It’s Time To
MOBILIZE YOUR MARKETING

Promote your school meal program as if your job depends on it—because it just might.
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You’re coordinating meal preparation and service in the cafeteria in one school, classrooms in another and multiple meal packs for parent pickup.

You’re short-staffed and short on multiple menu items. Three parents have publicly taken your team to task for running out of pre-ordered meals, two principals have reported complaints from the custodian about foodservice trash and one school site is investigating a reported virus outbreak. Someone from SNA reaches out and asks about your plans for promoting National School Lunch Week (NSLW) next month. “Are we celebrating NSLW this year? Are you kidding? Of course, we (are/aren’t)!” Think carefully before you finish that sentence.

School nutrition professionals are always pulled in multiple directions, especially at the start of a new school year. But 2020 has dumped significantly heavier burdens on your shoulders. Something’s gotta give, and the sustained creativity required for marketing efforts may seem the most dispensable candidate. But that could prove an unwise decision. The challenges of 2020 mean that marketing may be the most important priority for your time and attention.

Whether you are making the meal experience irresistibly fun for kids or reassuring their parents of safety standards or raising awareness about the passionate professionalism of your team, all campaigns lead to one destination: increased participation in your program. Participation drives everything. While districts should take deserved pride in distrib-
Facing COVID-19 with Courage • Commitment • Compassion

Showing off a new touchless barcode scanner system is one way to build parent trust about safe meals in Tuscaloosa.

Keshia Williams, School Nutrition Director in Coweta County, Ga., reached out to SEA Level Social to create this infographic and gave permission to share the concept with other districts.

Marketing our child nutrition programs has always been an important aspect of our jobs, but due to the serious financial deficits that we’re all facing, it should be considered one of our top priorities,” says Donette Worthy, SNS, Child Nutrition Director, Tuscaloosa County (Ala.) School District. “Telling our story through marketing will be one way that we can turn our finances around to the positive. It can be the tool that we use to help gain the trust of our parents and the community, which, hopefully, will drive more students to eat with us.”

Sharon Glosson, SNS, Executive Director of School Nutrition, North East Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas, agrees. “It’s important for communities to know that their support of the local school meal program is crucial for our survival. We saw the devastating impact that a decrease in participation causes our programs.”

MASTERING THE MESSAGE

“We need to sell the convenience, the affordability, the deliciousness, the nutritional value and the comfort of school meals,” says Jeanne Reilly, NDTR, SNS, School Nutrition Director, Windham Raymond (Maine) RSU #14 Schools. “We need to make it clear that having a school lunch, whether in school or at home or in a learning pod, brings some normalcy to the school day and offers relief to parents who are exhausted by trying to plan breakfast and lunch menus day in and day out.” (Never mind the stress of trying to supervise remote learning!)

In this most unusual and uncertain year, there are So. Many. Messages. to market about your program. School meals are safe. School meals are for everyone, regardless of income, regardless of whether you are learning at school or home. They are important to education and well-being. Our school meals are delicious and nutritious. They have value to busy parents. They connect kids with pre-pandemic normalcy. We have an awesome team
and we all miss the kids. We still want
to engage with our students, no matter
where they are, keeping the fun in our
program. Plus, there are many logisti-
cal updates that parents need to know.
Whew!

Given your limited time to produce
materials, how do you identify and pri-
oritize these different messages? Keep
your goals front and center.

“Marketing equals communication,
and during COVID-19, communicating
with families is essential,” stresses Reil-
ly. “Menu changes, changes in school
schedules, delivery sites and times—ev-
everything is so variable now. We need to
deliver the most up-to-date information
to families—in the easiest manner for
them to receive it. We take a multi-
pronged approach of messaging families
through our district listserv and using
social media, especially Facebook and
Instagram.”

Consultant Liz Roesel, owner of the
new school nutrition marketing-based
start-up SEA Level Social, affirms both
the priority and the means. “Logistics
since March have been more com-
plicated than ever, and parents are
extremely eager for the latest news and
guidance from the district,” says Roesel.

“Most child nutrition departments have
switched from the National School
Lunch Program (NSLP) to emergency
feeding to summer feeding to NSLP
then, wait a minute, back to summer
again. It’s not only overwhelming for
the nutrition team, but for parents to
understand who can receive meals and
when and where they can access them.”

She’s working on some simple “thank
you for your patience and support”
social media messages for her clients.

