

# Getting Religion

## —For Your Products, That Is

Kosher or halal certification may be a necessity for a specific target market or a marketing means to increase sales. In either case, knowledge of the requirements for kosher or halal certification is necessary.

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**W**hen My Own Meals, Inc. was established in 1986, we did not have religious supervision. We just wanted to bring great-tasting, top-quality, nutritious, refrigeration-free, shelf-stable meals to the market. Later, we added kosher certification and then halal certification. Making the changes was an adventure. Here's what we learned.

### Myths About Religious Supervision

Let's begin by dispelling some myths about religious supervision:

- Some believe that a producer pays a rabbinic supervisor or Muslim inspector a fee to bless the plant and then go home. In reality, it isn't that easy. The word kosher means "fit" or "proper." Halal means "lawful" or "permitted." There are religious procedures and practices involved in both, not just a blessing. In fact, in most cases, no blessing is involved.

- Some believe that kosher and halal refer to religion. Instead, kosher and halal actually relate more to products and practices acceptable to each ethnic group. Following kosher or halal rules according to books or previous job experiences does not mean that a producer can label the product as either kosher or halal, although many companies do this. This is particularly true with exports, where the item may only be stickered. Those companies will likely be forced out of the competition when one of its competitors whose products are truly certified discloses what is being done.

Food items have to be "certified" as either kosher or halal by a trained and reputable organization. Certification means production according to specific rules and cultural practices. There are laws in some states enforcing kosher labeling laws, and there are consumer self-policing groups—these include magazines such as *Kashrus* and Internet sites such as [www.kashrut.com](http://www.kashrut.com). The Islamic community is now working toward similar legislation and watchdog groups; the first such bill was just passed in New Jersey.

- Some say rabbinic supervisors and Islamic inspectors should be doing the work for the higher

good, not for the money. However, they have the right to earn money for the work they have been trained to do. After all, it is their certification that you will be using to market your products. Actually, they are doing the work demanded of your target consumers. You profit from sales to your target consumers, who support these supervisors and pay their fees by buying your supervised food items. Your targeted consumers rely on and trust trained religious supervisors to certify that the food they buy and consume meet these standards. The target consumers are actually paying for this religious supervision, not you. They pay a premium for food to assure themselves that the food meets their needs.

- Many believe that every rabbinic or Islamic organization should accept every other rabbinic or Islamic certifier's work. Yet, like brand acceptance, a certifying agency's reputation is earned, not a birthright. Just because an ingredient is kosher or halal certified by someone else, your religious organization may not choose to rely on that certifying agency. You are paying your religious organization to certify your products as meeting certain standards, including all ingredients. Consumers trust your religious organization based on its reputation, consistency in standards, and reliability. One organization may be perfect for one type of product, but totally unacceptable for many other products. This is a complicated situation, and the religious supervisors need some room to operate to your benefit.

- Many ask why there is a difference in consumer acceptance and fees charged for each certifying organization if they all are certifying to the same set of religious rules. The answer is not in the rules but in the consumer's mind. Consumers rely on the reputations of certain named rabbis, Muslims, or organizations to meet their similar interpretations of the religious rules. Rules are interpreted, and consumers research which organizations have interpretations of the rules similar to their own. It is this allowance for interpretation which confuses many marketers. There is not always a right or a wrong way to do things. Instead, there might be a "what do the people relying on our reputation expect us to accept?" A product is

*My Own Meal* brand products bear certification that they are kosher, and *J&M* brand products bear certification that they are halal. Some *My Own Meal* products also bear certification



The Double-O KS symbol indicates that the product meets the kosher standards of the Organization of Orthodox Kashruth Supervision (Rabbis A. and M. Soloveichik)



The Crescent M symbol indicates that the product meets the halal standards of the Islamic Food & Nutrition Council of America

that they are both kosher and halal. The shelf-stable products are packaged in retort pouches or trays

kosher or halal only to the extent that consumers accept the reputation of the religious supervisors and organizations.

Marketing enters into the decision process of selecting a religious organization and fee structure. Marketers must identify the target consumer group and its expectations before choosing a religious organization. Whom you choose depends on whether you are selling to kosher consumers requiring strict interpretation of the kosher laws, or mainly to the general market which perceives kosher as better quality. It also depends on the complexity of your operations and whether you will be running kosher or halal all the time or just as special runs.

