

Building the School Nutrition Program Brand Personality Within the School Setting

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Please note that this study was published before the implementation of Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which went into effect during the 2012-13 school year, and its provision for Smart Snacks Nutrition Standards for Competitive Food in Schools, implemented during the 2014-15 school year. As such, certain research may not be relevant today.

ABSTRACT

Purpose/Objectives

The objectives of this project were to investigate the application of brand personality concepts in the school nutrition (SN) setting and to explore high school students' awareness and acceptance of these branding initiatives.

Methods

An embedded, multiple-case replication design included structured interviews with SN directors and managers focused on the process, strategies, and challenges of building the SN brand personality. An on-site branding checklist was used to evaluate visible uses of branding strategies in the cafeteria. SN managers were requested to take photos of elements that gave the cafeteria personality or character, while high school students were asked to react to these pictures using a standardized set of probing questions during focus group sessions.

Results

Results showed that to create an SN program's brand personality, four primary methods have been 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. 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.

Applications

As the number of meals eaten outside the home continues to increase, SN programs vie for brand recognition against competitive foods and retail food outlets located in close proximity to schools. Results from this study provide sustainable and successful practices for creating a competitive and appealing brand personality for the SN program.

INTRODUCTION

An increase in the number of single-parent families (Usdansky, 2008) and dual-income families (Raley, Mattingly, and Bianchi, 2006) in the United States has left a generation of homemakers struggling to find time to meet domestic responsibilities. Consequently, a high number of families eat several meals away from home each week out of convenience (Kant & Graubard, 2004). At the same time, the restaurant industry, like many other industries, recognizes the influence children have on where families choose to dine. Restaurant marketers aggressively aim promotional campaigns at children (Story & French, 2004), and the food manufacturing industry vigorously promotes snack

food and beverages to children in a never-ending media campaigns (Alvy & Calvert, 2008; Bell, Cassady, Culp, & Alcalay, 2009;). Adapting some of the strategies used by the commercial food industry to attract child consumers may enable SN directors to increase participation rates. One successful marketing strategy 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. Brand personality may be used by organizations to establish an emotional connection with consumers through the overall tone or manner used to deliver brand messages (Moser, 2003). Other researchers have reported that brand personality promotes brand loyalty, reducing consumer susceptibility to diversion by other marketing efforts (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2004). Zollo (2004) reported that teens are particularly influenced by brand personality marketing because of a 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. A five-factor, 42-trait model was established with the following dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (Table 1).

Table 1. *Brand Personality Framework (Aaker, 1997)*

Dimensions	Traits
Sincerity	Down-to-earth, honest, 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
Sophistication	Upper class, glamorous, good looking, charming, feminine, and smooth
Ruggedness	Outdoorsy, masculine, western, tough, and rugged

Hospitality researchers (Lee, Back, & Kim, 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 developing a 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.

To strengthen brand personality, Moser also suggested the implementation of appropriate brand icons that create unique sensory traits, triggering an image of the brand in the customer's mind. Such icons include, but are not limited to: logos, distinctive packaging, organization colors, typefaces, designs and layouts, distinctive visual techniques, unique architectural images, staff uniforms, and music.

Creating a strong brand for SN programs and developing a good brand personality may influence the desire of students to participate in the program. Thus, the following research questions were used to develop a case study: What characteristics or indicators compose the SN program's brand personality as perceived by students, SN directors, and SN managers; and what are the barriers to the implementation of branding strategies in high school SN programs?

Results of this exploratory case study can lead to future research that will help SN directors in establishing sustainable strategies and successful practices for creating an SN program brand personality.

METHODOLOGY

A multiple-case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003) with a literal replication design using a modified photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001) was used to examine the application of branding concepts across four SN settings. The replication protocol and instruments included structured interviewing and focus group scripts, disposable digital cameras for photovoice components, and a branding checklist. The site visits were planned for one to two days, with four distinct activities to be conducted by two researchers: (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) field observations. Informed consent procedures established by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee at the University of Southern Mississippi were followed for all aspects of the research study. Methods were approved by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Site Selection

Child nutrition state agency directors across the country were asked via e-mail to recommend potential case-study sites. Of the 50 directors who received the e-mail, 16 responded and recommended a total of 49 SN directors. Each of the recommended SN directors received a short questionnaire exploring branding initiatives that were already being applied at their SN sites. To stimulate responses, the following were provided as examples of branding initiatives: giving a distinct name to the cafeteria, using school and/or district-specific terms in naming menu items, and incorporating school colors. Responses were received from 13 SN directors representing only the Midwest and Southeast USDA regions. Survey results allowed researchers to choose SN districts that were applying the widest variety of brand personality techniques. Final selection of four study sites was based on SN program demographics (enrollment and average daily participation rate) the SN director's willingness to participate, and school district level approval of the site visit. Two schools from each of the regions represented were chosen (Table 2). The first site visit served as a pilot study to test data collection protocols. As a result of the pilot study, the only revisions in data collection protocol were the times budgeted for each step of the observation (dependent on the time commitment of the sites). No changes were made on the data collection instruments; therefore data collected from the pilot site was included in the study results.

