

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



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**National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi**

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

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PURPOSE

The purpose of the National Food Service Management Institute is to improve the operation of child nutrition programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination.

MISSION

The mission of the National Food Service Management Institute is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs.

VISION

The vision of the National Food Service Management Institute is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in child nutrition programs.

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EXPLORING TRENDS AND BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION OF BRANDING CONCEPTS IN THE SCHOOL NUTRITION SETTING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commercial dining has increased over the last decade since more and more families are eating several meals a week away from their homes. School-aged children have grown accustomed to frequenting restaurants and have learned to recognize brands (Kant & Graubard, 2004; Meyer, 2000; Story & French, 2004). As a result, a new generation of customers has emerged. Their expectations of foodservice operations and customer service are evolving. Students are attracted to a welcoming dining environment that represents their lifestyle and have come to expect a similar dining environment in the school cafeteria. Since the branding concept is fairly new in the school nutrition (SN) setting, developing a strong brand and creating an appealing brand personality for the SN program may increase the student's desire to participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

Previous National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) research 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 the SN staff and the manner in which they interact with the students; (c) nutrition, which focuses on nutrition-related themes in all promotional materials, including the cafeteria's brand name; and (d) school spirit, which focuses on utilizing elements depicting school spirit in the décor, menu, staff uniforms, and other promotional materials. In order for SN programs to be competitive, they have to go beyond the core products and build a consistent "brand" that

students can relate to (Rushing & Asperin, 2011). 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.

The purpose of this research was to identify perceptions, practices, advantages, and barriers to implementation of branding concepts in SN programs. An expert panel session was conducted with seven SN professionals to assist with the development of a comprehensive survey instrument assessing the implementation of branding concepts in SN settings. Expert panel members determined that most SN professionals could relate to a marketing strategy or initiative more so than a branding concept and recommended researchers use the term “marketing” for the survey and any correspondence with study participants. The qualitative information from the expert panel was used to develop the survey and a national review panel evaluated the content, scales, readability, clarity, and flow of the instrument. Surveys were mailed to a random sample of 700 SN directors stratified by the seven United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regions. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, exploratory principal components factor analysis, Cronbach’s alpha, and one-way ANOVA with Tukey’s post hoc test.

Results identified 10 factors that contribute to marketing the SN program which included SN staff involvement, advantages for students, stakeholders’ support, development and implementation, and communication. SN directors reported “hardworking,” “friendly,” “healthy,” and “successful” as the leading personality traits that describe their SN programs. The top marketing initiatives were posters/banners posted in the cafeteria, school specific color scheme in cafeteria, and consistent marketing district-wide. Advantages associated with marketing the SN program included student satisfaction with food choices, updated menu,

increase in student participation, and increase in student selection of healthier food products.

Barriers identified by participants included time commitment to plan and implement marketing initiatives, find funds for marketing initiatives, SN staff's perception of increased workload, and utilization of existing facilities. These are all important factors when 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.

INTRODUCTION

The exposure of school-age children to commercial dining has increased over the last decade. More and more families are eating several meals a week away from their homes. (Kant & Graubard, 2004). Children are also accustomed to seeing numerous food advertisements daily and have learned to recognize brands (Meyer, 2000; Story & French, 2004). 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).

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 (Rushing & Asperin, 2011). These four school districts rose to the challenge and adapted some of the branding strategies used in commercial foodservice operations into their own brand personality. A well established brand personality, defined as the “set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997; Marconi, 2000), must have the following characteristics: elements of the

brand's marketing mix are deliberately coordinated, personality sought is competitively distinctive and desirable, and the personality sought is robust and kept consistent over time and over media (Batra, Lehmann, & Singh, 1993; Lannon, 1993). Since the branding concept is fairly new in the SN setting, developing a strong brand and creating an appealing brand personality for the SN program may increase the student's desire to participate in the NSLP. Likewise, the ability of SN programs to clearly define its brand personality may have practical implications in their managerial, communicational, and operational decisions. Results from the previous NFSMI, ARD study 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

Establishing a branding concept can help in understanding the customer and their attitudes, provide a foundation for differentiation from competition, and guide operational decisions (Aaker, 1996). In addition, brand personality influences consumer preferences by allowing them to express themselves through the brands that they use (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1993; Siguaw, Mattila, & Austin, 1999). According to Zollo (2004), teens are drawn to brands that enhance self-expression. Brand personality can affect the customer's emotions and thereby have a positive effect on customer satisfaction (Lee, Back, Kim, 2009). These statements suggest

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. In the SN setting, these can be associated with packaging the SN program (menu merchandising as well as 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 (Rushing & Asperin, 2011).

