

# **Branding the School Nutrition Program: Building the Foodservice Personality**



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

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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**

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**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.

## INTRODUCTION

Children and adolescents' expectations of foodservice have changed in recent years. This is due in part to the fact that families are eating out more than ever before. However, this change has also been influenced by the fact that food manufacturers and restaurant chains aggressively promote their products and services to children and adolescents. School nutrition (SN) programs vie for brand recognition against competitive foods and retail food outlets located in close proximity to schools. Thus, SN directors wishing to remain competitive, meet participation goals, and promote good nutrition may be wise to consider these new expectations of children and adolescents when developing marketing plans for their SN programs. (Alvy & Calvert, 2008; Bell, Cassady, Culp, & Alcalay, 2009; Kant & Graubard, 2004; Raley, Mattingly, & Bianchi, 2006; Story & French, 2004)

An increase in the number of single-parent families (Usdansky, 2008) and dual-income families (Raley et al., 2006) in the United States has left a generation of homemakers struggling to find time to meet domestic responsibilities. Consequently, out of convenience, a high number of families eat multiple meals away from home each week (Kant & Graubard, 2004). At the same time, the restaurant industry, like many other industries has come to realize the influence children have on where families choose to dine out. As a result, restaurant marketers aggressively aim promotional campaigns at children (Story & French, 2004). Meanwhile, the food manufacturing industry exposes children to a never ending media barrage of snack food and beverage advertisements, most of which are promoting items high in fat, sugar, and/or sodium, and lacking in nutrient density (Alvy & Calvert, 2008; Bell et al., 2009). Add to this situation the fact that a significant percentage of American children are overweight, and it becomes obvious that more marketing efforts are needed to promote good nutrition to children. School nutrition

directors are in a unique position to meet this challenge. Learning and applying some of the strategies used by the commercial food industry to attract child consumers may enable school nutrition directors to increase participation rates. One marketing strategy shown to be successful in research for promoting and maintaining customer satisfaction and loyalty, especially in teens, is developing a brand with a strong personality.

What is brand personality? According to Aaker (1997), brand personality encompasses the traits of a brand that allow consumers to express themselves, or demonstrate how they want to be perceived. Moser (2003) explained that brand personality can be used by organizations to establish an emotional connection with consumers through the overall tone and attitude in which brand messages are delivered. Lee, Back, and Kim (2009) concluded that brand personality has a positive effect on customer satisfaction, while other researchers reported that brand personality promotes brand loyalty by reducing consumer susceptibility to diversion by other marketing efforts (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2004). Zollo (2004) reported that teens are particularly influenced by brand personality marketing because of their strong need for self expression.

In 1997, Aaker developed a brand personality scale (BPS) to explore the meaning of commercial brands by evaluating how brand personality traits are structured in the minds of individuals in the United States. The following 42 BPS traits were identified based on five dimensions: sincerity (down-to-earth, family-oriented, honest, sincere, real, wholesome, original, cheerful, sentimental, and friendly), excitement (daring, trendy, exciting, spirited, cool, young, imaginative, unique, up-to-date, independent, and contemporary), competence (reliable, hard-working, secure, intelligent, technical, corporate, successful, leader, and confident), and sophistication (upper class, glamorous, good looking, charming, feminine, and smooth), and

ruggedness (outdoorsy, masculine, western, tough, and rugged). Hospitality researchers (Lee et al., 2009; Siguaw, Mattila, & Austin, 1999) confirmed that Aaker's BPS was effective in distinguishing restaurants based on the five BPS dimensions. Moser (2003) recommended that organizations wishing to identify their brand personality should select at least one trait from each of the five dimensions. It was further noted that the traits selected should reflect the organization's true personality and core values. Moser went on to suggest the implementation of appropriate brand icons (such as logos, distinctive packaging, organization colors, typefaces, designs and layouts, distinctive visual techniques, unique architectural images, staff uniforms, and music) to support brand personality by creating unique sensory traits that trigger an image of the brand in the customer's mind.

### **Research Objectives**

Although the concept of brand personality is new to the SN setting, creating a strong brand for an SN program and developing a good brand personality may influence the desire of students to participate in the program, while promoting good nutrition. Therefore, the purposes of this project are the following:

- Identify characteristics/indicators that students identify as components of the SN program's personality;
- Identify barriers to implementation of branding strategies in high school SN programs; and
- Identify sustainable strategies, resources, and successful practices for creating an SN program brand personality.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

A holistic, multiple-case study methodology with a literal replication design was used to investigate the application of brand marketing and brand personality concepts in the school nutrition (SN) setting. Multiple-case study research methodology was chosen because it contains qualitative methods used to explore and understand a phenomenon and its impact within real-life situations such as brand personality in SN environments (Baxter & Jack, 2008; & Yin, 2003). The holistic, multiple-case framework was used to examine brand personality across four SN settings using a literal replication format to collect data that would yield similar and contrasting characteristics in branding in SN environments (Yin, 2003). The literal replication format or protocol was developed based on previous research (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001; Wang & Burris, 1997) and research objectives to establish the components of brand personality. The replication protocol and instruments included disposable digital cameras for photo-voice techniques, structured interviewing and focus group protocol, and observation and documentation checklists that were intended to accomplish the following goals:

- Facilitate the discussion about brand personality in SN settings through structured interviews with SN directors and site-level managers;
- Guide focus groups with high school students;
- Examine support documents (i.e. printed menus, marketing flyers); and
- Conduct field observations to capture events/activities as they happen in the SN environment.