Table 2. *Demographics for School Districts Selected as Case Study Sites*

Variables	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
USDA region	Southeast	Midwest	Midwest	Southeast
Student enrollment	1,129	2,335	1,119	2,282
Average daily participation	60.8%	59.8%	81.6%	22.8%
Percentage of students approved for free and reduced-price meals	30.0%	24.8%	88.0%	15.9%

Data Collection

Following confirmation of participation, the SN manager received an overview of his/her role in the study and a disposable digital camera with photovoice instructions. The managers were asked to photograph elements that captured or reflected the SN's brand personality. The SN manager had two weeks to complete the project, after which the camera and media release forms were sent back to the researchers. The researcher processed and compiled the pictures into a slideshow in preparation for the on-site focus group with high school students.

Non-randomized, purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the focus group. At each site, 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). Focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers after obtaining student assent to participate in the discussions. Students were shown the compiled photo slideshow. For each photo, students answered a series of five questions based on photovoice "free writes" protocol (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001): " *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?*" After the slideshow, students were given a list of the 42 descriptors on the Brand Personality Scale (Aaker, 1997) and were asked, "If you were to think of your cafeteria as a person, which of these words would you use to describe it?" The lists were collected and results tallied.

During the site visit, researchers conducted separate one-hour interviews with the SN directors and managers using the same structured interview guides at each site. Questions for the directors and the managers focused on the processes involved in the branding initiative, development of the brand and brand personality, and the barriers to implementation, if any. Directors and managers were also asked to provide any feedback they received from students, parents, SN staff, school staff, administrators, and other stakeholders upon implementation of the branding initiative. In addition, researchers conducted a walkthrough of the back-of-the-house, dining, and service areas to gather information on branding strategies used in the SN site, recording observations using a branding checklist. Items on the checklist included the use of brand icons such as: logos, distinctive packaging, organization colors, uniform typefaces, user imagery (e. g., pictures of students), and staff uniforms (Moser, 2003).

Data Analysis

Information gathered from focus groups, interviews, and site observations was transcribed and analyzed individually for pertinent data and themes. A modified Constant Comparative Method (CCM) was used to analyze data (Glaser, 1965), which provided a process for analyzing the data collected across the SN sites. 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. Glaser (1965) proposed that by using the CCM, effective and efficient strategies may be systematically identified, described, and combined by researchers for dissemination to other professionals in their field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multiple common factors were observed between the four sites that participated in this study. Table 3 provides an overview of the "On-site Branding Checklist." Results showed that to create an SN program's brand personality, the branding initiatives included one or a combination of the following: improvement of aesthetics, emphasis on staff image, focus on nutrition, and incorporation of school spirit.

Table 3. *Summary of On-site Branding Checklist for All Sites*

Elements	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
Cafeteria is given a distinct name	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cafeteria has its own logo	No	Yes	Yes, the school mascot	Yes

Cafeteria has a tagline or slogan	No	No	Yes	Yes
Cafeteria uses school color scheme	Yes	No	Yes, with other colors as well.	Yes
Cafeteria has own color scheme (different from school colors)	No	Yes	See above	No
Cafeteria has a mission/vision statement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mission/vision statement displayed	No	No	No	Yes
Uses creative names for menu items	No	No	Yes	Yes
Plays music during meal times	No	No	Only played to indicate the end of the breakfast meal	No, but plans are being made for the future
Uses uniform fonts and types for all promotions	Not uniform for all events	Yes	No	Yes
Maintains updated website	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Uses cafeteria-specific letterheads, envelopes, etc. for outgoing communications	No	Yes	No	No
Produces promotional flyers and brochures	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Uses consistent decorations for dining and serving area	No	Yes	No, little control by cafeteria	Yes
Uses brand-related signage at	Minimal	Yes	No	No

different areas of dining area					
Dining and service areas are well decorated	Minimal; made by school staff and faculty	Yes	Minimal	Minimal	
Staff wear uniforms	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Staff uniforms are in school colors	Yes	No, cafeteria colors	No, but wear school t-shirts on spirit day	No	
Tables are arranged and are conducive for socialization	Some, but not all	Yes, all tables are round	No	No	
Cafeteria uses district-wide brand	No	No	Yes	Yes	
Cafeteria carries a specific self-branded lunch line and/or product	No	No	Yes	Yes	
Self-branded printed packaging or wrappers are purchased for sandwiches and salads or other grab and go products.	No	No	Yes	Yes	
Cafeteria has SN tag-line incorporated in marketing materials	No	No	Yes	Yes	
Utilizes user imagery to convey brand personality (use of typical or idealized users, e. g. , photos of students)	No	No	No, but planning to in the future	No	

Improvement of Aesthetics

Findings suggested that districts with additional internal and/or external funding have established the brand personality primarily through aesthetics, focusing on creating a more commercial and contemporary dining environment. In all four sites, the conceptualization of the aesthetic component stemmed from giving the cafeteria a distinct name, and in three of the four schools, designing a distinct logo. Three of the schools offered self-branded to-go items featuring the logo in the

packaging. Besides the branding component, individually-wrapped items also provide a visual merchandising aesthetic that students may have come to expect, as wrapped items are prevalent in many youth-oriented restaurants, vending machines, and convenience stores.

