



Insight

A Publication for Child Nutrition Professionals from the National Food Service Management Institute

Exploring Trends and Barriers to Implementation of Branding Concepts in the School Nutrition Setting

O The exposure of school-aged children to commercial dining has increased over the last decade. More and more families are eating several meals a week away from their homes. Children are also accustomed to seeing numerous food advertisements daily and have learned to recognize brands. This new generation of consumers has grown up frequenting restaurants with their families, and their expectations of foodservice operations and customer service are evolving. A welcoming dining environment that represents their lifestyle appeals to students, and they have come to expect a similar dining environment in the school cafeteria. At a time when the number of meals eaten outside the home continues to increase, school nutrition (SN) programs should monitor the effect that this exposure has on the students' decision to participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

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The benefits of utilizing branding strategies in the SN setting have not been empirically explored, because the concept of branding has generally been associated with commercial foodservice operations. Vying for brand recognition against retail food outlets located in close proximity to schools and other heavily branded competitive foods is a challenge for SN programs. However, four school districts that participated in a case study previously conducted by the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) have established that succeeding in this endeavor can be accomplished. Results from this previous study

showed that to create an SN program's brand personality, four primary methods have been utilized singularly or in combination: (a) aesthetics, which focuses on creating a more commercial and contemporary dining environment; (b) staff, which focuses on school nutrition staff interaction with the students; (c) nutrition, which focuses on nutrition-related themes in all promotional materials; and (d) school spirit, which focuses on depicting school spirit in the décor, menu, staff uniforms, and other promotional materials.

This project builds on the brand personality case study exploring branding strategies used in exemplary SN programs. Trends and barriers to implementation of branding concepts in SN programs participating in the NSLP are explored.

OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of this project were to identify the following:

- Characteristics of branding concepts in the SN setting;
- Brand personality trends in SN programs by administering a national survey;



- Sustainable strategies, resources, and successful practices for implementing branding concepts in SN programs; and
- Advantages and barriers to implementing branding concepts in SN programs.

METHODS

Phase I: Expert Panel

- In Phase I of the research, an expert panel session was conducted with SN professionals. Potential expert panel members were chosen from a pool of SN directors previously recommended by child nutrition state agency directors from the earlier NFSMI, ARD brand personality research study.
- Seven SN professionals participated in the expert panel meeting. Participants were asked semi-structured, open-ended questions designed to explore the trends and barriers to implementation of branding concepts in SN settings. The expert panel session was facilitated by an NFSMI, ARD researcher, and an assistant moderator captured the participants' comments.
- The researcher summarized responses, and then participants verified the summaries were accurate. The responses recorded during the expert panel session were grouped into emerging themes and then used to develop statements that were incorporated into the quantitative survey instrument.

Phase II: Survey Development

- Researchers used the qualitative data from Phase I as the foundation for drafting the survey designed to identify the perceptions, practices, barriers, and advantages of implementing marketing initiatives in SN programs that participate in the NSLP.
- Based on recommendations from the expert panel, the scannable survey was titled, *Marketing the School Nutrition Program*, with the intention of generating a more distinguishable survey for SN directors across the country. The survey consisted of five sections.
- Forty-two SN directors were invited via email to participate as members of a review panel to evaluate the draft survey instrument. The panel reviewed the draft survey and completed the evaluation form, which assessed the content, scales, readability, clarity, and flow of the draft survey. Responses from the review panel members were tabulated, comments were summarized, and suggestions were incorporated into the final survey instrument.

Survey Administration

- The study sample was selected from the database of school districts maintained by Market Data Retrieval, a company that specializes in the school market. A random sample of 700 SN directors representing the seven USDA regions was selected for the national survey administration.
- A pre-notice letter was mailed to these SN directors one week before the survey was distributed. The letter described the study, and encouraged recipients to participate. A cover letter and a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope were included with each survey.

A reminder postcard was sent approximately one week after the survey was mailed to encourage participants to complete their surveys.

Data Analysis

Surveys were analyzed using the statistical package SPSS Version 15.0 for Windows. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, exploratory principal components factor analysis, Cronbach's alpha, and one-way ANOVA with Tukey's post hoc tests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Survey Results

- Out of 700 surveys mailed, a total of 208 surveys were returned and used in statistical analysis, for a response rate of 29.7%.
- Of the 16 characteristics listed describing healthy menu choices, nutritious (87.5%) was selected most frequently by respondents, followed by fresh (85.3%), colorful (78.5%), and good quality (77.0%).
- The top marketing initiatives implemented in SN programs were posters/banners posted in the cafeteria (38.8%), followed by a school-specific color scheme in the cafeteria (19.6%), and consistent district-wide marketing (15.0%).
- Resource materials used most often to assist in planning and implementing marketing initiatives were Web sites (22.1%), other school districts (20.8%), and educational sessions (15.1%).
- Respondents indicated the service systems used most often in their SN programs were traditional cafeteria line(s) (33.7%), salad bar (19.0%), grab-and-go (17.0%), and self-service (16.8%).
- Sources of funds most often used to implement marketing initiatives were SN budget (65.9%), district support (14.9%), and grant (10.6%).

Perceptions

Participants were provided a list of 24 traits that describe characteristics of SN programs. Hardworking (75.1%) was listed the most frequently by respondents as a trait that describes their SN program followed by friendly (73.7%), healthy (71.7%), and successful (65.4%).