Demographic data collection instruments included profile questionnaires completed by SN directors and managers.

### Case Study Site Selection

Child nutrition state agency directors were asked to recommend SN directors who administer exemplary programs to participate in this study. State agency directors responded with the names and contact information for multiple SN directors. In an effort to select the most appropriate sites, each of the SN directors received a short questionnaire exploring branding initiatives that were already being applied at their SN sites. A cover letter explained the purpose of the questionnaire, the voluntary nature of participation, as well as the researcher's contact information for questions and concerns. Information gathered from the survey allowed the researchers to choose districts that were specifically applying innovative brand personality concepts versus those who were applying general/traditional marketing techniques. From the pool of SN directors who responded to the survey, the four case study sites were selected and invited to participate. Final selection of four study sites was based on the SN director's willingness to participate as well as SN program demographics (geographic location, meal eligibility characteristics, and size parameters).

The invitation explained the project and the purpose of the site visit, and provided the researcher's contact information for questions and concerns. After SN directors agreed to participate, confirmation letters were mailed electronically with additional information on the upcoming site visit. Attached to the confirmation e-mail was a passive parental consent form for high school students who participated in the focus group. One month prior to the site visit, a packet was sent to the SN director containing a cover letter, and a disposable digital camera with instructions for SN manager regarding photo-voice protocol, *Program and Personal Characteristics* and *Profile of High School SN Program* questionnaires, media release forms, and

a postage-paid return envelope addressed to the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD).

All site visits were performed by two NFSMI, ARD staff. The first site visit served as a pilot study to test data collection protocols. Revisions to the protocol were made as necessary prior to performing remaining three site visits. The site visits were planned for one to two days with four distinct activities to be conducted: (1) structured interview with SN director, (2) structured interview with site manager, (3) focus group with high school students, and (4) field observation.

(1) ***Interview with SN Director*** (approximately 60 minutes)

The SN director received a general outline of topics for discussion prior to the meeting. The researcher followed a structured interview guide at each site. Interviews were transcribed and reviewed to identify themes across the four interview sessions.

(2) ***Interview with SN Manager*** (approximately 60 minutes)

Prior to the site visit, the SN manager received a general overview of his/her role in the study, as well as a disposable digital camera to capture elements that he/she considered parts of the SN program's brand personality or elements that reflected the personality of the students served in the cafeteria. The SN manager was given two weeks to complete the project, at which time the SN director was to collect the camera and media release forms to send back to NFSMI, ARD in a postage-paid return envelope. Upon receipt, the researcher processed and compiled the pictures in a slideshow in preparation for the focus group with high school students. At time of site visit, the researcher conducted a structured interview with the SN manager. Interviews were transcribed and reviewed to identify themes across the four interview sessions.

(3) ***Focus Group with High School Students*** (approximately 60 minutes)

Non-randomized, purposeful sampling was used to select participants. The SN director worked with the SN manager and school administrator(s) to choose eight high school students representative of the student population (gender, age, and ethnicity, participation in the National School Lunch Program, and meal eligibility category). The researcher did not have any interaction with the students until the onsite focus group session.

Focus group sessions were held at an accessible, neutral site, accommodating the participants with convenient access. These sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Before the start of the focus group, the researchers obtained student assent to participate in the discussions. At the beginning of the focus group students were asked two questions “What is your favorite restaurant?” and “Why do you like to go there?” After responses were given and recorded, students were shown the photos that the SN manager took of the cafeteria. As the group progressed through the photo slide show, the students were asked to react to the photos by answering a series of five questions (what do you see, how does it make you feel, why was this picture taken, what characteristics do you think of, and what would you change). Next, the students were given a list of 30 descriptors (Table 1) and asked, “If you were to think of your cafeteria as a person, which of these words would you use to describe it?” After all the focus group discussions had been completed, two researchers reviewed the transcripts and identified themes across the four focus group discussions.

Figure 1

*Brand Personality Descriptors*

Friendly	Upper class	Exciting
Secure	Original	Intelligent
Hard working	Spirited	Reliable
Down-to-earth	Unique	Good looking
Real	Confident	Honest
Trendy	Independent	Up-to-date
Cool	Charming	Masculine
Successful	Family-oriented	Western
Smooth	Contemporary	Rugged
Young	Technical	Sincere

(4) **Field observation** (approximately 60 minutes)

An Onsite Branding Checklist was used to guide the field observation, which consisted of a walkthrough of the back-of-the-house, dining, service areas, and as time permitted, attendance of one lunch period to inconspicuously observe the SN program in full operation. This checklist was a two page document that listed of 24 elements of branding strategies (such as “cafeteria has its on logo” and “uses creative names for menu items”) with corresponding a boxes to indicate whether or not the element exists at the site and to provide additional comments.

### **Data Analysis**

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. As necessary, short and focused follow-up interviews were conducted via telephone to gather additional information, clarify ambiguous data, and/or verify observations.