“Everything can’t run perfectly from day
one. We want to gently reiterate this to
our audiences to let them know that
these are unique circumstances, that
everyone is doing their best and that
things may continue to change in the
coming weeks. Get ahead of an angry
parent reaction,” she advises.

Making lemonade from the lemons
of the continual programmatic changes,
Roesel notes that it has created a captive
audience that is eager to receive and
share your next update. “Overall, social
media posts announcing free meals
have had the highest amounts of ‘likes,’
‘comments’ and all-important ‘shares,”
she reports.

Glosson and her team stick to core
messages about school meals: Their
amazing team goes above and beyond
for students, providing delicious choices
so that children will be allowed and
encouraged to participate and get all the
benefits of school meals.

Worthy believes it’s most important
to address the fear and anxiety that the
pandemic has generated. “Showcasing
our safety measures is my number one
priority in our marketing efforts,” she
reports. “If our parents and guardians don’t feel as if their child will be safe eating with us, then, honestly, the look, nutrition and logistics won’t matter. Once the trust factor has been established, then showing off our wonderful meals, sharing logistics with our remote learners and showcasing our amazing team will follow.”

Roesel agrees that marketing efforts can go a long way to make parents feel at ease and students feel safe and welcome. She helped to develop a flyer and social media graphic for the Coweta County (Ga.) School Nutrition team that would highlight the safety measures they had implemented and the protocols to follow when picking up meals. “Isn’t it reassuring to your audience that you are taking these precautions?” asks Roesel rhetorically.

She reports that another priority popular among her clients is the “we have missed our students and are so happy to see them back in the cafeteria” message. “But don’t forget your virtual learners,” Roesel advises. “They are still a part of your district, and you might want to make a little extra effort to make them feel some of that love from your team.” This also will head off potential parental backlash that at-home learners are being treated as less important than face-to-face learners.

In the Year of the Pivot, trying to create and stick to a strategic marketing plan may be an impractical goal. When it comes to message priority, “I really just go with what seems most pressing at the time, what I am hearing out in the community. It’s very instinctive,” explains Reilly. That said, her instincts generally point her to prioritize mes-
Events like National School Lunch Week (NSLW), National Apple Month and Halloween are so important when it comes to engaging students in your school nutrition program. But so far, in the early weeks of the school year, they’ve been relegated to the back burner by many district teams still adjusting to the basic logistics of getting meals prepped and served and foundational marketing outreach to parents to maximize participation. Plus, “It feels different with COVID-19,” concedes Jeanne Reilly, NDTR, SNS, School Nutrition Director, Windham Raymond (Maine) RSU #14 Schools. “Gone are our Fun Friday theme breakfasts and our special events. But they will be back!”

When Reilly catches her breath, she’s sure to start putting on her thinking cap for planning special events that work within the restrictions of the pandemic. “These are participation drivers and they help deliver the messages that school meals are fun and delicious and that we care, without really having to ‘say’ those things.” Special celebrations are a great way to get new customers and gain their loyalty.

Donette Worthy, SNS, Child Nutrition Director, Tuscaloosa County (Ala.) School District, is going to start evolving her marketing efforts away from safety measures to focus on the high quality of school meals and the benefits to all children. “Just recently, I had one mom think that since all meals will be free until the end of December, this meant that the quality of meals would decrease,” she reports.

Liz Roesel, owner of the SEA Level Social marketing consultancy, encourages school nutrition operators to take advantage of promotions like NSLW and National Farm to School Month, calling them “more important than ever!” These events allow your program to become a part of a national celebration. Plus, finding creative ways to make the most of occasions like Halloween or the World Series will help your students feel more “normal” in this unique year, she explains.

Last June, April Laskey, SNS, Director of School Nutrition, Billerica (Mass.) Public Schools, presented at SNA’s popular Back to School Training Series about her thorough approach to school meal marketing—even during a pandemic. She shared a detailed plan for the year ahead, starting with back to school welcome goals and messaging:

- Students will be nervous about going back to school.
- Help kids feel as welcome and comfortable as possible.
- Use meal service in any form to engage students by keeping the tone fun and bright.
- Continue to reassure that food is safe.
- Don’t focus on “we wish things were back to normal”—stay positive.

The plan went on to identify tactics that were tailored to different grades/buildings, as well as incorporate them on signage, menus, labeling, principal newsletters and, of course, social media. At press time, Laskey reports that a simple mantra—“Smile and Feed Kids”—directs every decision. “It’s a simple idea I have repeated for 15 years, but it’s never meant so much as it has over the last six months,” she notes.