Practices

Participants were provided with 23 practice statements that contribute to marketing their SN programs, and they were

Creating Brand Personality Focuses on These Four Areas:

Aesthetics: Create a more commercial and contemporary dining environment.

Staff: School nutrition staff interact with the students.

Nutrition: Include nutrition-related themes in all promotional materials.

School Spirit: Depict school spirit in the décor, menu, staff uniforms and other promotional materials.

asked to rate the level of importance for each statement by using a scale of 4 (*very important*) to 1 (*not important*). They were also asked to indicate their current status in regard to each statement by using a scale of 4 (*fully addressed*) to 1 (*not addressed*).

Regarding levels of importance, respondents ranked “SN director attends conferences/seminars to stay current on marketing trends” (3.46 ± 0.81), “printed menus are sent home with students” (3.45 ± 0.89), and “menus are updated to support marketing initiatives” (3.42 ± 0.74) as the three practices with the highest importance. With regard to current status, the highest current status levels reported were “printed menus are sent home with students” (3.46 ± 0.97), “menus are updated to support marketing initiatives” (3.06 ± 0.91), and “SN director attends conferences/seminars to stay current on marketing trends” (3.05 ± 1.00).

Challenges and Barriers

Participants were asked to score their level of agreement with the challenges and barriers related to marketing their SN programs. A 4-point rating scale was used with 4 being *strongly agree* and 1 being *strongly disagree*. Of the 12 challenges and barriers listed on the survey, the strongest level of agreement reported was “find funds for marketing initiatives” (3.41 ± 0.87), followed by “time commitment to plan and implement marketing initiatives” (3.40 ± 0.72), and “SN staff’s perception of increased workload” (3.21 ± 0.85).

Advantages

Participants were provided 12 statements regarding advantages related to marketing their SN programs and were asked to rate their level of agreement using a scale of 4 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Almost all of the statements were seen as being important advantages to marketing SN programs, with 11 out of the 12 statements receiving a mean rating of 3.35 or greater. The strongest level of agreement reported was “student satisfaction with food choices” (3.70 ± 0.53), followed by “updated menu” (3.68 ± 0.52), “increase in student participation” (3.64 ± 0.63), and “increase in student selection of healthier food products” (3.64 ± 0.60).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research Study Conclusions

Establishing a branding concept can help in understanding the attitudes of the customer, providing a foundation for differentiation from competition, and guiding operational decisions. In addition, brand personality influences consumer preferences by allowing them to express themselves through the brands that they use, which is important because teens are drawn to brands that enhance self-expression. Brand personality can also affect the customer’s emotions and thereby have a positive effect on customer satisfaction. This suggests that to be competitive, SN programs have to go beyond the core products and build a consistent “brand” that students can relate to. While commercially branded products are being offered through the SN program, the concept of self-branding and creating an SN brand personality are relatively new practices.

Top-Rated Characteristics of Appealing Healthy Menu Food Items

Nutritious
Fresh
Colorful
Good Quality

In the SN setting, these can be associated with packaging the SN program (menu merchandising, cafeteria design and décor), keeping the communication to stakeholders consistent, guiding the personal interactions between SN staff and students, and designing marketing strategies to maximize the leverage that a well-established brand personality provides.

Based on survey responses, SN professionals believe that to market their SN programs, they need to have SN staff involved from inception to completion. A successful marketing initiative must focus on students as well as obtain and maintain the critical support of stakeholders. These are important factors for SN professionals who are considering how to begin a marketing initiative and for those who are assessing an existing one. SN professionals can use this information to create a “brand” and focus promotional efforts on marketing initiatives that appeal to their customers, thereby increasing participation and satisfaction with their SN programs. Results from this study will guide the development of a marketing resource that can assist SN professionals with developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating a marketing initiative in their SN programs.

PRACTICAL USE OF THIS INFORMATION

- Participants identified posters/banners posted in the cafeteria, a school-specific color scheme in the cafeteria, and consistent district-wide marketing as their top marketing initiatives. The resource materials most often used to plan and implement marketing initiatives were Web sites, other school districts, and education sessions. School nutrition professionals who wish to begin incorporating marketing initiatives into their SN programs may follow the example set by these study participants and explore these resources prior to developing a marketing initiative to not only generate ideas, but also for assistance throughout the process.
- Study participants believe that to market their SN programs, they need to have SN staff involved from inception to completion. Therefore, gaining staff involvement is key for SN professionals who wish to implement marketing initiatives. Study participants identified the following as important to establishing staff involvement: implementing consistent practices in all school cafeterias; providing feedback; attending conferences/seminars; providing professional development and training; and evaluating routinely. School nutrition professionals who wish to gain or improve staff

involvement may follow this example when implementing marketing initiatives into their SN programs.

- Study participants believed that a successful marketing initiative must focus on students. Marketing practices included providing students a broader selection of healthier food products, maintaining updated menus, achieving student satisfaction, soliciting feedback from students, and using this student input in modifying marketing initiatives. School nutrition professionals can use these strategies to create a “brand” that students can relate to, thereby increasing participation and satisfaction with their SN programs.
- Outcomes from this study and feedback from participating SN professionals indicated research is needed to build on this project by developing a marketing resource written specifically for SN professionals. The resource should include instructions to guide SN professionals through the process of developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating a marketing initiative in their SN programs. This will assist SN professionals with developing strategies and providing services that satisfy their current customers and appeal to new ones.

For More Information

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