. "And you know it's made right here."

Luke likes to answer questions from customers, especially young people who may not have been in a butcher shop before. "I encourage them to ask questions. Then they'll feel more comfortable and hopefully come in more," he said.

"It's a neat place," said customer Stefanie Holt of Appleton. "They're really helpful and knowledgeable."

The meat counter offers beef, lamb, poultry, and pork, including pigs for pig roasts. Prices are posted behind the counter on an old-fashioned letter board.

Two sausage-makers start at 3:30 a.m. daily, so customers can buy fresh sausage each morning. "The wieners are by far the most popular. The bologna is very popular, and the Italian sausage and the brats," Luke said.

"A lot of people don't know about our home-smoked bacon," he added, which is made in two smokehouses behind the store.

Luke is frustrated by the misconception that small markets are more expensive than large grocery stores. "I've shopped the competition and our prices are very comparable," he said. "Plus, all our meat is all-natural. There are no hormones and it's not injected with a salt solution to add weight."

While Luke estimates about 80 percent of his business comes from meat, the market also carries produce, dairy, and dry goods.

"We have people coming in every morning for eggs and milk," he said. The market also sells its own salad dressing, and recently began selling homemade potato salad.

Growing up, all seven Jacobs siblings — five daughters and two sons — worked the market's cash register, but only Luke expressed interest in running the store someday.

Partway through a business degree at UW-Eau Claire, he decided to return to the market. "I know that school has helped me, but I think the best training for this is on-the-job training with my dad," he said.

The day Ed found out about Luke's decision, "I was elated," he said. "He wrote me a letter telling me. It was one of those days when everything was going wrong. But then when I read the letter, I was on cloud nine!"

"My mom tried to talk me out of it," Luke said. "She knows the ups and downs. But I have a love for waiting on customers and being around people," he said. "I'm happy coming to work every day, and not everyone can say that."

Ed couldn't be happier with his son's career choice. "He's got that smile, and customers love him. We could've built a new store and it wouldn't have had the impact Luke has," he said proudly.

The market is planning a 60th birthday celebration in October. "Not a lot of people can say they've been in business that long, so we want to celebrate," Luke said.

Luke acknowledges his family's market is a rare breed. He takes comfort in a recent article he saw in a Milwaukee newspaper. "It said small-town meat markets are coming back. I hope that's true, and that it's a trend that lasts a long time," he said, flashing a smile.