

# **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**

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

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### **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.