Yet, many SN professionals do not recognize that they have a “brand” and identify these strategies as being more of a marketing initiative, since they may not have a logo or name for their SN programs. A brand is neither a logo nor name, but who you are, what your customers think of you, and what they say about your operation. It is in essence the SN programs’ identity. Whereas, marketing is how you raise awareness, promote your goods and services, and draw customers to your operation (Crutchfield, 2009; Klein, 2008). These two concepts work together to help build the SN program’s brand personality. Thus, it is important to define the strategies that are being successfully utilized by SN programs, examine the implications in the SN environment, determine the barriers to implementation, and disseminate information to other SN professionals. Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to explore the trends and barriers to implementation of branding concepts in SN programs participating in the NSLP. This study will build on the brand personality case study exploring branding strategies used in exemplary SN programs.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this project included the following:

- To define characteristics of branding concepts in the SN setting
- To administer a national survey for identifying brand personality trends in the SN programs
- To identify sustainable strategies, resources, and successful practices for implementing branding concepts in SN programs
- To identify advantages and barriers to implementing branding concepts in SN programs

METHOD

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the application of branding concepts in the school nutrition (SN) setting. Researchers used a qualitative research approach to collect data for the development of a quantitative survey instrument as identified by Nassar-McMillan and Borders (2002). The research project was conducted in two phases. During Phase I, an expert panel session was conducted with seven SN professionals to assist with the development of a comprehensive survey instrument assessing the implementation of branding concepts in SN settings. The information received from Phase I was used to develop the draft survey instrument in Phase II. A national review panel evaluated the draft survey to assess the content, scales, and provide comments on the readability, clarity, and flow of the instrument. After revisions were made, the final survey was mailed to a national sample of SN directors.

Phase I: Expert Panel

In Phase I of the research, an expert panel session was conducted with SN professionals. An expert panel operates similar to the Delphi Method illustrated by Linstone & Turoff (2002) and focus group methodology identified by Krueger and Casey (2009). The panel is comprised of a diverse group of individuals recognized in their field and used as a primary analysis method for incorporating data with the perception and judgment of individuals familiar with the area of the study (Seskin, Still, & Boroski, 2002). Potential expert panel members were chosen from a pool of SN directors previously recommended by child nutrition state agency directors from the earlier National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) brand personality research study. Ten SN professionals were e-mailed invitations to attend a day and a half expert panel session. The invitation explained the study and purpose of the expert

panel meeting and provided the researchers' contact information. Seven SN directors agreed to participate as expert panel members. A confirmation letter was sent to each member with additional information regarding the upcoming meeting and travel arrangements.

The agenda for the expert panel session was planned to address the issues related to the research objectives so that the discussion supported the development of the survey instrument in Phase II of this study. 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 with an assistant moderator capturing the participants' comments. Throughout the session, the researcher used a structured approach to keep the discussion focused on the selected topics. After all questions were discussed, the researcher summarized responses, and participants were asked to verify that the summarized comments were an accurate depiction of the discussion. 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 to implementing marketing initiatives in SN programs that participate in the National School Lunch Program. 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. Section I asked SN directors to select traits that describe their SN programs. In Section II, SN directors were asked to indicate their level of importance, ranging from 4 (*very important*) to 1 (*not important*), and current

status, ranging from 4 (*fully addressed*) to 1 (*not addressed*) with 23 practices that contribute to marketing their SN program. Section III and IV asked SN directors to indicate their level of agreement, ranging from 4 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*) with 12 challenges and barriers and 12 advantages related to marketing their SN program. In Section V, SN directors were asked to provide demographic information related to their credential/certification status, years of experience in SN programs, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) region, student enrollment, marketing initiatives implemented, resource materials used, percentage of free and reduced priced lunches, participation rates for K-8 and 9-12, service systems used, sources of funds, and whether high schools in their school district were open campuses.

Review Panel

Forty-two SN directors were invited via e-mail to participate as members of a review panel to evaluate the draft survey instrument. With the invitation, the SN directors received a copy of the draft survey instrument, the objective of the review panel, and instructions for completing and returning the “Review Panel Evaluation Form”. Return of the completed evaluations signified consent to participate in the study. The objective of the review panel was to complete and review the draft survey and complete the evaluation form which assessed the content, scales, readability, clarity, and flow of the draft survey. The “Review Panel Evaluation Form” was divided into six sections, five representing the sections of the draft survey, perceptions, practices, challenges and barriers, advantages, and program and personal characteristics, and the last section representing the overall draft survey instrument. In Section I of the evaluation form, panel members were instructed to evaluate whether the instructions were clear, statements accurately reflect traits used to describe SN programs, applicability in the SN setting, and appropriateness of terminology. A four-point scale from *strongly disagree* to

strongly agree was used for each evaluation statement. In Section II, III, and IV, panel members were instructed to evaluate whether the instructions were clear, statements accurately reflect practices, challenges and barriers, and advantages related to marketing the SN program, appropriateness of terminology, and suitability of the two rating scales, level of importance scale and current status scale. A four-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* was used for each evaluation statement. At the end of Sections I through IV, reviewers were asked if any statements should be excluded or if additional statements should be included in each of the sections of the survey instrument. In Section V, panel members were instructed to evaluate whether the instructions were clear and a four-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* was used to evaluate the instructions. Additionally, panel members were asked if any statements should be excluded and if any additional statements should be included in this section. Space was provided for reviewers to delete statements, add statements, or make any recommendations for improvement to the survey at the end of each section. In the “overall” section, members were instructed to evaluate the survey for organization, appropriateness of language, and ease of use for SN professionals. A four-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* was used for each evaluation statement. Space was provided for panel members to submit any recommendations for overall improvement of the survey instrument. 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 data base 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 each of the 700 SN directors approximately one week before the survey instrument was distributed to notify the study participants about the survey and briefly describe the study. A cover letter was attached to the survey instrument explaining the purpose of the study, requesting participation in the study, assuring confidentiality of responses, and providing researchers' contact information. A self-addressed postage-paid envelope was included with each survey for each participant to return the completed survey. A follow-up postcard was sent approximately one week after the survey was mailed. The postcard was sent to encourage SN directors to complete and return the survey.