### **Informed Consent**

The researchers followed informed consent procedures established by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee at The University of Southern Mississippi for all sections of the research study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Case Study Sites**

#### **Site One, Pilot**

##### **General Program Characteristics**

The pilot site was a high school located in the Southeast region of the United States and had a student enrollment of 1,129. The percentage of students approved for free and reduced priced meals at the high school was 23% and 7% respectively. The price of a reimbursable breakfast meal was \$1.00, while a reimbursable lunch was \$2.00. The campus was closed at lunch, meaning students were not allowed to leave campus at lunch to purchase and/or consume food. The school offered one breakfast period, from 7:30 am to 7:55 am daily and four 22-minute to 25-minute lunch periods between 11:05 am and 1:12pm. The food production system for the school nutrition (SN) program was described “as on-site,” while the service system was described as “food court.” The menu options available in the cafeteria included salad bar, pizza bar, deli bar, traditional, sandwich bar, and specialty bar (hot dog bar; soup, salad, and fruit bar, nacho bar, pasta bar, and potato bar). The *à la carte* items available were baked chips, cookies, ice cream, 100% fruit slush, water, electrolyte replacement beverage, juice drinks, crystal light, tea, yogurt, nuts, trail mix, fruit, fruit snacks, and granola and cereal bars. It was reported that the SN program was self-supporting. Further, it was reported that revenues from meal participation at lower grade levels were not needed to support the high school SN program.

##### **School Nutrition Director and Manager Personal Characteristics**

The SN director had 16 to 20 years work experience in SN programs, the majority of which were in the current position. In addition to being a registered dietitian, the director had a School Nutrition Association (SNA) certification and had completed some graduate credits

beyond a master's degree. The SN manager had six to 10 years work experience in SN programs in the current position, an SNA certification, and completion of high school diploma or GED.

### **Field Observation**

The following elements of branding were recorded during the field observation of the pilot study site. The cafeteria had a distinct name and logo, which were selected by the students. A vision statement was posted in the kitchen, but not the dining area. School colors were used in some areas of the cafeteria and as part of SN staff uniforms. Dining and serving areas did not contain many decorations. The decorations that were available were made by school staff and faculty. The types and fonts used to prepare promotional materials were not uniform or consistent for all events. A minimal amount of brand-related signage was displayed in the serving area. The cafeteria offered some self-branded to-go foods, however, creative names were not used for menu items and self-branded packaging was not available. The dining area contained rectangular tables placed in rows, which did not maximize opportunities for student socialization.

### **Structured Interviews with School Nutrition Director**

During the structured interview, the SN director for site one indicated there was not a written marketing plan for the SN program. In the past, marketing had mainly consisted of providing good customer service. The idea for the marketing/brand initiative came from trends the SN director observed in trade journals, nutrition periodicals, and information received at SN conventions. As part of the initiative, high schools students held a contest to select a name for the cafeteria, with the SN director and manager making the final decision. The brand goal for the SN program was "making the cafeteria a place where students want to eat," and the brand personality goals were friendly, warm, welcoming, fresh, and healthy. The marketing/branding

initiatives had not been implemented beyond the high school, except for the district wide formation of the SN committee, which received some resistance from middle and elementary school managers. Student participation was the only means the SN director had for evaluating the success of marketing activities. Not only did the SN program not receive financial support from the school district to support the initiative, but the SN program had to compete with the school district for vending sales.

### **Structured Interviews with School Nutrition Manager**

The SN manager reported that the marketing/branding initiative began with the implementation of the student nutrition advisory council (SNAC). The first objectives the SNAC accomplished were creating a logo depicting the school mascot (which students painted on a wall in the cafeteria) and renaming the cafeteria. The primary goals of the marketing/branding initiative were to involve students and increase participation rates. The model for the marketing/branding initiative was a local, family owned restaurant with warm and friendly service and down home southern cooking. The following human personality traits were attributed to the SN program: honest, sincere, friendly, reliable, and hard-working. The SN manager described cafeteria customers as in-a-hurry and friendly. It was stated that the unique aspects of the SN program were a very small serving area, a small close-knit community, and a lack of vending. When asked to identify future goals of the marketing/branding initiative, the SN manager reported the elimination of fried foods, selling more fruits and remodeling the cafeteria. The advice the SN manager gave to other SN programs planning a marketing/branding initiative was make the initiative a positive experience for students and be open to stakeholder suggestions.

The key players in implementation of the marketing/branding initiative were the SNAC, the school newspaper staff, teachers, the SN director and SN staff. Many of the teachers promoted the cafeteria to students, and some teachers purchased food items from the cafeteria to take home for supper. School administration demonstrated their support for the SN program by routinely dining in the cafeteria. The marketing/branding initiative was communicated to stakeholders via the school newspaper, pep rallies, menu distribution (hard copies), the menu on the school website, and the local community newspaper. The SN staff was well aware of the brand for the SN program because it was discussed routinely at staff meetings. There was no formal system in place to determine the impact or success of the marketing/branding initiative. However, it was reported that more students seemed to be coming into the cafeteria since implementing the initiative, although not all these students were purchasing reimbursable meals.

The SN program had received positive and negative feedback with regards to the marketing/branding initiative. Some students complained about the healthier focus, such as limiting the number of cookies served. According to the SN manager, the initiative improved students' perceptions of the cafeteria; students realized that the cafeteria staff was human and that they care about them. This, in turn, improved the morale of SN staff and promoted positive interactions between SN staff and students. In an effort to demonstrate involvement with school activities and the community, a non-SN related activity that SN staff participated in was the sale of pans to raise money for a local charity.