• Most kosher producers believe that Muslims accept kosher as meeting halal standards and requirements. Religiously, Muslims do not accept kosher certification as a substitute for halal certification. While some countries did make allowances in the past, this is quickly changing. Until now, many Muslims accepted kosher because they believed the slaughter was similar to their requirements and because the animals at least received a blessing at the time of slaughter. They are now learning that this is not true and are less accepting of kosher as a halal substitute. And commercially available halal products were virtually non-

existent in the U.S. except for imported products and locally butchered meat. Internationally, only proper halal certification is acceptable, and monitoring agencies are being established. This international attitude is moving into the U.S. market.

• Some consumers think a kosher label means that no hormones or antibiotics were used on the animals. This may not be true.

• Some producers thought that to be halal, they only had to follow a book of procedures. Companies following this policy will be in for some big marketing problems. Let's correct some rumors of what is allowed to be considered halal:

1. A Muslim inspector cannot say a blessing on a truck as it passes his house on its way from the slaughterhouse to qualify the resultant meat as halal acceptable.

2. Inspectors cannot say a blessing only at the start of the slaughtering process. It must be said throughout the process on each animal as it is slaughtered.

3. A Muslim cannot say a blessing after all slaughtering is completed to cover all the animals slaughtered that day.

4. Inspectors cannot use recordings of blessings to substitute for the devotion of an observant Muslim.

5. Producers cannot accept the word of the slaughterhouse that humane methods were used and the meat therefore should be considered halal.

6. Producers cannot accept that a product labeled as halal is indeed produced as halal. It must be certified or accepted by a certifying organization.

7. Producers can never label a meat product as halal if there is no on-site Muslim participation. This is where the U.S. has lost competitively in the international market.

8. Producers cannot simultaneously process any pork or pork-derived product while producing halal-labeled meat.

9. Producers cannot process any pork or pork-derived product immediately prior to the processing of any halal-labeled product without a full, comprehensive, and detailed cleaning.

## Kosher Requirements

There are five major classes of kosher labels:

• **Kosher** indicates that any meat item contains only products from kosher animals, e.g., beef, lamb, and goat, slaughtered according to specific requirements. *Glatt kosher* means that all the lungs of every animal (excluding fowl and poultry) were inspected and found to be virtually free of adhesions, which are indications of previous disease. It indicates a healthy animal. If there are too many adhesions, then the meat is

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pulled off the line and packed and sold as non-kosher, or under some circumstances, as non-glatt kosher. Poultry is sometimes marketed as glatt even though every bird is not similarly inspected.

Kosher slaughter of meat, fowl, and poultry is considered a complicated business. Every animal and bird is slaughtered by hand, not machine. The slaughterman (*shochet*) must be trained and experienced in the slaughtering process, strong, and not faint of heart. There are strict rules about the sharpness of the knife, which is periodically inspected by a trained supervisor. Heat makes feathers easier to remove but cannot be added to the kosher process, as is usually done in non-kosher production. Animals cannot be stunned, as is also usually done in non-kosher production. Blood vessels, nerves, and some fats are removed (*traibering*). Then to remove the blood quickly, the meat is soaked and salted within 72 hours of slaughter.

Certain rules in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) have been interpreted to mean that kosher consumers are not supposed to eat milk and meat together. In addition, there are various customs as to how much time must pass between eating a dairy product and a meat product. Generally, kosher consumers can eat milk products before meat meals, since dairy is digested more quickly than meat. The waiting period is anywhere from minutes to an hour.

However, the wait is more restrictive and longer (up to six hours) if meat is consumed first. *Pareve* items (see below) may be consumed at the same time as either dairy or meat. And only *Kosher for Passover* items (also see below) may be consumed during the eight days of Passover.

- **Kosher-Pareve** means that there are no milk or meat ingredients used. Pareve means “neutral.” It includes items such as kosher fish, eggs, grains, honey, and all plant materials. Vegetarians who will not eat fish or eggs need to watch the ingredients panels for these two ingredients, since the kosher market considers eggs and fish as “neutral.” However, the pareve label can simplify their search for qualifying products.