Informed Consent

The protocol for Phase I and Phase II of the study was reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Data Analysis

Surveys were analyzed using the statistical package SPSS Version 15.0 for Windows. Descriptive statistics included means, standard deviations, and frequencies of total responses. Exploratory principal components factor analyses were performed on items in the practices, advantages, and challenges and barriers sections of the survey instrument, to determine if each set of items could be reduced to a smaller number of factors. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were calculated to determine the internal consistency of the factors that emerged. One-way analysis of variances with Tukey's post hoc tests were used to evaluate differences in responses based on years working in SN programs, student enrollment in the school district, K-8 daily lunch participation rates, and 9-12 daily lunch participation rates.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Phase I: Expert Panel

An expert panel session was conducted to explore the trends and barriers to implementation of branding concepts in school nutrition (SN) programs participating in the National School Lunch Program. Of the ten SN professionals invited to participate in the expert panel session, seven (70%) agreed to participate. All seven SN professionals were SN directors (100%) and represented the Midwest, Mountain Plains, Northeast, Southeast, and Western regions as classified by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). All panel members were involved in the discussion (100%). Data were collected during the expert panel session using a systematic approach by asking semi-structured, open-ended question to keep the discussion focused on the research objectives. The main discussion points were recorded and summarized by researchers. Expert panel members established that most SN professionals could relate to a marketing strategy or initiative more so than a branding concept and recommended researchers use the term “marketing” for the survey and any correspondence with study participants. Following the expert panel session, responses were grouped into emerging themes and integrated into the quantitative survey instrument.

Phase II: Survey

A total of 700 surveys were distributed to a nationwide sample of SN directors. Each potential participant received a cover letter, survey, and postage-paid envelope for returning the completed survey. A total of 208 surveys were returned and used in statistical analysis, for a response rate of 29.7%.

Personal and Program Characteristics

Program and personal characteristics of respondents are provided in Table 1. Over 30% of respondents are certified by the School Nutrition Association, 23.0% are not certified, and 21.5% have a state agency certification. The largest percentage of respondents reported working in SN programs for more than 20 years (36.5%) and the smallest percentage reported working in SN programs for less than one year (2.9%). The USDA regions were nearly equally represented, with slightly stronger representation from the Southeast and Western regions (17.8% for both regions). The majority of respondents (46.9%) reported working in a school district with 2,799 or less, while only 1% reported working in a school district with 65,000 or greater. The top marketing initiatives implemented in SN programs were posters/banners posted in the cafeteria (38.8%), followed by school specific color scheme in cafeteria (19.6%), and consistent marketing district-wide (15.0%). Resource materials used most often to assist in planning and implementing marketing initiatives were websites (22.1%), other school districts (20.8%), and educational sessions (15.1%). Respondents identified 41% to 60% (39.0%) as the largest percentage group of students who receive free and reduced priced lunches in their district followed by 61% to 80% (22.0%), and 21% to 40% (21.5%). The highest percentage of lunch participation rates was 61% to 80% for both grades K-8 (44.8%) and 9-12 (33.3%). 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 supported (14.9%), and grant (10.6%). The majority of respondents reported that the high schools in their school district were not open campuses (72.0%).

Table 1

Personal and Program Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N=208)

Demographics	Frequency	%
What is your certification/credential status? (Select all that apply.) ^a		
School Nutrition Association certified	79	30.4%
Not certified	60	23.0%
State agency certified	56	21.5%
Registered Dietitian	25	9.6%
School Nutrition Specialist credentialed	24	9.2%
Licensed Dietitian/Nutritionist	11	4.2%
American Culinary Federation certification	3	1.2%
Dietetic Technician Registered	2	0.8%
How many years have you worked in SN programs?		
Less than one year	6	2.9%
1-5 years	24	11.5%
6-10 years	37	17.8%
11-15 years	27	13.0%
16-20 years	38	18.3%
Greater than 20 years	76	36.5%
In which USDA region do you work?		
Southeast	37	17.8%
Western	37	17.8%
Midwest	34	16.3%
Mid-Atlantic	29	13.9%
Northeast	27	13.0%
Mountain Plains	23	11.1%
Southwest	21	10.1%
What is the approximate student enrollment in your school district?		
2,799 or less	97	46.9%
2,800 to 9,999	73	35.3%
10,000 to 19,999	18	8.7%
20,000 to 44,999	11	5.3%
45,000 to 64,999	6	2.9%
65,000 or greater	2	1.0%

^aParticipants allowed to check more than one option; total exceeds 100%.

