Media Outreach

Best Practices Guide

Looking for some new tips on how to capture the media’s attention, prepare for a press event and get the good news out about the healthy, delicious meals you serve? Learn from your colleagues – school nutrition professionals who have earned positive media coverage for their programs. This guide offers advice, ideas and success stories from School Nutrition Association members with extensive experience in media relations.

For other media outreach resources, including talking points, handouts and more, visit www.schoolnutrition.org/pr.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Get to know your communications officers.................................................................2
The Hook: Know what events will grab the media’s attention ................................3
Plan your visual ..............................................................................................................5
Find Your Best Spokesperson ..................................................................................7
Don’t overlook social media opportunities .............................................................8
Be prepared when the media calls ...........................................................................10
Get to know your communications officers

“I always clear any interview with our Public Affairs office first,” says Jessica Shelly, Cincinnati Public Schools (Ohio). “It makes them feel in control and in the know.”

Most school districts have a public affairs department or communications officer in charge of media outreach. Oftentimes, these individuals are in charge of the district’s outreach to parents through e-newsletters, the website and social media.

On a quiet day, invite your communications officer to join you for school lunch to learn about the healthy meals you serve and any upcoming special events or nutrition education initiatives. Talk with these individuals about ways to get your positive messages out to the community. If you are planning a media event, ask them for advice on ideal timing and location for the event, the best media outlets and reporters to invite and how to make sure your cafeteria and spokespeople are camera-ready. They may prefer to write the media advisory and contact the reporters, so be sure they have all the information they need for the event.

If reporters come directly to you for interviews, consider forwarding or sharing the information with your communications officers so they stay up to date on media interest in your program. They may want to be involved with interviews or may have additional tips to help you prepare. After interviews run/air, they may be able to help spread the good news through internal and external newsletters, blogs or emails.

Building a relationship with your communications officer can pay off in unexpected ways. When Hickman Mills C-1 School District’s (Missouri) summer meals program was featured on SNA’s website, Leah Schmidt, SNS, shared the link with her district’s communications office. Within a day, a local television news outlet visited one of the district’s summer meal sites and broadcast this fantastic news story promoting the program: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfON4D9fqys.
The Hook: Know what events will grab the media’s attention

Every school meal program deserves positive media coverage, but it takes something special to grab the media’s attention. Maybe you’re hosting a student taste test of foods that meet the new nutrition standards, planning a kids cooking competition, or having a farmer talk with students about the locally grown apples on your menu this month. Here are some “hooks” that have captured the media’s attention in schools across the country:

Hillsborough County School District (Florida) earned great media coverage for their **Cook It Up Student Recipe Challenge and Cook-Off**. Student chefs were paired with their school’s nutrition manager, serving as “sous” chef to assist them in making their dish. The grand prize winner received tickets to a Justin Bieber concert.

Hillsborough’s **Behind the Lunch Counter – Kitchen Tours** have also been popular. Families, community members, and media get a behind-the-scenes look at the program. Stations are set up throughout the kitchen and serving areas with information on how food is prepared, financials, training, and nutrition. Check out the coverage at: [http://tbo.com/brandon/two-local-schools-host-kitchen-tours-525976](http://tbo.com/brandon/two-local-schools-host-kitchen-tours-525976).

**Student taste tests** are great ways to demonstrate how schools are encouraging students to try healthier choices. Taste tests are always popular with reporters, who love to get student reactions and find out what healthy foods are (and aren’t) well received by students. Here is an example of a student taste test media event at Norfolk Public Schools (Virginia): [http://hamptonroads.com/2010/05/norfolk-schools-use-hummus-get-kids-eating-healthy-food](http://hamptonroads.com/2010/05/norfolk-schools-use-hummus-get-kids-eating-healthy-food).


Plan your visual

A picture really *is* worth a thousand words! The best media events are ones that offer strong visual elements that complement the story being told.

Too many reporters and viewers have negative perceptions of bland school meals. When you plan your media visit, think about all the **colorful, healthy-looking visuals** you can provide, and be sure to include details about what visuals will be available in your media advisory. [Click here](#) to download a sample media advisory.

Remember to talk with the school principal about whether students have **signed media releases** on file allowing them to be filmed or photographed. TV crews may need to avoid filming student’s faces if media releases are not on file. Plan ahead to ensure camera crews have well-lit space to set up where they can capture activity in your kitchen and the lunchroom. Here are some additional tips from media pros:

Wake County Public Schools (North Carolina) **staged the kitchen** during a recent successful media event.

> *Marilyn Moody, SNS, said, “We prepped foods for the next day; we cut up tomatoes for salads, and used the Robot Coupe while the cameras were rolling. We tried to make the kitchen appear like "scratch cooking" was alive and doing well in school kitchens.”*

And since reporters inevitably arrive in the cafeteria mid-meal, when student trays are already picked over, Jean Ronnei, SNS, in Saint Paul Public Schools (Minnesota) recommends **setting up a visual for reporters**, so they can zoom in on all the healthy choices on the tray:
Many viewers haven’t taken step in a school cafeteria in years, so you’ll want to **make sure your cafeteria is camera ready** when the media calls. Dallas Independent School District (Texas) goes through the following checklist before every media event:

- Make sure you inform the cafeteria staff, and if needed, replace uniforms or aprons. This way staff will be looking their best for the big day.
- To make serving lines look welcoming and inviting, add decorations using items you have on hand in the kitchen.
- Make sure everything looks picked up and clean.
- Remove empty/almost empty pans from line.
- Have the cafeteria supervisor assign a staff person to walk the front of the line periodically to make sure everything stays looking camera ready.
- Remind the cafeteria staff to smile, greet students as they normally do and to carry on as if no cameras are there when serving students.

