

Branding the School Nutrition Program: Building the Foodservice Personality



OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the project were to investigate the application of brand personality concepts in the school nutrition (SN) setting and to explore the high school students' awareness and acceptance of these branding initiatives.

METHOD

- An embedded, multiple-case replication design was used in four school districts in the US. One high school from each district served as the primary case study site.
- Structured interviews with the SN directors and managers focused on the process, strategies, and challenges of building the SN brand personality.
- An onsite branding checklist was used to evaluate the visible uses of branding strategies in the cafeteria.
- SN managers were requested to take photos of elements that they considered captured the cafeteria's brand personality or character.
- High school students were asked to react to these pictures using a standardized set of probing questions during focus group sessions.

RESULTS

Results showed that to create an SN program's brand personality, four primary methods have been utilized singularly or in combination:

- **Aesthetics:** focus on creating a more commercial and contemporary dining environment
- **Staff:** focus on the SN staff and the manner in which they interact with the students
- **Nutrition:** focus on nutrition-related themes in all promotional materials, including the cafeteria's brand name
- **School Spirit:** focus on utilizing elements depicting school spirit in the décor, menu, staff uniforms, and other promotional materials

ADVANTAGES OF HAVING A RECOGNIZED SCHOOL NUTRITION BRAND AND BRAND PERSONALITY

- Increased student participation and satisfaction in the NSLP
- Improved perceptions about the SN staff, cafeteria, and the concept of "the school lunch"
- Increased consistency in products and service delivery
- Increased pride, sense of ownership, and job satisfaction of SN staff
- Positive publicity for the SN program within the school and community

SELECTED QUOTES FROM HIGH SCHOOL FOCUS GROUPS

- *We like having the school logo all over the cafeteria; it makes the cafeteria part of the school.*
- *I like the individually marked salads—they look commercial and you can see through the packaging that it is fresh.*
- *Having lots of different choices is an incentive to eat lunch in the cafeteria because each person can find at least something that they're going to like.*
- *I like the bursts of colors and creativity in the cafeteria.*
- *I like that tables are circular because it's good for socializing.*
- *The decorations spice up the cafeteria; they make it more appealing and less "cafeteria" looking.*
- *Most students prefer that the SN staff wear school spirit t-shirt shirts compared to the scrubs.*
- *I love the cafeteria ladies! That's one reason why I go to lunch.*

ADVICE FROM SUCCESSFUL DIRECTORS

- Find out what excites you and your staff about your operation.
- Be consistent.
- Identify your priorities and budget for what will create the most impact.
- The customer has to see the brand ALL the time (letterheads, announcements, cafeteria décor, staff uniforms, menu merchandising, and product packaging).
- Choose a logo that will stand the test of time: clean, concise, appealing, customizable.
- Get influential students on board because high school students listen to their peers.
- Include SN staff in the planning stages to facilitate ownership and buy-in.
- Create a brand that will complement the school district's brand.
- Create an identifiable district-wide brand, but provide guidelines for customizing each SN site to fit the students served.

APPLICATIONS

As the number of meals eaten outside the home continues to increase, SN programs vie for brand recognition against competitive foods and retail food outlets located in close proximity to schools. Results from the study provide sustainable and successful practices for creating a competitive and appealing brand personality for the SN program.