(Table 1 continues)

(Table 1 continued)

Personal and Program Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N=208)

Demographics	Frequency	%
Select the marketing initiatives implemented in your SN program. (Select all that apply.) ^a		
Posters/banners posted in cafeteria	168	38.8%
School specific color scheme in cafeteria	85	19.6%
Consistent marketing district-wide	65	15.0%
A logo for the SN program	49	11.3%
A distinct name for the SN program	38	8.8%
A slogan/tagline for the SN program	28	6.5%
What resource materials did your SN program use to assist in planning and implementing marketing initiatives? (Select all that apply.) ^a		
Websites	119	22.1%
Other school districts	112	20.8%
Educational sessions	81	15.1%
On-line computer searches	62	11.5%
Industry journals	57	10.6%
Other	46	8.6%
Commercial/local restaurants	43	8.0%
Marketing Consultants	18	3.3%
What percentage of students in your district receives free and reduced priced lunches?		
20% or less	23	11.2%
21% to 40%	44	21.5%
41% to 60%	80	39.0%
61% to 80%	45	22.0%
80% or greater	13	6.3%
What are the average grades K-8 daily lunch participation rates in your school district?		
20% or less	1	0.5%
21% to 40%	7	3.4%
41% to 60%	38	18.7%
61% to 80%	91	44.8%
80% or greater	66	32.5%

^aParticipants allowed to check more than one option; total exceeds 100%.

(Table 1 continues)

(Table 1 continued)

Personal and Program Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N=208)

Demographics	Frequency	%
What are the average grades 9-12 daily lunch participation rates in your school district?		
20% or less	12	6.2%
21% to 40%	28	14.4%
41% to 60%	59	30.3%
61% to 80%	65	33.3%
80% or greater	31	15.9%
Select the service system(s) used in your SN program. (Select all that apply.) ^a		
Traditional cafeteria line(s)	197	33.7%
Salad bar	111	19.0%
Grab and go	99	17.0%
Self service	98	16.8%
Food court style	46	7.9%
Stand-alone kiosk	23	3.9%
Reimbursable vending	10	1.7%
What sources of funds were used to implement marketing initiatives in your school district? (Select all that apply.) ^a		
School nutrition budget	168	65.9%
District supported	38	14.9%
Grant	27	10.6%
School supported	16	6.3%
Industry	6	2.4%
Are the high schools in your school district open campuses?		
Yes	56	28.0%
No	144	72.0%

^aParticipants allowed to check more than one option; total exceeds 100%.

Perceptions

Participants were provided a list of 24 traits that describe characteristics of SN programs. As shown in Table 2, 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%).

Table 2

Traits Describing the School Nutrition Programs of Survey Respondents (N=208)

Perceptions	Frequency	%
Which of the following traits do you think describes your SN program? (Select all that apply.) ^a		
Hardworking	154	75.1%
Friendly	151	73.7%
Healthy	147	71.7%
Which of the following traits do you think describes your SN program? (Select all that apply.) ^a		
Successful	134	65.4%
Small-town	121	59.0%
Cheerful	95	46.3%
Wholesome	89	43.4%
Up-to-date	77	37.6%
Family-oriented	71	34.6%
Good looking	53	25.9%
Spirited	45	22.0%
Imaginative	44	21.5%
Exciting	33	16.1%
Unique	25	12.2%
Institutional	23	11.2%
Out-of-date	23	11.2%
Trendy	23	11.2%
Boring	21	10.2%
Contemporary	17	8.3%
Cool	17	8.3%
Unattractive	10	4.9%
Unappealing	7	3.4%
Unfriendly	5	2.4%
Unhealthy	4	2.0%

^aParticipants allowed to check more than one option; total exceeds 100%

Practices

Participants were provided with 23 practice statements that contribute to marketing their SN program and were asked to rate the level of importance for each statement, using a scale of 4 (*very important*) to 1 (*not important*), and to indicate their current status in regards to each statement, using a scale of 4 (*fully addressed*) to 1 (*not addressed*). Table 3 represents the means and standard deviations for each of the 23 statements in descending order of importance.

Table 3

Level of Importance and Current Status Regarding Practices Contributing to Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Practices	N	Importance^{ab} Mean ± SD	N	Current Status^c Mean ± SD
SN director attends conferences/seminars to stay current on marketing trends.	200	3.46 ± 0.81	195	3.05 ± 1.00
Printed menus are sent home with students.	205	3.45 ± 0.89	202	3.46 ± 0.97
Menus are updated to support marketing initiatives.	202	3.42 ± 0.74	201	3.06 ± 0.91
Marketing initiatives are communicated to stakeholders (students, staff, parents, district/school administration).	201	3.32 ± 0.79	200	2.50 ± 0.84
Student input is used to market the SN program.	204	3.31 ± 0.77	201	2.61 ± 0.94

^aScale = 4 (*very important*) to 1 (*not important*)

^bImportance mean and standard deviation scores in descending order

^cScale = 4 (*fully addressed*) to 1 (*not addressed*)

(Table 3 continues)

