

Orientation to School Nutrition Management

Customer Service, Merchandising, and Food Presentation

Participant's Workbook

Time: 1 ¼ hours



Key Area 2: Operations
Learning Code: 2200

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Institute of Child Nutrition

The University of Mississippi

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Introduction

The school nutrition staff may think that customer service, food quality, and how food is presented to students do not influence student participation. After all, the school nutrition program provides meals at a reasonable price that meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, jointly issued and updated every 5 years by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). In addition, school meals are offered at convenient times, served in a facility convenient to the customer, and may be the only food available during the lunch period. While it is true that these factors influence participation, they do not guarantee all students or even a majority of students will eat meals at school. School nutrition customers are no different from the customers who choose any other business. They want to be valued and treated with respect. In other words, students want to be treated like a customer. The purpose of this lesson is to develop an awareness of the importance of customer satisfaction, merchandising, and food presentation to the success of the school nutrition program. Customer satisfaction, food merchandising, and food presentation include an attractive service line filled with nutritious food that tastes good and a courteous, friendly, and respectful staff on the serving line. Customer service is the foundation for everything school nutritional professionals do. The school nutrition program's mission, vision, policies, and procedures all relate back to the customer.

Role of the School Nutrition Director

We can all agree that students are our primary customers in the school nutrition programs. However, students are not all alike. Today's students are typically a very diverse group. Meeting the needs of a large group of students can present quite a challenge for the school nutrition program. It is a challenge that requires teamwork by the entire school nutrition staff. The school nutrition program director is the team leader and sets the tone for how the staff responds to the customer. It is important for the director to strategically integrate all aspects of the food experience into training for the staff. As leader of the school nutrition team, if the director sets high standards, the rest of the team will reach up to them. Conversely, if a leader sets low standards, the staff will reach down to them.

Functional Areas and Competencies

Functional Area 6: Marketing and Communication

Competency 6.2: Develop a customer service infrastructure to promote the school nutrition program.

Source: *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills for District-Level School Nutrition Professionals in the 21st Century* retrieved from: <http://theicn.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=284>

Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants will be able to accomplish the following:

1. Identify the customer.
2. State how the principles of customer service, merchandising, and food presentation relate to attracting and keeping customers.
3. Demonstrate how to use menus and meal themes as part of a merchandising effort to attract and influence the preferences of children.
4. Develop a method for evaluating customer service.

Lesson Plan

Activity Group: “What Students Say” and “What Students Hear”

1. “What Students Say”

(These are comments overheard from students as they come through the serving line.)

2. “What Students Hear”

(These are comments students hear from the school nutrition employees as they move through the serving line.)

Objective 2: State how the principles of customer service, food presentation, and quality meal service relate to attracting and keeping customers.

Activity: Principles of Customer Service, Merchandising Food Presentation, and Quality Meal Service

1. What are the first impressions that might influence a student's decision to eat in the school nutrition program?
2. What are the Key Elements of Food Presentation?
3. What are descriptive terms that can be used to describe (or name) menu items when you publish district menus?
4. Food Quality Standards—the characteristics of food that are acceptable to consumers include factors such as appearance (size, shape, color, and consistency), texture, and flavor. Can you name others?

Objective 3: Demonstrate how to use menus and meal themes as part of a merchandising effort to attract and influence the preferences of children.

Merchandising is any practice which contributes to the sale of products to a retail consumer. How can the menu contribute to a merchandising program for the school nutrition program?

Activity: Themes

Instructions: Work as a group and develop a theme to use for a week in the school nutrition program. This theme can become part of your marketing plan for next year. List one specific way you can incorporate this theme into each one of the following areas of your school nutrition program:

1. The cafeteria
2. Working with teachers to integrate it into education
3. Marketing (i.e. menu, etc.)

Record your theme and plans of action for incorporating the theme on flip chart paper, and post on the wall when you finish. To help get your thought process started, look at the examples below.

Themes:

- Eat from the Rainbow
- Adventures in Healthy Eating
- Holiday Themes (Thanksgiving, Valentine's Day, etc.)

Objective 4: Develop a method for evaluating customer service.

Activity: Customer Feedback

Instructions: Work with your team to identify five characteristics that would help you get to know your customers' likes and dislikes. The characteristics can be any component of the school nutrition program from food quality to dining environment. List those things about the dining experience which will lead your students to eat or not eat school meals. BE SPECIFIC. Write the characteristics on flip chart paper and post on the wall.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Activity: Sample Taste Test Form

Instructions: Circle or X the number that best answers each question; 1 is the worst and 6 is the best.

						
How does the food look?	1	2	3	4	5	6
How does the food taste?	1	2	3	4	5	6
How is the texture? How does the food feel in your mouth?	1	2	3	4	5	6
How does the food smell?	1	2	3	4	5	6
Was it the right temperature?	1	2	3	4	5	6
How do you like the food?	1	2	3	4	5	6

Activity: Quality Food Service Survey (Self-Assessment)

Think about how your school district is currently engaged in improving quality meal service to provide excellence in customer service. Check each item as *Mission Accomplished*, *Mission in Progress*, or *Mission Needs Attention*. If you don't know which term is applicable, then write the word "unsure".