During the session’s Q&A, Laskey went on to describe how she makes marketing a budget priority, including purchasing a costume for all major—and several lesser-known—holidays. Regular celebrations are a priority at each site, although she concedes that not every manager fully embraces the responsibility. “There are some that will only do what they are told to do—and then I provide a basic set of materials. But others want to put their own stamp on it.”

**MAXIMIZE YOUR RESOURCES**

When you’re pressed for time—and when marketing isn’t really your jam—all advice and ideas are invaluable. Some general strategies follow, but also check out some of the ideas worth borrowing on page 4.

“When crafting any marketing message—especially on social media where everyone is scrolling quickly and you are competing for attention—it’s important to keep your message and phrasing as simple as possible. Parents don’t understand what ‘waiver flexibility’ means, but they can understand that meals are free at this time,” says Roesel.

She also encourages a fair amount of re-purposing (AKA “stealing”). Materials from organizations like SNA or government agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are
great to share with anxious parents. Reilly agrees: “Make the most of tools—graphics, messages and other marketing content—provided by SNA, your state affiliate, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, vendors and even other directors that are shared on social media. Save these for the days when you don’t have even a minute to spare or for when you are fresh out of ideas.”

Roesel also applauds how “our school nutrition family so effortlessly shares and builds each other up,” noting that the infographic developed for Coweta County has been customized for other districts and shared on school nutrition Facebook groups.

Glosson is lucky to have a good-sized team to help her market school meals, and she recognizes that this priority can be another burden for smaller districts with fewer resources and time to invest. But she notes that a perceived negative can be turned to a positive: “I think it would be fun to find a student group that could help with marketing, possibly as part of a class project. Students have creative ideas and tactics to reach their peers.”

For her Windham Raymond community, Reilly tends to send wordier logistics-heavy communications via listserv and emails. But when using graphics on social media? “I want the picture to almost speak for itself, grabbing attention and telling the story quickly and efficiently.” She relies on her team to provide her with “great photos of the meals they are serving or interesting ‘behind-the-scenes’ perspectives that can tell a parent a lot about what goes on in a school kitchen.” In fact, Reilly says she’s trained all members of her team on how to take and send pictures with a smartphone. “That has saved me from having to be in many different places all at the same time. It’s a key tactic: utilizing your staff to document their days and the work they are right fully proud of.”

Worthy also asks her staff to send her pictures throughout the week. When she uses one on social media, she makes sure to give a shout-out to the specific team in the post. “Our staff understands the importance of our marketing efforts, as I am very upfront with them about the negative effects that the pandemic has had on our program.”

Images have been among the most-effective marketing approaches in her district, Reilly reports. “Showing pictures of our meals and of students enjoying those meals? This strategy has truly changed the perception of school meals in our district—and even helped grow our participation during the early days of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, when everyone else’s participation was dropping! Even school board members follow us on social media today and comment about our amazing school meals.”

If you have a group in the school community that supports your program, like the Board of Education, PTA, booster club or even just the district communications office, then reach out for their help in sharing your messages. “When the school district’s social media team shares our department posts on their page, they have a much larger following and it directs parents back to our page,” Glosson explains.

Indeed, this is a good time to look at your department’s website with fresh
If there’s downtime at the pickup, conduct a quick poll to get feedback or share an upcoming initiative or change,” she notes.

Remember that marketing is a year-round effort—and an opportunity to educate your audience and build your brand. “As the year progresses, take as many pictures as you can of your team, students in the cafeteria, everyone at the curbside pickup line and your delicious meals,” says Roesel. “Pictures always get more engagement from social media audiences, and you can also publish them on your website and include them in e-newsletters.”

MARKETING WORKS

“Marketing can seem like a daunting task on top of everything else that we have going on right now,” Worthy admits. “But I want my peers to understand that it is OK to start small. Set a goal, and when you accomplish it, set another. Don’t give up. At first, you might feel as if it isn’t making a difference, but one day you will see the fruit of your labors.”

Reilly articulates what is at the heart of everyone’s school meal marketing priorities in this strange school year: “We want families to know that we care about them. This has been a stressful time for everyone. By caring for our customers, we will win their loyalty for years to come, long after COVID-19 is gone.”

Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition.
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