(Table 3 continued)

Level of Importance and Current Status Regarding Practices Contributing to Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Practices	N	Importance^{ab} Mean ± SD	N	Current Status^c Mean ± SD
SN managers provide feedback on marketing initiatives.	200	3.28 ± 0.81	193	2.67 ± 0.91
SN staff is involved in planning and implementing marketing initiatives.	200	3.25 ± 0.79	196	2.64 ± 0.92
Marketing is consistent in all school cafeterias.	200	3.23 ± 0.84	196	2.43 ± 0.92
Marketing initiatives are implemented in all school cafeterias.	204	3.21 ± 0.89	201	2.66 ± 1.01
District/school administration demonstrate support for marketing initiatives.	205	3.20 ± 0.94	201	2.30 ± 1.01
Students provide feedback on the implementation of marketing initiatives.	205	3.20 ± 0.83	200	2.36 ± 0.94
SN director visits other school districts to gain marketing ideas for their SN program.	202	3.18 ± 0.88	198	2.60 ± 1.06
Training on implementing marketing initiatives is provided to SN staff.	199	3.17 ± 0.79	194	2.32 ± 0.96
SN managers are provided professional development on marketing the SN program.	202	3.16 ± 0.82	195	2.48 ± 0.97
Trends in food service are evaluated for marketing ideas.	203	3.11 ± 0.84	200	2.59 ± 0.93

^aScale = 4 (*very important*) to 1 (*not important*)

^bImportance mean and standard deviation scores in descending order

^cScale = 4 (*fully addressed*) to 1 (*not addressed*)

(Table 3 continues)

(Table 3 continued)

Level of Importance and Current Status Regarding Practices Contributing to Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Practices	N	Importance^{ab} Mean ± SD	N	Current Status^c Mean ± SD
Advocates within the school district promote the marketing initiatives of the SN program.	204	3.04 ± 0.85	201	2.24 ± 0.90
Marketing initiatives are evaluated routinely.	199	3.02 ± 0.88	194	2.21 ± 0.97
Resources are sought for planning and implementing marketing initiatives.	205	2.97 ± 0.83	201	2.35 ± 0.95
Stakeholders are involved in implementing marketing initiatives.	204	2.87 ± 0.92	198	2.14 ± 0.88
A written marketing plan is developed to guide the marketing initiative of the SN program.	205	2.68 ± 0.92	200	1.81 ± 0.98
Pamphlets promoting the SN program are distributed to stakeholders.	204	2.60 ± 0.99	200	1.99 ± 1.02
Electronic newsletters are sent to stakeholders as part of marketing initiatives.	203	2.50 ± 1.04	200	1.80 ± 1.07
Commercial/local restaurant concepts were used in marketing initiatives.	205	2.36 ± 0.96	201	1.97 ± 0.90

^aScale = 4 (*very important*) to 1 (*not important*)

^bImportance mean and standard deviation scores in descending order

^cScale = 4 (*fully addressed*) to 1 (*not addressed*)

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. Seventeen out of the 23 practice statements had a mean score above 3.0, indicating high levels of importance. Practices rated least important included “commercial/local restaurant concepts were used in marketing initiatives” (2.36 ± 0.96), “electronic newsletters are sent to stakeholders as part of marketing initiatives” (2.50 ± 1.04), and “pamphlets promoting the SN program are distributed to stakeholders” (2.60 ± 0.99). The current status levels were considerably lower than levels of importance. Out of the 23 practice statements, 20 statements had mean scores between 2.67 ± 0.91 to 1.80 ± 1.07 . 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 program. 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). Respondents did not rank “SN staff’s resistance to change” (2.80 ± 0.96) or “find a consultant/advisor to develop marketing initiatives” (2.38 ± 0.97) as major challenges to marketing their SN programs. Means and standard deviations for challenges and barriers are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

Level of Agreement with Challenges and Barriers Related to Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Challenges and Barriers	N	Agreement^a Mean ± SD
Find funds for marketing initiatives	200	3.41 ± 0.87
Time commitment to plan and implement marketing initiatives	204	3.40 ± 0.72
SN staff's perception of increased workload	200	3.21 ± 0.85
Utilization of existing facilities to market the SN program	198	3.12 ± 0.81
Achievement of consistent practices and services throughout the SN program	202	3.12 ± 0.81
Renovation of existing facilities to implement marketing initiatives	199	3.11 ± 0.93
Knowledge on how to develop marketing initiatives	198	3.11 ± 0.82
Staff acceptance of marketing initiatives	197	3.08 ± 0.80
Prioritize the continuous efforts to market the SN program	200	3.08 ± 0.75
Prepare a budget for marketing initiatives	195	2.92 ± 0.94
SN staff's resistance to change	203	2.80 ± 0.96
Find a consultant/advisor to develop marketing initiatives	198	2.38 ± 0.97

^aScale = 4 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*)

Advantages

Participants were provided 12 statements regarding advantages related to marketing their SN program 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). The advantage statement with the lowest level of agreement was “assist with open campus competition” (2.59 ± 1.16). Table 5 presents the means and standard deviations for each of the 12 statements.