For more suggestions on preparing for cafeteria site tours, visit [SNA’s Cafeteria Site Visit 101](#).

Once your visual is all set, **take plenty of photos**. Post them on your website or on parent flyers, promote via social media and share with media unable to attend the event. Willamina School District (Oregon) earned this great clip by submitting an event photo to their local paper:
Find Your Best Spokesperson

Of course the interview is just as important as the visual.

Jean Ronnei, SNS, Saint Paul Public Schools (Minnesota) reminds us that “Spokespersons can be anyone within your department. Find the person that is comfortable speaking in front of a group, is a natural smiler, and knows the subject matter.”

For Jean’s department, Angie Gaszak fits the bill, and her credentials, as a Registered Dietitian, give her additional credibility with the media. To see Angie in action, click here: http://www.kare11.com/news/article/989677/26/Back-to-class-New-healthier-lunch-menu.

And since the camera is always rolling, be sure to prepare all your cafeteria staff in case the camera turns in their direction. Reporters are often interested in interviewing the cafeteria supervisor since she/he works with the students every day.

Dora Rivas, SNS, of Dallas ISD (Texas) says to “Remind [your cafeteria staff] to be positive about the school meal program. This is their opportunity to brag!”

To help staff prepare, Dallas ISD (Texas) provides them with a list of possible questions and the department’s key messages.

Reporters also want to hear from participants. For a recent summer food program media event, Dallas ISD asked children to write about what the Summer Food Program meant to them. Their responses were posted for media and event attendees to see. They also identified participating families to speak about the program.

Teachers are excellent third party validators!

When a local news station came to visit Mesa Public Schools’ (Arizona) breakfast in the classroom program, the district arranged for the classroom teacher to interview with the reporter about the benefits of breakfast to her students.
Don’t overlook social media opportunities

Reporters, parents, and students all spend a tremendous amount of time on social media sites, so don’t overlook Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites as a way to get your message out. Provo School District (Utah) maintains a model Facebook page (check out http://www.facebook.com/ITSMealsProvo). Even if you don’t have the staff or time to maintain a Facebook page for your program, consider regularly contributing to your school district’s social media sites by providing colorful photos, popular menu items, cafeteria event info or facts about the healthy foods being served.

In Fall 2012, when the media was abuzz with stories about “hungry athletes,” Jean Ronnei, SNS at Saint Paul Public Schools (Minnesota) went on the offense by posting daily pictures on the district Facebook page of the healthy, hearty meals available in the school cafeterias. The posts allowed the program to show and describe the delicious, nutritious foods being offered, and the posts earned numerous “likes” and positive comments from parents who knew little about the meal program.

Dallas ISD’s (Texas) meal program also utilizes their district’s Facebook and Twitter accounts to post reminders about school nutrition promotions. Following each special event, they post pictures to the district’s Flicker account and news stories to the district webpage.

Chandler Unified School District (Arizona) has taken to the social media airwaves by creating their own social media pages at www.facebook.com/cusdnutrition and www.twitter.com/cusdnutrition.
Wesley Delbridge, RD, reports that “Between Facebook and Twitter we have over 4,000 followers and it continues to grow. We advertise new items, show pictures of events and taste testings and even have giveaways. It has been a great resource to communicate with our parents and help change some of the ideas they might have about school meals.”


For tips on the use of social media in school nutrition departments, [click here](http://www.azcentral.com/community/chandler/20120511chandler-schools-using-food-lure-followers) to download Wesley’s article.
Be prepared when the media calls

From new nutrition standards to food safety concerns, you never know what topic the media will call to discuss. When you receive a “surprise” media call, never feel pressured to give an interview on the spot – **always give yourself time to prepare.**

*Nancy Rice, SNS, Georgia Department of Education, reminds us, “You can tell the interviewer you are busy at the moment, but to please email their questions over and you’ll try your best to get back with them by their deadline. This gives you a chance to get your thoughts and research together.”*

Nancy recommends creating a **cheat sheet** to keep on hand at all times listing key stats like average daily participation, free and reduced price percentage, meal prices, healthy new menu items, etc. You’ll also want to include some key messages about your program and any specific initiatives that you want to promote (eg Farm to School, Breakfast in the Classroom, etc).

Debbi Beauvais, SNS, Gates Chili & East Rochester Schools (New York) even keeps a running list of **“Sound Bites”** or short, catchy phrases like “You cannot teach a hungry child” or “Fuel up with fruits and veggies.”

*Debbi says, “When I have to write a piece about my program or get interviewed for a school nutrition story it is great to have this list to look through to have those quotable quotes refreshed in my head.”*

Short sound bites are particularly important for radio and television interviews. News radio stations often produce 30 second stories, so when you can boil your comments down to a catchy phrase, your message is more likely to hit the airwaves.

Don’t forget to keep a few **photos of your healthy looking lunch and breakfast trays** on file too. If the reporter can’t come to visit your cafeteria, you can send a photo or two to show off the great looking food you serve. Here’s one from Debbi’s program:

More tips on responding to media calls are available in SNA’s Media and Outreach Guides, found at [SchoolNutrition.org/PR](http://SchoolNutrition.org/PR).