

# Perdue Proves His Chickens

SALISBURY, Md. (AP) — Although he has drawn occasional squawks from housewives for his plucky mode of advertising, Frank Perdue accumulated millions by putting chickens on a human level.

"My chickens eat better than you do," he boasted in the first of some 50 television commercials that have made him into a sort of celebrity chicken man.

He has since beeseed customers to buy his "Well-turned legs" and recently began a new campaign in four northeastern cities — Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Providence, R.I. 8 selling breast gauges so shoppers can judge for themselves his claim that his chickens are among the biggest breasted on the market.

The 54-year-old president of the family-owned Perdue Inc. concedes that "very occasionally" the ad campaigns have prompted critical letters from housewives but mostly, he believes, they appeal to the American sense of humor.

In any event, Perdue may be the only man in the chicken processing business who gets regular requests for autographed photographs. He also has appeared on a number of talk shows and says people often recognize him when he stops in butcher shops in New York and other key market cities.

For this, Perdue readily credits his New York advertising firm, Scali, McCabe and Sloves Inc., which started the campaign in 1971 to get the market customer conscious of the company's brand name instead of aiming indirectly at grocers and butchers.

The campaign, built around the theme, "it takes a tough man to make a tender chicken," cost Perdue an estimated \$550,000 in its initial year. These days, he isn't saying what it costs, expect to confirm that it is "well into six figures."

Like others on the Delmarva Peninsula, a three-state area

that includes Delaware and sections of Maryland and Virginia, Perdue's prime market lies in the northeastern corridor states where Perdue aimed at eight states from Rhode Island south to Pennsylvania with lesser emphasis in Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey and the single mid-western state, Ohio.

Although he comes off as low-keyed and countryfied in his ads, Perdue, a balding man with a slightly nasal voice, leaves his image up to those who are paid to create it.

"They are the writers and I'm just the yo-yo," says Perdue, who admits to offering some ideas for the messages but otherwise only insists the agency spend time studying his chicken business before proposing a campaign.

So far, the unusual ads, coupled with Perdue's claim to selling a "superior chicken," which he supports with a mon-

ey-back guarantee, has paid off healthy dividends.

His customers are paying an average of 5 cents to 10 cents more per pound for Grade A Perdue chickens than they would for other brands and have helped the company move from annual sales of about \$63 million in 1971, when the current ad campaign began, to \$140 million last year, Perdue said.

Despite the fact that broiler producers across the nation have been averaging monthly losses since January, Perdue claims his business has not been forced to cutback production and he's continuing plans to expand his operation by one-third next year by opening a new processing plant and feed mill near Oshoskie, N.C.

The business itself is no simple chicken factory. In the vernacular of the trade, Perdue is known as an integrated broiler producer. The firm's operations encompass everything from breeding birds and hatch-

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ing eggs to grain storage for feed and chicken processing plants.

With a weekly average of 1.6 million processed birds, Perdue is far from the largest of the highly sophisticated industries in the trade. The National Broiler Council ranks it, by unofficial records, only among the top 15 largest.

Like other major poultry processors, Perdue maintains a hefty staff of geneticists, veterinarians, quality control supervisors and nutritionist to oversee the production of chickens and continue research in development of better methods and birds.

To him, the chicken business is no laughing matter.

"Thoroughness is next to godliness in business," says Perdue in what seems destined to become a line in some future ad.

In the thoroughness department, Perdue has apparently rankled some people in the industry with his zealous atten-

tion to selling a yellow bird.

"We are dedicated to having the yellowest bird on the market . . . the yellower, the better," says nutritionist Willie Payne, who runs a weekly computer test to determine the most economical and efficient feed mixture for chickens according to prevailing ingredient

prices each week.

Payne also makes certain that Perdue chickens get plenty of xanthophyll in their feed which reacts to give chickens a yellow skin. Along with normal ingredients such as corn, which contains xanthophyll, the company includes marigold petals in its feed to help the yellow process along.

In addition, Perdue's lab analyzes up to 130,000 blood samples annually to make certain chickens are maintaining their proper level of xanthophyll and its geneticists have been working for four years in research that is gradually developing a synthetic strain of bird that naturally

starts off more yellow than others.

Perdue admits that part of his emphasis on coloring is simply to meet what is viewed as the desires of shoppers in the northeastern market area who have for years equated yellow chickens with quality. But he also claims that yellow color is insurance of a healthy chick.

That claim isn't entirely supported by USDA officials at the nearby poultry experimental station in Georgetown, Del., who say consumer preference in many areas of the country is for white skinned birds and the only time color could be an indication of health would be if a

pale bird showed up in a flock of otherwise yellow chickens.

Others contend that Perdue's yellow chicken campaign has generally hurt other processors on the Delmarva Peninsula, who also specialize in the premium yellow chicken market, by overselling the Northeastern states. Poultry economist W. T. McCallister of the Delaware Extension Service agrees that the premium market for the area has been slipping in recent years but says the trend is tied to complex factors and is only partially a reaction to Perdue's expensive production and Madison Avenue sales techniques.

In addition to his emphasis

on color, Perdue has researchers working in other fields and claims his quality control standards are among the best in the nation.

It was his geneticists work over the past four years, for instance, that led Perdue to the broader breasted chicken campaign.

Norman Lupean, who heads the company's two-man genetics team, says he has increased the average eatable breast meat by one-half of one per cent since the program started, and hopes to increase the overall meat by 1 per cent to 2 per cent in the next few years.

On the basis of a company-

contracted survey by a New York laboratory, Perdue now claims to produce a chicken

with .7 per cent more breast meat than its nearest competitor.