Table 5

Level of Agreement with Advantages Related to Marketing the School Nutrition Program
($N=208$)

Advantages	N	Agreement^a Mean \pm SD
Student satisfaction with food choices	199	3.70 ± 0.53
Updated menu	200	3.68 ± 0.52
Increase in student participation	199	3.64 ± 0.63
Increase in student selection of healthier food products	201	3.64 ± 0.60
Positive school meals image in community	203	3.61 ± 0.61
SN staff feels part of a team	194	3.61 ± 0.58
Professionalism of SN program	198	3.61 ± 0.57
Increase in student selection of fruits and vegetables	200	3.57 ± 0.68
Improved communication with stakeholders (students, staff, parents, district/school administration)	201	3.53 ± 0.63

^aScale = 4 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*)

(Table 5 continues)

(Table 5 continued)

*Level of Agreement with Advantages Related to Marketing the School Nutrition Program
(N=208)*

Advantages	N	Agreement^a Mean ± SD
Improved stakeholders' perception of the SN program	200	3.50 ± 0.66
Fewer complaints from stakeholders	200	3.35 ± 0.83
Assist with open campus competition	193	2.59 ± 1.16

^aScale = 4 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*)

Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analyses were conducted on the statements in the following sections: practices, advantages, and challenges and barriers. The importance of practices, current status of practices and advantages demonstrated adequate internal consistency and reliability, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .70 to .91. The challenges and barriers section had a Cronbach's alpha below the standard of .70. The first factor, "Importance of SN Staff Involvement," included eight statements related to the importance of having SN staff involved in marketing initiatives. The second factor, "Current Status of SN Staff Involvement," included eight statements focused on the current status of having SN staff involved in marketing initiatives. The third factor, "Advantages for Students," included five statements related to the advantages marketing initiatives provide students. The fourth factor, "Importance of Stakeholders' Support," included five statements related to the importance of receiving support from stakeholders on marketing initiatives. The fifth factor, "Advantages for Other Stakeholders," included seven statements related to the advantages marketing initiatives provide other stakeholders. The sixth factor, "Current Status of Stakeholders' Support," included five statements focused on the

current status of receiving support from stakeholders on marketing initiatives. The seventh factor, “Importance of Development and Implementation,” included five statements related to the importance of developing and implementing marketing initiatives. The eighth factor, “Current Status of Development and Implementation,” included five statements focused on the current status of developing and implementing marketing initiatives. The ninth factor, “Importance of Communication,” included four statements related to the importance of communicating marketing initiatives to stakeholders. The tenth factor, “Current Status of Communication,” included five statements focused on the current status of communicating marketing initiatives to stakeholders. Table 6 displays the ten factors, the factored statements, and the Cronbach’s alpha for each factor.

Table 6

Factor Descriptions for Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Marketing Factor Structure	Cronbach’s Alpha
Importance of SN Staff Involvement	.91
Marketing initiatives are implemented in all school cafeterias.	
Marketing is consistent in all school cafeterias.	
SN managers provide feedback on marketing initiatives.	
SN director attends conferences/seminars to stay current on marketing trends.	
SN staff is involved in planning and implementing marketing initiatives.	
SN managers are provided professional development on marketing the SN program.	
Training on implementing marketing initiatives is provided to SN staff.	
Marketing initiatives are evaluated routinely.	

(Table 6 continues)

(Table 6 continued)

Factor Descriptions for Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Marketing Factor Structure	Cronbach's Alpha
Current Status of SN Staff Involvement	.89
Marketing initiatives are implemented in all school cafeterias.	
Marketing is consistent in all school cafeterias.	
SN managers provide feedback on marketing initiatives.	
SN director attends conferences/seminars to stay current on marketing trends.	
SN staff is involved in planning and implementing marketing initiatives.	
SN managers are provided professional development on marketing the SN program.	
Training on implementing marketing initiatives is provided to SN staff.	
Marketing initiatives are evaluated routinely.	
Advantages for Students	.83
Increase student selection of healthier food products	
Updated menu	
Student satisfaction with food choices	
Increase in student selection of fruits and vegetables	
Increase in student participation	

(Table 6 continues)

(Table 6 continued)

Factor Descriptions for Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Marketing Factor Structure	Cronbach's Alpha
Importance of Stakeholders' Support	.82
Student input is used to market the SN program.	
Advocates within the school district promote the marketing initiatives of the SN program.	
District/school administration demonstrate support for marketing initiatives.	
Students provide feedback on the implementation of marketing initiatives.	
Menus are updated to support marketing initiatives.	
Advantages for Other Stakeholders	.81
Improved communication with stakeholders (students, staff, parents, district/school administration)	
Professionalism of SN program	
SN staff feels part of a team	
Assist with open campus competition	
Positive school meals image in community	
Improved stakeholders' perception of the SN program	
Fewer complaints from stakeholders	

(Table 6 continues)

(Table 6 continued)