### **Focus Groups with High School Students**

Students indicated that the photo voice presentation was representative of the cafeteria, which they felt was not appealing. It was stated that the cafeteria name lacked excitement and had no real meaning to students. Characterizations of the cafeteria ranged from rugged, to

corporate, to feminine. Students indicated that the posted paper menu on the cafeteria wall was not necessary because the school had a new menu board. Students felt that the fruit offered in the cafeteria was not fresh, that the serving area was too small, and that the plates were often wet at meal time. Most students liked the salad bar, although some reported that they would like to see more variety in what is offered. Students thought the deli and potato bars should contain higher quality ingredients. French fries were identified a favorite menu item, as were self-serve selections, where students had control over the quantity of food put on their plates. Students liked the to-go-items, but they wanted the freedom to eat them outside, which was currently off limits to students due to littering. With regards to the baked chips, some students liked them and some did not, but most agreed that more variety was needed with these snack items. Students liked the freezer drinks, but wished the serving sizes were larger. It was reported that the interior dining area was often unclean, and some students felt it was too enclosed with limited lighting and no color. Students recommended that the dining area have music and more contemporary decorations. With regards to the SN staff, students reported a close and positive relationship. Some of the phrases students used to describe the SN employees were “best part of lunch,” “they respect us,” and “always cheerful.” Lastly, students concurred that more time was needed to eat lunch.

## **Site Two**

### **General Program Characteristics**

This high school site was located in the Midwest region of the United States. Student enrollment at this site was 2,335. The percentage of students approved for free meals was 16.2%, while 8.6% were approved for reduced priced meals. The price of a reimbursable breakfast was \$1.15, and the price of a reimbursable lunch was \$2.00. The campus was closed for lunch. Each

lunch period lasted 30 minutes, and serving times were divided into three blocks to accommodate all the students. The food production system was described as an onsite central kitchen that prepared some meals for a small specialized satellite school on campus. The service system was described as a food court with nine serving lines offering deli items, grill-items, pizza, home-style items, grab-and-go, and Mexican cuisine. The following *à la carte* items were available: French fries, yogurt, cookies, Gatorade (G2), Tropicana drinks, water, baked chips, soft pretzel and cheese, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, fresh fruit, and milkshakes with toppings. It was reported that participation revenues from the high school SN program were necessary to support the meal program for lower grades.

### **School Nutrition Director and Manager Personal Characteristics**

The SN director had six to ten years of experience working in SN programs, with one to five years experience in the current position. The director was a registered dietitian with an SNA certification and a master's degree. The SN manager reported six to ten years work experience in SN programs, with one to five years work experience in the current position. The manager had an SNA certification in addition to a high school diploma or GED.

### **Field Observation**

The field observation revealed that the cafeteria had a distinct name and logo, and an individualized color scheme. School nutrition staff wore uniforms, but the uniform colors differed from the schools colors. A mission statement was identified as a part of the SN program documentation, but was not on display in the cafeteria. Due to issues with volume, music was not played in the cafeteria during meal times. It was noted that the SN department produced promotional flyers and brochures in-house. Further, it was noted that the SN department used uniform fonts and types for all promotion materials and department related communication. The

serving area contained brand related signage and the dining area was furnished with round tables to promote socialization. The cafeteria did not have self-branded serving lines or products, nor was there an SN tag-line that was incorporated into marketing materials.

### **Structured Interviews with School Nutrition Director**

The SN director reported that all SN employees were required to follow a specified protocol for the marketing initiative. The goals of the marketing/branding initiative were increasing participation and getting students to eat healthy. The previous SN director was responsible for developing the theme for the marketing/branding initiative consisting of red and purple stars to identify the different meal components, a concept which was eventually copyrighted. Some of the brand identifiers for the SN program mentioned during the interview included: original, smooth, cheerful, trendy, and cool. At the time of the study, students were not involved in SN marketing efforts. Funding for the initiative came from a bond issue and a wellness grant. School administration was very supportive of the initiative, which helped increase student participation numbers dramatically in the past seven years. It was reported that resistance was not an issue in implementing the initiative, but maintaining consistency throughout the district was a challenge. Evaluation of the initiative was not formalized.

### **Structured Interview with School Nutrition Manager**

The SN manager indicated that the inspiration for the marketing/branding initiative was fast food restaurants that appeal to school-age children, such as McDonalds and Burger King. The initiative was implemented before the current SN manager; however, the cafeteria and kitchen were remodeled during the current SN manager's tenure. Some of the traits that were identified by the manager as part of the SN brand personality were down-to-earth, reliable, honest, hard-working, and spirited. According to the SN manager, the most unique aspect of the

SN program was a fully self-service serving line. The key players involved in planning and implementing the initiative were the SN director and SN manager, with support from school administration. The student population was described as generally friendly, polite, decisive, and easy-going. Freshmen were identified as the biggest population that ate in the cafeteria and had the highest participation of school lunch. At the time of the study there was no student advisory committee.

Participation numbers have increased annually for several years, but the SN manager was unsure if this increase was directly related to the initiative. Most of the feedback with regard to the initiative had been positive and many of the comments were related to the increase in the variety of menu options that were offered at meals. The marketing/branding initiative was communicated to stakeholders through distribution of the weekly menu. School nutrition staff was made aware of the initiative at new employee orientation and staff meetings. The SN manager advised that SN programs who were considering implementing a marketing initiative should identify the cafeteria by a unique name and create something that correlates the cafeteria back to the school. For example, the SN program was involved in preparing cakes and cookies for school plays and Homecoming, and community fund raising activities. The SN manager indicated that one of students' favorite aspects of the initiative was the star bonuses program, where once a month students received a treat (such as lemon bars and strawberry shortcake) when they selected at least three of the five menu components.