- **Kosher-Dairy** means that some milk product or milk by-product is included in the item. For example, non-

dairy creamer is labeled with a kosher symbol followed by a “D,” since an ingredient such as sodium caseinate may be in the product. Milk chocolate is always dairy. Most margarine is dairy, although pareve margarines are available.

- **Kosher-Dairy Equipment** means that while there are no meat or milk ingredients in the product, it was produced on a piece of equipment that previously ran dairy and the machinery was not “kashered”—cleaned and left idle for 24 hours. (This is similar to many products labeled today as “May contain peanuts,” even though peanuts are not listed in the ingredient panel. Consumers with allergies want to know if the product was produced in a plant that processes peanuts or if it was produced on equipment which previously produced peanuts.)

- **Kosher for Passover** means that the product meets even more detailed rules. Passover products can be consumed during the eight days of this religious holiday, when regularly labeled kosher products are not considered adequate. Passover products do not contain *chometz* ingredients—wheat (except that used for matzoh), barley, rye, oats, spelt or any flours, oils, alcohols, or other by-products of these ingredients. Making bread is not allowed for this period of time. Only specifically prepared unleavened bread, matzoh—made according to very strict rules to assure that it remains unleavened—is allowed. Most Jews also prohibit the consumption of *kitniyos*—rice, beans, peas, lentils, buckwheat, mustard, corn, peanuts, soy, and all by-products of these ingredients.

Additional discussion of kosher requirements can be found in Regenstein and Regenstein (1979, 1988, 1990).

### Kosher Certification

“Kosher certified” means that a religiously observant individual trained in religious law and production methods has determined that the food was processed in accordance with the expected religious standards. Various organizations use specific symbols or logos (*hechshers*) to indicate that the product has been certified as kosher. A product not bearing a kosher symbol may still be kosher, but without the certification symbol there is no way to communicate its kosher status or reliability to consumers.

Certain products require a rabbi on-site for all aspects of production. This means from the time the doors are

opened in the morning, through the plant cleaning, the plant *kashering* (boiling or steaming of all equipment between kosher and non-kosher production and between types of kosher production, e.g., dairy and meat), production, packaging of all finished products, to closing of the plant overnight.

Other products only require periodic on-site supervision. These include producers making the same products day after day, using the exact same production methods and ingredients. Examples include the milling of flour and the manufacture of pastas. When these types of products are always run as kosher, the plant is always kosher. In this case, the rabbinic supervisor reviews and approves all ingredients and suppliers used, establishes production standards with the plant, and then only monitors the production through frequent visits, both announced and surprise. If the plant runs both kosher and non-kosher products, or runs any combination of dairy, pareve, or meat items, then more rabbinic work and supervision are required.

Kosher production and certification is a business based on religious principles. It is similar to the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture’s supervision of the production of meat producers. At some plants, USDA inspectors are there every minute; in other plants, they come and go. Just as USDA certifies that its standards are met, as interpreted by the local inspector, so do the rabbis certify that production meets kosher laws as interpreted by the certifying organization and the local rabbinic supervisor.

Companies and individuals have been sued for falsely labeling, selling, and distributing a product as kosher certified when it was not certified. Kosher agencies successfully sue or force recalls at companies that falsely use the agencies’ kosher symbol on packaging. There are even laws which prohibit the use of the word “kosher” on a product which has not been properly certified as such. The lawsuits against the companies are virtually always won. Even the use of “kosher-style” is restricted, including by federal law (21 CFR 101.29).

A U.S. District court in New Jersey ruled that rabbis who speak out publicly on religious matters cannot be sued in civil court. Many consider this ruling to support the rights and responsibilities of religious leaders to publicly disclose certifying organizations or facilities that

do not meet their standards.

In business, there are quality products and there are “knock-off” copies. The same occurs with regard to certification. Just as a product trademark (brand name) tells the consumer the quality to expect, the certification symbol tells the consumer what to expect regarding the kosher (or halal) status of a product. The reputation behind the symbol or mark is valuable and guarded in both situations.