Factor Descriptions for Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Marketing Factor Structure	Cronbach's Alpha
Current Status of Stakeholders' Support	.81
<p>Student input is used to market the SN program.</p> <p>Advocates within the school district promote the marketing initiatives of the SN program.</p> <p>District/school administration demonstrate support for marketing initiatives.</p> <p>Students provide feedback on the implementation of marketing initiatives.</p> <p>Menus are updated to support marketing initiatives.</p>	
Importance of Development and Implementation	.79
<p>Commercial/local restaurant concepts were used in marketing initiatives.</p> <p>Trends in food service are evaluated for marketing ideas.</p> <p>Resources are sought for planning and implementing marketing initiatives.</p> <p>Stakeholders are involved in implementing marketing initiatives.</p> <p>SN director visits other school districts to gain marketing ideas for their SN program.</p>	

(Table 6 continues)

(Table 6 continued)

Factor Descriptions for Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Marketing Factor Structure	Cronbach's Alpha
Current Status of Development and Implementation	.75
Commercial/local restaurant concepts were used in marketing initiatives.	
Trends in food service are evaluated for marketing ideas.	
Resources are sought for planning and implementing marketing initiatives.	
Stakeholders are involved in implementing marketing initiatives.	
SN director visits other school districts to gain marketing ideas for their SN program.	
Importance of Communication	.75
Marketing initiatives are communicated to stakeholders (students, parents, district/school administration).	
A written marketing plan is developed to guide the marketing initiative of the SN program.	
Electronic newsletters are sent to stakeholders as part of marketing initiatives.	
Pamphlets promoting the SN program are distributed to stakeholders.	

(Table 6 continues)

(Table 6 continued)

Factor Descriptions for Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N=208)

Marketing Factor Structure	Cronbach's Alpha
Current Status of Communication	.70
Marketing initiatives are communicated to stakeholders (students, parents, district/school administration).	
A written marketing plan is developed to guide the marketing initiative of the SN program.	
Electronic newsletters are sent to stakeholders as part of marketing initiatives.	
Pamphlets promoting the SN program are distributed to stakeholders.	

In addition to calculating Cronbach's alpha levels for the statements in each factor, one-way analysis of variances (ANOVA) were conducted to compare the ten factors identified with participants' responses regarding years working in SN programs, student enrollment in their school district, K-8 daily lunch participation rates, and 9-12 daily lunch participation rates. With the large number of variables included in the analysis, only a few statistical significances were identified at the 0.05 level of significance. There were significant differences between "importance of development and implementation" ($F[2, 202] = 10.12, p = .00$), "importance of communication" ($F[2, 201] = 6.78, p = .00$), and "current status of development and implementation" ($F[2, 199] = 3.84, p = .02$) factors and student enrollments of 2,799 or less, 2,800 to 9,999, and 10,000 or more. Additionally, there were significant differences between "advantages for stakeholders" ($F[2, 199] = 3.17, p = .04$), "importance of development and implementation" ($F[2, 198] = 3.13, p = .05$), and "current status of development and

implementation” ($F[2, 195] = 3.09, p=.05$) factors and K-8 daily lunch participation rates of 20% to 60%, 61% to 80%, and greater than 80%. No statistical significant differences were found between the ten factors and years working in SN programs and 9-12 daily lunch participation rates. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey’s HSD tests indicated that the mean scores for student enrollments of 2,800 to 9,999 and 10,000 or more were significantly higher than student enrollment of 2,799 or less for the “importance of development and implementation” factor. This finding suggests that school districts with 2,800 to 9,999 students and 10,000 or more students are more likely than school districts with 2,799 or less to recognize the importance of seeking resources, evaluating food trends, using commercial/local restaurants marketing concepts, visiting other school districts, and involving stakeholders during implementation of marketing initiatives. The mean score for student enrollment of 10,000 or more was significantly higher than student enrollments of 2,799 or less for the “importance of communication” factor and student enrollment of 2,800 to 9,999 was significantly higher than student enrollment of 2,799 or less for the “current status of development and implementation” factor. These findings suggest that school districts with student enrollment of 10,000 or more are more likely than school districts with 2,799 or less students to recognize the importance of communicating marketing initiatives to stakeholders, writing a marketing plan, and distributing electronic newsletters and pamphlets to promote their SN program to stakeholders. In addition, school districts with student enrollment of 2,800 to 9,999 students are more likely than smaller school districts of 2,799 or less students to be currently developing and implementing marketing initiatives in their SN programs. Means and standard deviations for each set of factors by student enrollment are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Comparison of Means and Standard Deviations (SD) for Marketing Factors by Student Enrollment

Factor	n^a	Mean ± SD
Importance of Development and Implementation		
2,799 or less	96	2.68 ± 0.67
2,800 to 9,999	72	3.03 ± 0.64
10,000 or more	37	3.14 ± 0.48
Importance of Communication		
2,799 or less	95	2.60 ± 0.71
2,800 to 9,999	72	2.81 ± 0.74
10,000 or more	37	3.09 ± 0.58
Current Status of Development and Implementation		
2,799 or less	96	2.19 ± 0.70
2,800 to 9,999	70	2.47 ± 0.65
10,000 or more	36	2.37 ± 0.56

^an is based on cases included for post hoc comparisons of factors by student enrollment.