### **Focus Groups with High School Students**

Students reported that they were pleased about the overall dining experience and the amount of choices they were offered at meals. They felt the bright colors and commercial atmosphere in the cafeteria made the dining experience more exciting, although more décor was

recommended. Students liked the round tables in the dining area, but complained that there was not enough seating for everyone. The grab-and-go section was popular, but students felt more staff and serving lines were needed in this area to improve service. Students appreciated the ability to purchase French fries daily from the *à la carte* menu, and they liked the freedom of the vending machines, but complained that the prices of many of these items were too high and there were no “junk” food items offered.

### **Site Three**

#### **General Program Characteristics**

This Midwest high school had a total student enrollment of 1,119. The percentage of students approved for free meals was 78% and 10% were approved for reduced priced meals. The cost of breakfast was \$0.70, while lunch was \$2.00. The campus was closed during lunch. There were three lunch periods; the first period was from 10:13 am to 10:36 am, the second period was from 11:04 am to 11:27 am and the third period was from 11:55 am to 12:18 pm. When asked to describe the food production system, the SN director reported that some menu items were prepared using scratch cooking methods in the central kitchen and sent to the schools for final preparation, while other menu items were prepared at individual schools using ingredients delivered directly to the school by vendors/distributors. The service system consisted of four serving lines and a centrally located self-service bar that included condiments and toppings. Each day students had a choice of four menu options. The first, “the real deal,” consisted of a hot entrée and sides. The second, “the grill,” consisted of grilled chicken sandwiches or hamburgers and sides. The third, “build-and-go,” consisted of a weekly rotation of build-your-own meals (such as a pasta bar) and sides. The fourth, “good-to-go,” included fresh salads, sandwiches, soup, and sides. The *à la carte* items available to students included a variety

of “right-sized” snacks. It was reported that the SN program was self-supporting and the high school SN program did not rely upon revenue from the SN program in lower grades for financial support.

### **School Nutrition Director and Manager Personal Characteristics**

The SN director reported greater than 20 years work experience in SN programs, of which 16 to 20 years were at the current position. In addition to a bachelor’s degree, the director held an SNA certification. The SN manager who held a Food Manager Certificate from the state, in addition to a high school diploma or GED, reported 16 to 20 years of experience in the current position.

### **Field Observation**

The cafeteria used a district wide brand, carried specific self-branded products, purchased self-branded packaging for sandwiches and to-go items, and was planning to implement an imagery campaign to convey brand personality. The field observation revealed the cafeteria had a distinctive name, but was not derived from the marketing/branding initiative; rather it was the name of the school’s first principal. The logo for the cafeteria was the school’s mascot and the cafeteria had a specific slogan. It was noted that the SN program did not use department specific letterheads or envelopes for outgoing communications. The school produced all promotional flyers and brochures in-house.

The serving area had a color scheme that incorporated school colors, while the dining area was mostly white with a few flags hung on the walls. An SN mission/vision statement was identified and displayed in the cafeteria. It appeared the SN program had only minimal control over decorations in the dining and serving areas. The rectangular tables in the dining area were arranged in long rows, which did not maximize opportunities for student socialization. School

nutrition employees were required to wear uniforms, which did not contain the school colors.

The only time SN employees wore school colors was on Friday, which was school spirit day. It was observed that only a few of menu items had creative names. Music was only played in the dining area to announce the end of breakfast.

### **Structured Interviews with School Nutrition Director**

According to the SN director, a district-wide marketing/branding initiative was established with the help of an outside consultant about five or six years prior to this study. The brand personality was identified as real, cheerful, friendly, hardworking, and confident. It was further reported that the marketing/branding initiative operated on an “as needed” projects basis, meaning that there was no set plan, but instead marketing/branding projects were undertaken when a need arose. Examples of these projects included promoting the menu and healthy food choices, advocating for breakfast in the classroom, and educating students and staff about the importance of recycling. A marketing expert was consulted to make sure the SN initiative was in sync with other school marketing efforts. All schools in the district actively participated in the initiative, but some schools were more willing to try new ideas (such as food sampling to students) compared to others. The initiative was communicated to stakeholders with brochures, a newsletter, menus, staff meetings, employee orientation, and local print media. To reduce resistance to the initiative, input was solicited from all the SN employees prior to and during implementation. Evaluation of the initiative acceptability was informal, and included listening to the parents and administrators and looking at changes in meal participation. Since the beginning of the initiative, participation rates had increased every year. Other reported positive outcomes associated with the initiative included increased customer and staff satisfaction.

### **Structured Interview with the School Nutrition Manager**

The SN manager confirmed that the concept for the marketing/branding initiative was developed by a professional marketing firm hired by the school district. School nutrition staff was made aware of the initiative in new employee orientation and periodic SN employee training. The characteristics selected to describe the SN brand personality were mostly traditional values including: honest, hardworking, wholesome, up-to-date, cheerful, and reliable. As part of the initiative, the department name was changed from “the foodservice department” to “school nutrition services.” The SN director and manager were identified as the key players in getting the initiative implemented with the commitment and support of school administration. The principal and administrative staff ate in cafeteria almost daily. The principal and the athletic department provided free polo-style shirts for the SN staff to wear on spirit days. The SN manager reported that there was little, if any, staff resistance in implementing the initiative. At the time of the study the SN department had not established a formal system for measuring the success of the marketing/branding initiative. Although participation rates had not increased since implementation of the initiative, it was reported that students appeared happier with the new environment of the cafeteria. The SN program had received several complements from school employees regarding their satisfaction with the healthier food options offered as part of the initiative. Some of the most popular menu items with students were build your own rice bowls, rotisserie chicken, and fried rice.

