

Exploring Trends and Barriers to Implementation of Branding and Marketing Concepts in the School Nutrition 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 purpose of this research study was to identify perceptions, practices, advantages, and barriers to implementation of branding concepts in school nutrition (SN) programs.

Methods

Seven SN directors participated in an expert panel session to discuss trends and barriers to implementation of branding concepts in SN programs. The qualitative information from the expert panel was used to develop a survey, and a national review panel evaluated the content validity, scales, readability, clarity, and flow of the instrument. Surveys were mailed to a random sample of 700 SN directors stratified by USDA regions. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analyses, Cronbach's alphas, and one-way MANOVAs with Tukey's HSD post hoc test.

Results

A total of 208 surveys (29.7%) were returned. Results identified four factors that contribute to marketing the SN program, which included SN staff involvement, stakeholders' support, development and implementation, and communication. SN directors reported "hardworking" (75.1%), "friendly" (73.7%), "healthy" (71.7%), and "successful" (65.4%) 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, district-wide marketing. 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: the time commitment to plan and implement marketing initiatives; finding funds for marketing initiatives; SN staff's perception of increased workload; and utilization of existing facilities.

Applications to Child Nutrition Professionals

SN professionals can use this information to create a *brand* and focus promotional efforts on marketing initiatives that appeal to their customers. Results from this study will guide the development of a marketing resource that can assist SN professionals with developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating a marketing initiative in their SN program.

INTRODUCTION

The exposure of school-age children to commercial dining has increased over the last decade. More and more families are eating several meals a week away from their homes (Kant & Graubard, 2004).

Children are also accustomed to seeing numerous food advertisements daily and have learned to recognize brands (Meyer, 2000; Story & French, 2004). This new generation of consumers has grown up frequenting restaurants with their families, and their expectations of food-service operations and customer service are evolving. A welcoming dining environment that represents their lifestyle appeals to students. They have come to expect a similar dining environment in the school cafeteria. At a time when the number of meals eaten outside the home continues to increase, school nutrition (SN) programs should monitor the effect that this exposure has on the student's decision to participate in the National School Lunch Program.

The benefits of utilizing branding strategies in the SN setting have not been empirically explored because the concept of branding has generally been associated with commercial food-service operations. Vying for brand recognition against retail food outlets located in close proximity to schools, and other heavily branded competitive foods, is a challenge for SN programs. However, four school districts that participated in a case study previously conducted by the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) have established that succeeding in this endeavor is possible (Rushing & Asperin, 2011). These four school districts rose to the challenge, adapting some of the branding strategies used in commercial food-service operations into their own brand personality.

A well-established brand personality, defined as the "set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (J. L. Aaker, 1997; Marconi, 2000), must have the following characteristics: elements of the brand's marketing mix are deliberately coordinated, personality sought is competitively distinctive and desirable, and the personality sought is robust and kept consistent over time with all types of media (Batra, Lehmann, & Singh, 1993; Lannon, 1993). The branding concept is fairly new in the 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. Results from the previous NFSMI, ARD research showed that to create the 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.

Establishing a branding concept can help in understanding the customer and their attitudes, provide a foundation for differentiation from competition, and guide operational decisions (D. A. Aaker, 1996). In addition, brand personality influences consumer preferences by allowing them to express themselves through the brands that they use (J. L. Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1993; Siguaw, Mattila, & Austin, 1999). Brand personality can also affect the customer's emotions and thereby have a positive effect on customer satisfaction (Lee, Back, & Kim, 2009). 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. In the SN setting, branding may be associated with packaging the SN program (menu merchandising as well as cafeteria design and décor), keeping the communication to stakeholders consistent, guiding the personal interactions between SN staff and students, and designing marketing strategies to maximize the leverage that a well-established brand personality provides (Rushing & Asperin, 2011).

Many SN professionals do not recognize that they have a "brand" and identify these strategies as being more of a marketing initiative, since they may not have a logo or name for their SN programs. A brand is neither a logo nor a name; it is the SN program's identity, including what customers think and say about the program. The concept of marketing raises awareness, promotes goods and services, and draws customers to the operation (Crutchfield, 2009; Klein, 2008). These two concepts work together to help build the SN program's brand personality. Thus, it is important to define the strategies that are being successfully utilized by SN programs, examine the implications in the SN environment, determine the barriers to implementation, and disseminate information to other SN professionals. The specific objectives of this project were to: define characteristics of branding concepts in the SN setting; identify sustainable strategies, resources, and successful practices for

implementing branding concepts in SN programs; and identify advantages and barriers to implementing branding concepts in SN programs.

METHODOLOGY

Phase I: Expert Panel

A qualitative research approach was used to collect data for the development of a quantitative survey instrument, as identified by Nassar-McMillan and Borders (2002).