The results also indicated the mean score for K-8 daily lunch participation rate of greater than 80% is statistically lower than 20% to 60% for the “advantages for other stakeholders” factor. This finding suggests that school districts with a greater than 80% K-8 daily lunch participation rate are more likely to recognize they have good communication with stakeholders, a positive perception of their SN program among stakeholders and the community, less complaints from stakeholders, and their SN staff feels like part of a team compared to school districts with 20% to 60% participation rate. The mean score for K-8 daily lunch participation rate of 61% to 80% is significantly higher than greater than 80% for the “importance of development and implementation” factor and the “current status of development and implementation” factor. These findings suggest that school districts with 61% to 80% K-8 daily lunch participation rate are more likely to recognize the importance and be currently developing

and implementing marketing initiatives to take their SN programs to the next level and increase student participation. Means and standard deviations for each set of factors by K-8 daily lunch participation rates are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Comparison of Means and Standard Deviations (SD) for Marketing Factors by K-8 Daily Lunch Participation Rates

Factor	n^a	Mean ± SD
Advantages for Other Stakeholders		
20% to 60%	46	3.53 ± 0.42
61% to 80%	90	3.41 ± 0.50
Greater than 80%	66	3.29 ± 0.58
Importance of Development and Implementation		
20% to 60%	45	2.89 ± 0.62
61% to 80%	91	3.00 ± 0.65
Greater than 80%	65	2.73 ± 0.68
Current Status of Development and Implementation		
20% to 60%	44	2.33 ± 0.69
61% to 80%	90	2.44 ± 0.66

^an is based on cases included for post hoc comparisons of factors by K-8 daily lunch participation rates.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research Study Conclusions

The objectives of this study were to identify perceptions, practices, barriers, and advantages to implementing branding initiatives in school nutrition (SN) programs. Results from the study indicated there were 10 factors that contribute to marketing the SN program. These include importance of SN staff involvement, current status of SN staff involvement, advantages for students, importance of stakeholders' support, advantages for other stakeholders, current status of stakeholders' support, importance of development and implementation, current status of development and implementation, importance of communication, and current status of communication.

Based on survey responses, SN professionals believed the practice statements under "importance of SN staff involvement" factor and "current status of SN staff involvement" factor have a significant impact on the implementation of marketing initiatives in SN programs. These marketing practices include implementing and being consistent in all school cafeterias, providing feedback, attending conferences/seminars, providing professional development and training, and evaluating routinely. SN professionals believed that to market their SN program they need to have SN staff involved from inception to completion. This is consistent with the findings of the previous National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) study which identified "staff" as one of the primary methods to create an SN program's brand personality (Rushing & Asperin, 2011).

In addition, SN professionals believed the practice statements under "advantages for students" factor and "importance of stakeholders' support" factor have a significant influence on the implementation of marketing initiatives in SN programs. These marketing practices include

increase in student selection of healthier food products, updated menu, student satisfaction, increase in student participation, students provide feedback, student input is used in marketing initiatives, advocates promote marketing initiatives, and district/school administration demonstrates support. SN professionals also believed that a successful marketing initiative must focus on students as well as obtain and maintain the critical support of stakeholders.

The barriers identified by participants include find funds for marketing initiatives, time commitment to plan and implement marketing initiatives, SN staff's perception of increased workload, utilization of existing facilities to market the SN program, and achievement of consistent practices and services throughout the SN program. However, participants also identified several advantages associated with marketing the SN program such as student satisfaction with food choices, updated menu, increase in student participation, increase in student selection of healthier food products, positive school meals image in community, and SN staff feels part of a team.

SN directors reported "hardworking," "friendly," "healthy," and "successful" as the leading personality traits that describe their SN programs. Participants identified posters/banners posted in the cafeteria, school specific color scheme in cafeteria, and consistent marketing district-wide as their top marketing initiatives. The resource materials most often used to plan and implement marketing initiatives were websites, other school districts, and education sessions. In addition, the service systems most frequently used were traditional cafeteria line(s), salad bar, grab and go, and self service. 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 also 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 program.

Education and Training Implications

Research findings from this study suggest the following implications for education and training:

- Training modules are needed to assist SN directors interested in developing and implementing a marketing initiative in their programs. Modules could be developed around the ten marketing factors identified in this study, including importance of SN staff involvement, current status of SN staff involvement, advantages for students, importance of stakeholders' support, advantages for other stakeholders, current status of stakeholders' support, importance of development and implementation, current status of development and implementation, importance of communication, and current status of communication. The materials should provide strategies for overcoming possible barriers, such as SN staff's perception of increased workload.
- Additional training materials should be developed to assist SN directors in assessing their existing marketing strategy.
- Educational materials are needed to assist SN staff in understanding marketing consumer psychology and behavior and identifying ways to support a marketing initiative in their program.

Research Implications

Outcomes from this study and feedback from participating SN professionals indicated research is needed to build on this project by developing a marketing resource. The resource should include instructions to guide SN professionals through the process of developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating a marketing initiative in their SN program. This will assist SN professionals develop strategies and provide services that satisfy their current customers and appeal to new ones.

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