Three items identified as future goals of the marketing/branding initiative included: redesigning the topper bar area to improve flow, remaining profitable, and increasing breakfast participation. The SN manager advised that all SN staff should be made aware of, and trained on the initiative, and that students should be made aware of any changes before they occur.

### **Focus Groups with High School Students**

Students were mostly positive about the marketing/branding initiative. They liked the increase in menu options and serving lines, which they felt made service go faster. They especially liked the to-go serving area because there were a variety of healthy items, and students felt the to-go items were sanitary because they were individually wrapped. However, some students complained that sandwiches and milk were sometimes frozen on the inside. They also liked the appearance of the new signage, but felt much of it was unnecessary and too time-consuming to read. They thought the school logos in the cafeteria made the SN department feel like part of the school. Some students liked the fact that the cafeteria dining area and auditorium shared the same space, while others felt like the frequent announcements and entertainment in the auditorium took away from their already limited eating time. Students felt the cafeteria “lunch ladies” were nice, but strict. The human personality traits that the students most often used to describe the SN program were friendly, original, and hard working.

### **Site Four**

#### **General Program Characteristics**

Site four was located in the Southeast region of the United States. The total student enrollment for this high school was 2,282, 12.6% of which was approved for free meals and 3.3% was approved for reduced price meals. The campus was closed during lunch, which consisted of two, 30-minute meal periods. The food production system was described as “onsite,” and the serving system was “food court.” The menu options included five entrée choices daily plus fruit and vegetables. *À la carte* items offered included cookies, pizza, chicken tenders, chicken sandwiches, and a variety of beverage and snack items. It was reported that the

SN program was self-supporting and revenue from the SN program at lower grade levels was not needed to support the high school SN program.

### **School Nutrition Director and Manager Personal Characteristics**

The SN director had worked in SN programs for more than 20 years, with at least 16 years in the current position. In addition to a doctorate, the SN director was also a registered dietitian with a School Nutrition Specialist credential. A submission was not provided that detailed the personal characteristics of the SN manager.

### **Field Observation**

Multiple branding elements were identified during the field observation. The cafeteria did not have a distinct name, but it did have a personalized logo and slogan. The scheme for the cafeteria included school colors and a mission/vision statement was on display. Although music was not played during meal times, there were plans to incorporate music in the future. The dining area contained round dining tables, minimal decorations, and the serving area contained no brand-related signage. The SN staff wore uniforms, but the uniforms did not contain the school colors. Although the SN program used a district-wide brand, site four did not have a specific self-branded lunch line. Self-branded packaging was purchased for sandwiches and to-go items and an SN tag-line was incorporated into marketing materials. Promotional flyers and brochures were produced in-house. Uniform fonts and types were used for all promotional materials. The SN program had an updated website.

### **Structured Interviews with School Nutrition Director**

The SN director indicated that the marketing/branding initiative began about six years prior to the study with the creation of the current logo. The mission, vision, and values of the SN program were incorporated into the logo. The brand personality was described as friendly, good

looking, up-to-date, contemporary, hardworking, and successful. The initiative was district-wide and included changing the name of the school foodservice department to student nutrition services. The SN director indicated there was no resistance from school administration with regards to the initiative, for which funding came solely from student nutrition services. The district office for student nutrition services gave specific guidelines for how the initiative was to be implemented, but each SN site was given some flexibility to customize local initiatives fit for each school's needs. All the schools in the district were relatively successful in implementing the initiative.

There were multiple ways the district SN office communicated the branding initiative to stakeholders including the use of the logo and tag-line on all communications, newsletters to parents, and web-based promotions. There had been a steady increase in participation in recent years, but the SN director was hesitant to attribute that increase solely to the initiative as there was no formal evaluation process for the marketing initiative. It was reported that the most significant positive outcomes of the branding initiative were employee pride and a feeling of ownership of the brand. The primary negative outcome of the branding initiative was increased costs associated with marketing items such as napkins, wrappers, and to-go bags containing logos.

### **Structured Interview with School Nutrition Manager**

The following characteristics were identified by the SN manager as the program's brand personality: family-oriented, honest and real. The SN manager reported that the marketing/branding initiative was started in part because students were concerned about their weight. A school nutrition committee containing both staff and students was formed to help guide the initiative, which was then communicated to stakeholders through multiple channels,

including the school television network, menus posted in the paper, menus sent to homes, catering activities, student orientation, and PTA meetings. School nutrition employees were made aware of the initiative through training and 15-minute health breaks. The initiative had strong support from school administration, demonstrated by daily lunch patronage.