Three of the four schools indicated they used a food court serving system in their cafeteria, similar to those utilized in many shopping malls, airports, and hospitals around the country. As reported in the literature, high school students routinely dine out with their families, and therefore may be more familiar and comfortable with a food court system versus a traditional cafeteria serving line. Examples of menu options available in the cafeteria included salad bar, pizza bar, deli bar, sandwich bar, and specialty bar (hot dog bar; soup, salad, and fruit bar, nacho bar, pasta bar, and potato bar). In addition, three of the schools offered a self-serve option. SN directors and managers stated that the food court and self-serve options are ideal for high school students as these service methods allow them to choose the foods and the quantities they desire. Students in focus groups agreed, as these service systems are what they see commercially and therefore expect or prefer in their SN program.

Although steps were already taken towards improving the aesthetics, members of more than one focus group commented that their cafeteria lacked a sense of excitement. The common recommendation from three of the focus groups was to make the cafeteria more contemporary and appealing.

Emphasis on Staff Image

On the other hand, results suggested that programs with limited resources focused the SN brand around the staff and the manner in which they interacted with the students. Friendly and hardworking were two of the most cited characteristics on which directors and managers hinged their programs' brand personality. Focus group results showed that the SN programs were successful in implementing this imagery as students also identified friendly and hardworking as the top two characteristics they related to the SN program. Generally, the students commented that one reason they participate in the SN program is because of the SN staff.

Focus on Nutrition

SN programs have focused the brand development on nutrition-related themes in all promotional materials, including the cafeteria's brand name in the case of one site. Focus on nutrition is also evident on the types of items that were individually wrapped or portioned in branded packaging, such as salads, fruit cups, low-fat breakfast breads, and half portion sandwiches, to name a few.

Incorporation of School Spirit

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 color scheme in the dining/serving area of three of the schools matched the school's team colors. One of the SN programs named the cafeteria after the school's athletic team, while another program incorporated the athletic team's logo in all the signage in the dining room.

Barriers to Implementation

According to SN directors, resistance to the initiatives was generally 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 a SN program.

Analysis of interview transcripts suggested that directors and managers agreed there were no formalized plans written to guide the implementation of the branding initiatives. Only one hired an external branding specialist to assist in the development of a marketing plan focused on developing the SN's brand personality. As a result, there were no formal plans or rubrics established to evaluate the success of the branding initiatives. It was mentioned that managers and staff were sometimes not completely made aware of the timeline for project implementation and changes were made within a short window. This in turn resulted in a resistance to the change being implemented.

The following were the most commonly identified methods for SN managers to informally determine if the SN branding initiatives were successful: positive/negative feedback from students, teachers and parents; relations between SN staff and students; and changes in meal participation. Six of the

eight directors and managers indicated that participation levels had increased since the branding initiative was implemented; however, none of these schools were certain how much of the increase in participation was directly related to the initiative. To some degree, the lack of established benchmarks served as a barrier to implementation as the directors, managers, and staff could not empirically measure the success of the initiative.

Keys to Success

Directors, managers, and students stressed the importance of support and communication for the effectiveness of the branding initiatives. In two of the programs, SN advisory committees were established to help direct the branding initiative. This created buy-in and a sense of ownership among the staff and students involved. SN staff representatives on the advisory committees served as vehicles for other SN staff to provide suggestions. One director mentioned that having advocates within the student body generated support, not only for the brand but also for the program as a whole.

Communicating the SN brand personality to stakeholders was important in building support for the initiative. The most common communication mechanisms identified were menu design, school papers, new employee orientation, and SN staff meetings. The campus was closed at lunch in all study sites. This provided the SN programs with a greater opportunity to win student business and expose students to the SN program brand by using different promotional materials posted within the cafeteria and around the school.

Limitations

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.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATION

The objectives of this project were the investigation of the application of brand personality concepts in the SN setting and the exploration of high school students' awareness and acceptance of these branding initiatives. Results indicate that all the participating schools have implemented one or more branding techniques to improve student perceptions of, and attitudes toward, the SN programs. Results also indicate that in the schools selected, four primary methods were used, singularly or in combination: improvement of aesthetics, emphasis on staff image, focus on nutrition, and incorporation of school spirit.

SN professionals, both at the district and school level, may benefit from marketing training modules focused on techniques for creating a recognizable brand personality. These modules have the potential of assisting SN professionals better understand how to plan, implement, and evaluate an SN program branding initiative. The techniques that participants used in this project may assist in developing these training modules.

As a result of this project, the researchers recommend the following six strategies to develop a brand personality for their SN program:

1. 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.
2. Decide the brand personality for the program before implementing a variety of marketing techniques. This process 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 BPS 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.
3. 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.
 4. Based on the estimated project scope and budget, look at the models provided by the case study sites and gauge which general ideas meet the SN program's 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.
 5. Establish a time-line for when these activities will take place that corresponds with the school schedule.
 6. 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.

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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