	Mission Accomplished	Mission in Progress	Mission Needs Attention
Quality Meal Service			
Tasty food is served at the peak of freshness and at the appropriate temperature.			
Foods served have a variety of color, texture, height, and flavor.			
Food is displayed attractively on an organized serving line/counter.			
Servings are placed neatly on the plate or tray without spills.			
Food is served according to menu description.			
A variety of food choices is available.			
Prepared items follow standardized recipes.			
Fresh fruits and vegetables are offered daily.			
There are correct and consistent food portions for all customers.			
Safe Food			
Temperature of foods on the serving line is checked often.			
Food safety programs are implemented.			
Spills are cleaned promptly.			
Serving and eating utensils are clean.			
A clean place to sit is available after being served.			
Personnel are neat and clean.			
Dining Environment			
Service line moves smoothly with few backups.			
Dining area is attractive and appropriately decorated.			
Arrangement of table and chairs is attractive and supports social interaction.			
Staff is efficient and friendly, and environment is customer-service oriented.			

	Mission Accomplished	Mission in Progress	Mission Needs Attention
Dining Environment (continued)			
Staff embraces the value of quality meal service as part of customer service.			
Merchandising Efforts			
Menus are distributed to students on a regular basis.			
Students are involved in the menu planning process.			
Menu terms are descriptive and appeal to students.			
Menus are publicized with nutrient content.			

Follow-Up Suggestions

1. Ask students to give you feedback on meal service provided in the school nutrition programs.
2. Develop a themed day, week, or month to promote the school nutrition program.
3. Ask each school site to complete the self-assessment form for Quality Food Service.

Key Terms

Term	Definition
Coaching	A four-step training technique involving (1) telling, (2) showing, (3) practice and feedback, and (4) action
Culture	The behaviors and beliefs which are characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group
Customer	A person who buys a product or service
Customer service	A combination of product, price, presentation, support, information, and delivery that has value to the customer
Eye appeal	The quality of appealing to the eye; attractiveness; beauty
Food texture	The feeling of the food in your mouth—not just one thing but lots of different sensations felt all at once
Merchandising	Any practice that contributes to the sale of products to a retail consumer
Primary customer	In school nutrition, the primary customer is any student enrolled in the school district that is eligible for the reimbursable school meals programs.
Quality food standards	The quality characteristics of food that are acceptable to customers—includes external factors such as appearance (size, shape, color, gloss, and consistency), texture, and flavor; and internal factors such as safety aspects
Secondary customer	Secondary customers in the school nutrition program are made up of the school district's faculty, administrators, support staff, and guests that are invited to eat at the school. Meals served to secondary customers are not eligible for reimbursement.
Taste test	A tool used to gather information about the flavor of a food or product

Supplemental Resources

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Answer Key

Activity: Identify Your Customers

Question 1: Who are the primary customers and who are the secondary customers?

- The students are the primary customers of the school nutrition program, and for the purpose of this lesson, we will focus on the student customer.
- Our secondary customers include school administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents.

Question 2: What influences the needs and wants of school nutrition customers?

- Diversity: Because students who come to the cafeteria are so different, feeding them can be quite challenging.
- Age: Certain characteristics that are typically common to students at various stages or times in their lives and influence their needs and wants.
- Peers: Our adolescent customers have strong social needs and are often influenced by their peers.
- Culture: Students come from many regional and ethnic backgrounds that influence eating patterns.

Question 3: What factors or groups influence our customers' eating habits?

- How customers feel at a particular time of day
- The perception of how food served in the school meals program tastes and looks
- The amount of time to eat and enjoy the company of their friends
- The environment of the dining room
- Whether or not there is positive reinforcement of behavior
- The beliefs and practices of parents and teachers

Source: Institute of Child Nutrition. (2003). *Focus on the customer: Building a customer-focused child nutrition program*.

Pre/Post-Assessment

Customer Service, Merchandising, and Food Presentation

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Characteristics of food that are acceptable to consumers are referred to as
 - a. Food Quality Standards
 - b. Culinary Techniques
 - c. Food Presentation Principles
 - d. Nutrient Standards
2. A technique used to encourage students to participate in the school nutrition program is
 - a. Nutrition Education
 - b. Customer Feedback
 - c. Merchandising
 - d. Forecasting
3. A key element of food presentation is
 - a. Texture
 - b. Height
 - c. Shape
 - d. All of the above
4. Which of the following is a **false** statement about factors that influence student eating habits?
 - a. Adolescent customers have strong social needs and are often influenced by their peers.
 - b. The age of a child has no influence on their food likes and dislikes.
 - c. The beliefs of parents about food customs influence student eating patterns.
 - d. The environment of the dining room can have an effect on a student's desire to participate in the school nutrition program.
5. A technique used to gather information about the flavor of a food product is known as
 - a. Quality Food Standard
 - b. Eye Appeal
 - c. Taste Test
 - d. Food Texture



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