Initially, student participation rates dropped as a result of the initiative, but participation returned to normal within one menu cycle. The SN department received positive feedback from parents and staff. In fact, parents were so pleased with the new health conscious initiative they attended a school board meeting to share how they felt. Students' perceptions of the SN staff likewise had improved since the initiative began. Before the initiative, SN employees were known as the "lunchroom ladies," but afterwards, many of the students knew staff by name and the relationships were much friendlier. When asked to give future goals of the marketing/branding initiative, the SN manager indicated the purchase of a sound system for the SN program to play music during meal times and a "Feed the World" promotion where students would be introduced to different menu items from around the world. The SN manager strongly advised that other SN programs be open and honest, welcoming of student involvement, and prepared for positive and negative feedback when implementing marketing/branding initiatives.

### **Focus Groups with High School Students**

Students were happy with the variety of menu items and the control they had at lunch to make their own choices. Although they used words such as clean, organized, inviting atmosphere, and hard working to describe the cafeteria as a whole, students felt the cafeteria décor was boring. They suggested making the environment more current, colorful, and appealing. It was reported that most students did not read the menu posted in the cafeteria, but they liked the fact that the menu offerings changed daily. Some students indicated that more

serving lines were needed to increase traffic flow at mealtimes. They liked the pre-packaged salads, but wanted more variety in chip selection. Students felt some of the pre-packed items were not wrapped well enough or were kept at room temperature too long. They felt the signage for the healthy express items effectively conveyed the message to customers that the food in that area was healthy. The students indicated mixed preferences for round dining tables. The most popular human characteristics selected to describe the SN department were friendly, secure, and hardworking which also reflected their perceptions of the foodservice staff, which they felt were hard working, professional, and multicultural.

### **Combined Trends of the Four Study Sites**

Multiple common factors were observed between the four sites that participated in this study. Some of these factors may be related to why the SN programs were successful at creating recognizable brands, while other factors may indicate barriers to creating recognizable SN brands. The following conclusions are based on the premise that a recognizable SN program brand had been successfully implemented at each of the participating schools.

### **General School Nutrition Program Characteristics**

When looking at general SN program characteristics five items emerge.

- At each site the campus was closed at lunch. This created a situation in which SN program competition was limited to items students could carry to school in the morning or commercial foodservice options available after school hours outside of the campus. This provided the SN programs with a greater opportunity to win student business and expose students to the SN program brand.
- Three of the four schools indicated they used a food court serving system in their cafeteria, a serving system that is seen in many shopping malls, airports, and

hospitals around the country. As reported in the literature review, high school students routinely eat out with their families, and therefore, may be more familiar and comfortable with a food court system versus a traditional cafeteria serving line. This increased comfort level and familiarity is likely to increase student responsiveness to the SN brand.

- At three of the schools, self-serve options were available in the cafeteria. Self-service is an ideal type of service for the youth who are always looking for ways to assert their independence and express themselves. This matches Aaker's (1997) definition of brand personality, allowing consumers to express themselves, or demonstrate how they want to be perceived. With self-service, youth have the freedom to choose the foods and the quantities they desire. Furthermore, self-serve is a type of service also seen in many restaurants, and is therefore something children are likely to feel familiar and comfortable with.
- At two of the schools, individually wrapped to-go items were available in the cafeteria. Teenagers in this day and age are routinely exposed to pre-packaged foods, both in restaurants and convenience stores. This exposure is likely to provide a level of familiarity and comfort to students that helps promote the SN brand.
- At all four schools it was reported that the SN programs were self-supporting. This suggests that the SN programs are managed by someone with good business acumen. It is likely an SN director with good business acumen has a good understanding of marketing, and is able to harness that wisdom to establish a recognizable school brand.

## **Field Observations**

The field observations yielded more trends. These items demonstrated that each school had made some progress towards establishing a brand personality. It also demonstrated that most of the SN programs had made an effort to align themselves as part of the school.

- 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.
- All of the schools had a vision/mission statement, however only two of the schools posted the statement in the dining or serving areas.
- 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 three of the schools the to-go items offered were self-branded.

## **Structured Interviews with School Nutrition Directors**

Comparison of the transcripts from the SN directors' structured interviews revealed some similarities with regards to brand personality perception, a lack of written plans for the branding initiatives, lack of formal evaluation indicators for the branding initiative, and minor resistance levels or barriers for implementing the branding initiatives. Analysis of these transcripts suggests that although SN programs were successful in implementing recognizable SN brand personalities, a more formalized approach may have delivered more measurable results.

- Friendly and hardworking were two of the most cited characteristics that directors hinged their programs' brand personality on. The nature of the services offered by the SN programs lends itself very easily to these characteristics.

- Although three of the schools did not have a formal or written branding plan, student participation was listed as an evaluation indicator for the SN branding program at all four of the schools.
- Three of the schools indicated that participation levels had increased since the branding initiative was implemented. However, none of these schools were certain how much of the increase participation was directly related to the branding initiative.
- Generally, resistance to the branding initiative was minimal. The SN directors listed the following items as barriers to implementing the branding initiative: resistance from SN managers at lower grade levels, difficulty keeping the initiative consistent throughout a school district, difficulty convincing SN managers to try new ideas such as taste testing with students, and applying the SN logo to all written communication sent from an SN program.

### **Structured Interviews with School Nutrition Managers**

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. Analysis of these transcripts suggest that implementation of SN branding initiative was fairly successful. However, if the schools would have taken a more systematic formalized planning approach to the implementation of the initiative, better results would likely have been achieved.

- Both groups overwhelming agreed that there were no formalized plans written to guide the implementation of the branding initiatives and no mechanisms designated to evaluate the success of the branding initiatives.