So it is the reputation and notoriety of the rabbinical organization that the kosher consumer relies on. A rabbi’s reputation comes from his family history, his own accomplishments, and his actions. Sometimes a rabbinic organization’s certification is rejected only because the chief rabbi of the organization does something in his personal life which is not approved by the community. It may have nothing at all to do with his production knowledge. Rabbis are expected to be better than average. His reputation is as good as he keeps it and is not a right of either birth, education, or experience.

### Halal Requirements

The *Qur’an*, the Muslim holy book, defines *halal* as foods “lawful” to consume. In contrast, *haram* refers to forbidden foods and ingredients, particularly pork, alcohol, and all by-products or derivatives of these. Meat from improperly slaughtered animals or from road-kill is also forbidden.

Halal is a growing international trade issue, primarily because there are about one billion Muslims in the world market, with only about 5–6 million in the U.S. In the past, the food in most international halal markets was always produced locally, so its acceptable halal status was assumed. Only as imports of prepared foods and meat products from other countries increase does halal certification become a growing issue, and the reliance on acceptable certifying organizations becomes increasingly more important. This affects all U.S. exporters, since these importing-country customers become more aware of unacceptable halal standards and take action.

Some Muslims in the U.S. accepted kosher products as meeting their religious requirements. Others read ingredients panels and decided for themselves. So, when we first entered the religious meals market, we thought we could convince the Muslims to accept kosher instead of going through the expense and effort of two separate production runs. However, it is not true that Muslims in general will accept kosher, especially if meat or meat by-product ingredients are involved. We learned

that we had to both produce and market our meals separately. We decided to set up a division of our company, called J&M Co., to produce and market *J&M* halal meat products, keeping *My Own Meal* brand as kosher.

When we first started halal production, there were few trained and qualified Muslim inspectors. During the past 10 years or so, trained inspectors have increased in availability, so the trend has changed toward more certification. Standards which previously were lax are now becoming more stringent. Yet, until recently, there was very little policing of the market by the Muslim community. This created relatively low barriers to entry and led to the spiraling of unreported mislabeling. Companies labeled products halal, whether they were certified as halal or not. Some companies still do this, but they are being exposed more and more, which will negatively affect violators’ ability to sell in the U.S. and abroad. The Internet has afforded the Muslim community a bulletin board “announcement” system to reach Muslims all over the world to report companies which have questionable standards. In addition to many halal specialty stores, some Internet food stores have started up. In the prison system, more and more lawsuits are being won by Muslims to get halal instead of kosher foods. Hospitals are starting to buy halal meals in addition to kosher.

Many U.S. food companies are in the process of establishing standards and revising formulations for future halal certification, and halal certifying agencies are getting more and more inspectors across the U.S. In some states, labeling regulations are being proposed to bring halal status to the level of kosher status when it comes to mislabeling. Companies that are not properly certifying their products are running an increased risk of exposure. Once exposed, they could be blacklisted in the U.S. and by countries to which they export, losing substantial business.

The book *Halal Industrial Production Standards* (Jackson et al., 1997) described the processes for various products and discussed many of the problematic practices of prior years. The book was published by My Own Meals, Inc. and the Islamic Food & Nutrition Council of America to help food processors understand halal standards and how to comply with them (Mermelstein, 1997). The following are key halal issues:

- **Meat and Milk.** Unlike kosher, there is no issue of keeping meat and milk ingredients segregated.
- **Meat and Poultry Products.** Like Jews, Muslims consume meat products; they are not vegetarians as a group. However,

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meat, poultry, and their derivatives require specific *dhabiha halal* certification. *Dhabiha* (or *zhabiha*) *halal* means slaughtered by a follower of Islam. Various groups have differing views of what this means. As noted above, there were few trained inspectors in the past, so practices in the U.S. were often out of control. For example, U.S. poultry producers were blacklisted by Kuwait for a time for improper practices. During this time, there were Muslims who would tell companies how to slaughter and often failed to personally show up at the producer. Many would send audiotapes of prayers to the producer to play during processing—all for a fee. It was easy for the producers, so they went along with it. Unfortunately, some of these “illegal” practices continue today, making certification by a reputable certifying organization even more critical. And now the Muslim community is publicly exposing such inspectors, to the detriment of these producers.

