

Branding the School Nutrition Program: Building the Foodservice Personality



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National Food Service Management Institute The University of Mississippi

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

The National Food Service Management Institute was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford and is operated in collaboration with The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

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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BRANDING THE SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAM: BUILDING THE FOODSERVICE PERSONALITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children and adolescents' expectations of foodservice have changed in recent years. Families are eating out more than ever before, and the commercial food industry aggressively promotes their products and services to this segment of the population. Adapting some of the commercial industry' strategies for attracting child and adolescent consumers may enable school nutrition (SN) directors to increase participation rates. One such strategy shown to be successful for promoting customer satisfaction in adolescents is personality branding. Research suggests that personality branding enables an organization to establish an emotional connection with young consumers; a link that allows these purchasers to express themselves or demonstrate how they want to be perceived through the traits of the organization's brand (Aaker, 1997 & Moser, 2003).

The specific objectives of this project included the following:

- To determine characteristics that students identify as components of a school nutrition (SN) program's personality;
- To ascertain barriers to implementation of branding strategies in high school SN programs; and
- To identify sustainable strategies, resources, and successful practices for creating an SN program brand personality.

A holistic, multiple-case-study methodology with a literal replication design was used to examine brand personality across four SN sites (Yin, 2003). To establish a list of potential case

study sites, child nutrition state agency directors were asked to recommend SN directors who administer exemplary programs. From this request, researchers were provided the names and contact information of 51 SN directors. In an effort to select the most appropriate sites, SN directors were sent a short questionnaire that was designed to explore any branding initiatives that were in place at the SN sites. From the pool of SN directors who responded to the survey, four sites were selected and invited to participate.

Data were gathered in two modes. In the first mode, data were collected by SN managers and directors one month prior to site visits. In the second mode, data were collected by researchers during site visits. Prior to each the site visit, participating SN directors received a packet containing a disposable digital camera, instructions for SN managers regarding photo-voice protocol, program and management personnel profile questionnaires, a postage-paid return envelope, and instructions for returning the packet upon completion. All site visits were performed by two National Food Service Management, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) staff members.

The first site visit served as a pilot study for testing data collection protocols. Each visit lasted one to two days and included four distinct activities: (1) a structured interview with the SN director, (2) a structured interview with the site manager, (3) a focus group with high school students, and (4) a field observation. Informed consent procedures established by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee at The University of Southern Mississippi were followed by the researchers throughout the study. Information gathered from each case study site was analyzed individually for pertinent data and themes. Cross-case tabulations were performed to search for distinct patterns, similarities, or important differences in branding approaches and strategies across the sites.

Several items emerged when general SN program characteristics were studied. At each site the campus was closed at lunch, which created a situation where SN program competition was limited, and provided a greater opportunity to win student business and expose students to the SN program brand. Three of the four schools used a food court serving system in their cafeteria, which is seen in many shopping malls, airports, and hospitals around the country. At three of the schools, self-serve options were available in the cafeteria.

Comparison of the transcripts from the SN director structured interviews revealed similarities in brand personality perception, a lack of written plans for the branding initiatives, a lack of formal evaluation indicators for the branding initiative, and the existence of barriers for implementing the branding initiatives. When the transcripts for the SN managers were analyzed, trends were observed between school sites and between the responses given by SN managers and SN directors. These trends suggest that the implementation of an SN branding initiative at each site was fairly successful.

Analysis of the transcripts from the student focus groups revealed further trends. As with the structured interviews of SN directors and the SN managers, the most commonly perceived brand personality traits were friendly and hard working. A common recommendation from each of the student focus groups was to make the cafeterias more contemporary and appealing.

The field observations yielded multiple trends. In all of the schools, the cafeteria was given a distinct name, and in three of the four schools, the cafeteria was assigned a distinct logo. In three of the schools, the color scheme in the dining/serving area matched the school team colors. In all of the schools the staff wore uniforms, but only at one school did the uniform colors match the school colors.

In conclusion, results of this study showed that in creating a brand personality, SN programs focused on one of four areas: aesthetics and decor; employees and how they interact with students; nutrition and health; and school spirit. Based on these findings, it is recommended that resources be developed to help SN professionals better understand the concept of brand personality and how brand personality can be successfully implemented at an SN program.