- Both groups of SN professionals indicated friendly and hard working as the most common brand personality character traits of their SN programs.
- Two of the SN programs established SN advisory committees that included student membership, to help direct the branding initiative. Informally, feedback from students, teachers and parents; relations between SN staff and students; and changes in meal participation were most commonly identified as how SN managers determined if the SN branding initiatives were successful.
- Three of the SN managers indicated that school administrative staff showed support for the branding initiative by routinely eating lunch in the school cafeteria.
- The most common mechanisms for communicating the SN brand to stakeholders were menus, school papers, new employee orientation, and SN staff meetings.
- When asked what advice SN managers would give to another SN program planning to implement a branding initiative, the general response was as follows: involve students and SN staff throughout the process and listen to the feedback.

### **Focus Groups with High School Students**

Analysis of the transcripts from the student focus groups also revealed some common themes and suggests that the SN programs had some success in implementing the branding initiatives, but there was still more room for improvements.

- As with the structured interviews with the SN directors and the SN managers, the most commonly perceived brand personality traits were friendly and hard working.

- The negative comment that was given by more than one student focus group was that the cafeteria was lacking in excitement.
- The common recommendation from the student focus groups was to make the cafeteria more contemporary and appealing.

The common positive comments from student focus groups were they liked the self-serve bars, the to-go items, the round dining tables, and the foodservice staff.

## CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATION

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. Results showed that to create an SN program's brand personality, four primary methods are utilized singularly or in combination. Districts that have obtained additional internal and/or external funding have established the brand personality primarily through aesthetics, focusing on creating a more commercial and contemporary dining environment. On the other hand, programs with limited resources focused the SN brand around the staff and the manner in which they interact with the students. Other SN programs have focused the brand on nutrition-related themes in all promotional materials, including the cafeteria's brand name. Lastly, elements depicting school spirit (e.g. school-related logos, fonts, colors, mascots, tag lines, athletic gear) were utilized in the décor, menu, staff uniforms, and promotional materials for the SN program.

The results from each data gathering phase of this study indicated that all of the participating schools have made strides towards developing brand personalities, and as a result, positive outcomes were observed in student perceptions and attitudes about the SN program at each school. It is likely that student participation at most of these SN programs increased as a result of the branding initiatives. Further, it is obvious that each of the schools could have taken a more formalized approach to planning, implementing, and measuring the success of the branding initiatives, which likely would have resulted in greater rewards; a lesson that can be applied in the future.

School nutrition professionals, both at the district and school level, would benefit from training modules to familiarize themselves with the terminology and application of branding and

creating a recognizable brand personality. These modules would help SN professionals better understand how to plan, implement, and evaluate an SN program branding initiative. School nutrition professionals wishing to engage in creating a brand personality at their SN program have multiple avenues they can pursue for guidance, such as searching for reference books or trade journal articles on this topic, hiring a branding/marketing consultant, or networking with SN directors and managers who have already implemented successful branding initiatives. Additionally, SN professionals can look at the case study sites presented in this study to get started.

If an SN professional were going to use the results of this study to develop a brand personality for their SN program, it is advised that the following suggestions be considered:

- Gather a committee of stake holders (students, parents, teachers, and SN workers) to serve as advisors for this project. Involve them in each step of the process. Getting their buy-in and support will help ensure the success of the project. Members of this group may also be helpful later in the project when volunteers are needed to make decorations and signs, or to help with activities like painting. Decide the brand personality for your program. This will require input from staff and students at each school participating in this program. One of the case study sites used a contest to get students and staff to give input. Whatever process is chosen, selecting at least one brand personality scale from each of the five dimensions (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness) will contribute in building a strong foundation for the SN's brand personality. Use the results of this process to determine the "true" brand personality to emulate for your branding initiative. Remember, the personality selected, must be a true or realistic representation of the school(s) and

program and must balance with the perceptions of students and staff. Estimate the scope of the project (i.e. renovations, decorations, signage, sound systems, and staff uniforms) and determine the budget that will be allocated. This facilitates an informed decision making process which may encourage the district to help in the branding effort.

- Based on the estimated project scope and budget, look at the models provided by the case study sites and gauge which general ideas meet your needs (e.g., renovating the cafeteria, replacing rectangle tables with round tables, adding self-branded signage to the serving area, decorating the cafeteria and serving areas, purchasing staff uniforms, installing a sound system for music, and purchasing self-branded packaging for wrapping to-go items). Coordinate a plan based on the example items provided above that exposes the brand personality you want to emulate.
- Establish a time-line for when these activities will take place that corresponds with the school schedule.
- Develop a system for evaluating and continually improving the project. The best way to accomplish this is to establish project goals, such as increased student participation and customer satisfaction. Routinely gather student and staff input with surveys or suggestion boxes.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research**

The project is limited only to information from four SN sites. A longitudinal study or a national survey among SN administrators would be beneficial to assess and validate the effectiveness of the branding strategies demonstrated in this research. In addition, a wider sample of schools at different levels of branding and/or marketing application could provide a more

robust picture of what is feasible and sustainable in an SN environment. Outcomes of the current study and future related studies could lead to the development of a best practice guide providing successful practices for creating a competitive and appealing brand personality for the SN program. The guide can be of use to SN professionals who want to establish benchmarks for branding their high school SN program. Such a guide could also alleviate the anxiety over planning and implementing a branding program.

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