Today, meat is slaughtered by trained Muslim slaughtermen under the standards, practices, and inspection of a trusted Islamic organization. Poultry is usually mechanically slaughtered with on-site supervision, control, and prayers of a trained Islamic slaughterman, who will hand-slaughter only those poultry which missed the mechanical knife. The theory is that the machine has no conscience and therefore cannot believe or have improper thoughts. The new trend in many international communities (particularly in Indonesia and Southeast Asia) is for all birds to be hand-slaughtered, just like the Jews require.

As a cautionary note, there are some slaughterhouses which are owned and operated by Muslims who do all their own slaughter without any outside inspection by an independent certifying organization. This could cause questions and problems later, especially competitively, if no independent reputable organization has oversight. This is true for both kosher and halal.

• **“Hidden” Meat By-Products and Alcohol Derivatives.** This is one area where kosher certification conflicts with the Muslim community. For example, although certain gelatins may be consid-

ered kosher, they may not be halal acceptable unless they come from halal-slaughtered animals. Also, kosher cheeses may not be halal acceptable unless microbial enzymes are used. Alcohol and alcohol-based flavors or ingredients are absolutely forbidden for halal consumers, even though they may be kosher certified and acceptable to kosher consumers.

### Halal Certification

Halal production is generally much easier to do than kosher production. Yet, its requirements should not be viewed lightly or glossed over.

Like kosher, there are generally two levels of inspection. In a facility which makes the same products day after day using the same ingredients, inspection is in the form of approving ingredients used and suppliers of ingredients, and establishing production and quality procedures to assure that the production qualifies as halal. Then on a periodic basis, the certifying organization can send in inspectors on both an announced and surprise basis to “audit.” In some cases, kosher certification is relied on in lieu of on-site inspectors, but the ingredients must be halal approved.

In a facility where many differing products are produced, inspection is more involved. The producer must have an on-site Muslim inspector for a special halal-certified production run. Whenever meat products are produced, inspection and cleaning are also more involved.

Generally, before starting halal production, a Muslim inspector checks to see that all non-halal-approved ingredients are removed from the production area, and that the equipment and the surrounding area are clean. The inspector uses observation and touch to make this determination. Anything not clean must first be cleaned and approved before commencing production. This is not as involved a process as kashering—there is no 24-hour rest period—and it is easier to “fix” violations through immediate, on-site cleanings.

Ingredients and suppliers must be approved by a trained inspector and the certifying organization. Some ingredients may contain questionable sub-ingredients. For example, binders and emulsifiers such as polysorbates or sodium stearates may be derived from or contain ingredients of animal origin. Flavors may use an alcohol base. Gelatin may be derived from pork or other

animal by-products (gelatin from fish is acceptable). The presence of questionable sub-ingredients may require on-site certification of the main ingredient. If haram (forbidden) ingredients, such as alcohol, pork, non-halal meat, or related by-products, are not used, an inspector may rely on kosher certification. Note that whether kosher is relied on or halal inspection of the ingredient is performed, ingredient certification is required by a trained and reputable organization before being authorized for use in halal production.

Like kosher production, agreed-on production procedures are established between the Muslim organization and the producer. These procedures may include incoming ingredient segregation and inspection, cleaning systems, record keeping, lot coding, packaging control, etc. Often, these are standard operating procedures which may have been modified for specific halal concerns. In some cases, it may be a modification to the kosher standards. The certifying organization will then determine how much on-site inspection is needed, given the circumstances. As more trained inspectors become available and as more consumers demand that food companies have proper halal certification, there will be more inspectors spending more time in production.

### Working with Religious Inspectors

Religious supervisors and inspectors are just like other business people with power. How you establish your initial means of operating, payment system, and expectations is very important. You may be required to change them over time, but at least you will start out on solid ground. Admittedly, this may take a lot more diplomatic effort if you are using a religious organization which is used to one way—its way—of operating.

• **Learn.** Many producers unwittingly empower these supervisors by not taking the time to learn the rules themselves. These certifying organizations work for you, too. Ask questions. Read. Learn. Such knowledge can help build cooperation. However, don't presume you know enough to try to produce without your supervisors.

• **Create a Team Atmosphere.** As in all businesses, it is important to create a team atmosphere. We tell our on-site supervisors that their job is to “help get the product produced.” Some producers instead think, “He's only trying to find out

what we do wrong.” Just don’t do it wrong. Do it right from the start with him on your side. Mistakes will happen. How you manage mistakes and fixes is important. Make the supervisor part of the production process to avoid problems, not just part of the solution to a problem gone bad.

- **Build Contingencies into Planning.** Have a backup contingency plan in case the inspector cannot or does not show up. Don’t open a properly sealed delivery without religious supervision. If the religious seal is broken before the supervisor arrives, the product cannot be used for kosher production and in some cases for halal production. During production, if you need a piece of stored equipment or utensils that were not kashered, talk with the supervisor to see if and how it can be kashered for use.

- **Train Your Production Staff.** Include participation by religious supervisors to help keep mistakes low. Don’t try to hide problems—fix them with your on-site supervisors and religious organization, or live with the cost.

- **Determine the Required Level of Certification.** First decide whether the plant will remain kosher or halal all the time, or only for specific kosher/halal runs.

To remain kosher/halal all the time means that all products in and out of the plant must always be kosher/halal. There is an exception for production errors where the religious status has been compromised, such as items destined for off-spec salvage collection. Another exception is for nonqualifying by-products. For example, in the U.S. the hind end of a steer is usually sold as non-kosher since it is impractical and costly to meet the religious requirements to qualify it as kosher (namely, remove the sciatic nerve), and there is a profitable and ready non-kosher market in which to sell it.

- **Determine Whether the Production Is Complicated or Simple.** Simple products are those involving repetitive and simple production. Examples include a frozen vegetable plant, a canned vegetable plant, a spice blending plant, a bean or rice processor, a macaroni plant, etc. In all of these cases, the product is made of the same raw materials from pre-approved suppliers and sources. The same products are produced every day. In simple production plants, constant, on-site religious supervision is not required to assure certification. Instead, the plant must be accessible to religious supervisors dropping in unannounced for surprise inspections. Ingredients and documents of sources must be available for a religious “audit.” But unless the operations, suppliers, or processes are dramatically changed, little on-site supervision is required.

For example, a simple production plant, such as one used for candy production, will remain kosher or halal unless something compromises the production. Only candy which is certified may carry the supervising organization’s symbol on the package. If the candy company also co-packs the same candy for another customer which does not require religious certification, the candy produced will still be halal or kosher but cannot be labeled or marketed as halal or kosher, since it is not certified. In addition, if some of the kosher candy produced has a dairy ingredient, such as milk in caramels, all the candy produced in the plant must be labeled as kosher–dairy (or kosher–dairy equipment), even though not all of varieties contain a dairy ingredient. Unless the plant is re-kashered after running dairy products, all kosher end products must be labeled as kosher–dairy. If that plant wants to also certify its products as halal, glycerin, gelatin, and flavorings may not be allowed by the Muslim organization. These are questionable ingredients, as discussed above, since they may be of animal origin or have an alcohol base.

In contrast, for complicated production, on-site religious supervision and control are required throughout all stages of production. This includes from raw material ordering, through production and cooking, to final packaging. Examples of complicated production include producing frozen dinners, producing refrigeration-free meals, slaughtering, producing Passover items, preparing processed meats, cooking products in a plant which also runs non-religious products at other times, kashering of anything, including the boilers, etc.

In complicated production environments, there are many differences between halal and kosher practices, starting with ingredients. Unlike the kosher market, halal producers still have a very limited supplier network for many ingredients.

For kosher production, a rabbi “lives” with the production and even must sign off on the ordering and receipt of packaging materials and labels carrying their symbols. For halal certification, the level of inspection varies. Little on-site Muslim inspection is required in a halal-approved plant operating with halal-approved production procedures and ingredients. However, whenever slaughter is involved, a Muslim must be on-site to perform the blessings on every animal slaughtered to qualify as halal. In a plant which runs both halal and non-halal products, the Muslim inspector must be there to inspect and approve all ingredients. The inspector’s job is to assure that only halal items are used; determine if any ingredients contain

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any meat or alcohol-based ingredients or by-products; ascertain the cleanliness of all equipment to be used; inspect all packaging to be used; require an accounting of all packaging used and remaining after production; and perform a special and intense cleaning, if pork products were ever processed on the equipment to be used in production. After that, the Muslim inspector will leave and drop by periodically during scheduled production, but may not have to remain there at all times.

### Marketing Considerations

Marketing decisions require a clear definition of the goal, target consumers, and products. They also involve differing religious requirements.

One approach is to add kosher or halal certification production standards to an existing product line. Then, the marketers will continue to mass-market the products as if there were no religious certification. In this case, the added religious certification is done as a product differentiation strategy or to keep up with the competition. These items are found in general product categories within grocery stores, side-by-side with non-certified,

competitor products, and is the largest market-segment alternative. For the mass-market consumer appeal, it is more important to have a religious symbol on the package than which symbol it is.

A second approach is to introduce a product which is strictly marketed as a religiously acceptable food item. In this case, it is not mass marketed, but rather targeted to specific consumers. It has a much smaller consumer base, making it a niche product. Barriers to entry are high. Examples include frozen kosher or halal airline dinners, shelf-stable meals for institutional use, gefilte fish, and matzoh. These items are usually found in a specialty or ethnic section of grocery store shelves, freezers, or refrigerators. They may also be demanded by institutions for specific religious customers.

These specialty products are much more subject to scrutiny and criticism within the community they serve. Choices made about production practices, suppliers, and religious supervisory organizations could dramatically affect their success. If the brand and products are good, they will command a very strong and loyal following.

For example, My Own Meals, Inc. and J&M Co. met the small, niche demand of the U.S. military for strict religious meals by creating the first commercial ration in the U.S. Military's history and by-passing military logistics sys-

tems to deliver its rations directly to the field (see sidebar below).

A third approach is to take a general product and market it heavily to the kosher or halal consumer. In this case, a popular branded item may add kosher or halal certification so that it is also acceptable to the religiously observant consumer. Here, the choice of the certifying agency is critical to success, so that the target consumers accept the product. Barriers to entry are slightly higher than the first approach, but substantially less than the second. Examples of such products include General Mills cereals, Maxwell House coffee, and various Kraft products.

Kosher or halal certification may be a necessity for a specific target market or a marketing means to increase sales. Critical to success is selecting the right certifying agency to team up with production and marketing staff, while meeting customer and consumer expectations. The emergence of proper halal certification for successful and continued international trade opens new marketing opportunities. In today's competitive environment, doing it right in the introduction stage is most important, because an unforgiving market may not allow a second chance.

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*Additional information about kosher and halal is available via the Internet at [www.myownmeals.com](http://www.myownmeals.com) and [www.halalcertified.com](http://www.halalcertified.com).*

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## Feeding the Religious Military

Ever wonder what it would be like to convince the U.S. Military to approve a new product which wasn't necessarily wanted, did not meet production standards unique to the military, was produced outside of the military-industrial network, and was distributed directly to soldiers outside the military logistics system?

The successful introduction of the kosher and halal ration program is proof that sometimes the impossible is possible, using guerrilla marketing with a touch of tenacity. My Own Meals, Inc. started the process in early 1991, and received its first contract in June 1996. The company remains the only supplier of this small niche product.

To get there took the joint effort and strong united support of religious groups and leaders, business leaders, certifying agencies, military chaplains, and Congress and a timely new law which eventually became Acquisition Reform Regulations. It took presentations to the Secretary of Defense and meetings at the Pentagon and the Defense Logistic Agency. Contracting activities, Congress, and military leaders all had to be convinced to support the effort. In the end, seven military agencies met at the Pentagon, all agreeing to the program and for the first time opening up competition to include commercial suppliers.

It is a demand-driven contract, with no commitment to purchase any rations. If rations are required, they must be delivered within days to arrive anywhere in the world. Order sizes can be as small as one case of a variety of 12 meals. There is no commitment of quantities required in a year, nor any forecast of how many will be kosher or how many will be halal. There are 10 varieties of kosher meals and 10 of halal. Six meals in each case are meat meals, and the others are vegetarian.

In the past year, the military bought almost 40 million individual non-religious rations in 28 varieties under fixed-delivery schedules—compared to a combined total of only about 132,000 kosher and halal rations. However, now our all-volunteer military can boast that soldiers have the right and the ability to get meals which meet their religious needs.