During Phase I, 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. An expert panel operates similar to the Delphi Method illustrated by Linstone and Turoff (2002) and focus group methodology identified by Krueger and Casey (2009). The two-day agenda for the expert panel session was planned to address the issues related to the research objectives so that the discussion supported the development of the survey instrument in Phase II of this study. After all questions were discussed, the researcher summarized responses, and participants were asked to verify that the summarized comments were an accurate depiction of the discussion. Responses were then grouped into emerging themes and used to develop statements for the quantitative survey instrument.

Based on recommendations from the expert panel, the scannable survey was titled *Marketing the School Nutrition Program*, with the intention of generating a more distinguishable survey for SN directors across the country. The survey consisted of five sections. Section I asked SN directors to select traits that describe their SN programs. In Section II, SN directors were asked to indicate their level of importance, ranging from 4 (*very important*) to 1 (*not important*), and current status, ranging from 4 (*fully addressed*) to 1 (*not addressed*) with 23 practices that contribute to marketing their SN program. Section III and IV asked SN directors to indicate their level of agreement, ranging from 4 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*) with 12 challenges and barriers and 12 advantages related to marketing their SN program. In Section V, SN directors were asked to provide demographic information related to their credential/certification status, years of experience in SN programs, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) region, student enrollment, marketing initiatives implemented, resource materials used, percentage of free and reduced-priced lunches, participation rates for K-8 and 9-12, service systems used, sources of funds, and whether high schools in their school district were open campuses.

Phase II: Review Panel

In Phase II, forty-two SN directors were invited via e-mail to participate as members of a review panel to evaluate the draft survey instrument for content validity and internal consistency. With the invitation, the SN directors received a copy of the draft survey instrument, the objective of the review panel, and instructions for completing and returning the "Review Panel Evaluation Form." Return of the completed evaluations signified consent to participate in the study. The objective of the review panel was to evaluate the draft survey to assess the content validity, scales, and provide comments on the readability, clarity, and flow of the instrument as well as the overall content. The "Review Panel Evaluation Form" was divided into six sections, five representing the sections of the draft survey, perceptions, practices, challenges and barriers, advantages, and program and personal characteristics, and the last section representing the overall draft survey instrument. A four-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* was used for each evaluation statement. Space was also provided for panel members to submit any recommendations. Responses from the review panel members were tabulated, comments were summarized, and suggestions were incorporated into the final survey instrument.

A random sample of 700 SN directors representing the seven USDA regions was selected for the national survey administration. A pre-notice letter was mailed to each of the 700 SN directors approximately one week before the survey instruments were distributed to notify the study participants about the surveys and briefly describe the study. A cover letter for the SN director was attached to the survey instrument explaining the purpose of the study, requesting participation in the study, assuring confidentiality of responses, and providing researchers' contact information.

Data Analysis

Surveys were analyzed using the statistical package SPSS Version 20.0 for Windows. Descriptive statistics included means, standard deviations, and frequencies of total responses. Exploratory principal components factor analyses were performed on items in the practices sections of the survey instrument, to determine if each set of items could be reduced to a smaller number of factors. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were calculated to determine the internal consistency of the factors that emerged. One-way multiple analyses of variances with Tukey's HSD post hoc tests were used to evaluate differences in responses based on years working in SN programs, student enrollment in the school district, K-8 daily lunch participation rates, and 9-12 daily lunch participation rates.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal and Program Characteristics

A total of 700 surveys were sent and 208 surveys were returned for a response rate of 29.7%. Over 30% of respondents are certified by the School Nutrition Association (SNA), 23.0% are not certified, and 21.5% have a state agency certification. The largest percentage of respondents reported working in SN programs for more than 20 years (36.5%) and the smallest percentage reported working in SN programs for less than one year (2.9%). The majority of respondents (46.9%) reported working in a school district with 2,799 or less, while only 1% reported working in a school district with 65,000 or greater. The top marketing initiatives implemented in SN programs were posters/banners posted in the cafeteria (38.8%), followed by school specific color scheme in cafeteria (19.6%), and consistent marketing district-wide (15.0%). Resource materials used most often to assist in planning and implementing marketing initiatives were websites (22.1%), other school districts (20.8%), and educational sessions (15.1%). Respondents identified 41% to 60% (39.0%) as the largest percentage group of students who receive free and reduced-priced lunches in their district followed by 61% to 80% (22.0%), and 21% to 40% (21.5%). The highest percentage of lunch participation rates was 61% to 80% for both grades K-8 (44.8%) and grades 9-12 (33.3%).

Personality Traits

Of the 24 personality traits listed describing characteristics of SN programs, hardworking (75.1%) was selected most frequently by respondents followed by friendly (73.7%), healthy (71.7%), and successful (65.4%). Respondents did not classify unhealthy (2.0%), unfriendly (2.4%), or unappealing (3.4%) as personality traits that describe SN programs.

Practices

Respondents ranked "SN director attends conferences/seminars to stay current on marketing trends" (3.46 ± 0.81), "printed menus are sent home with students" (3.45 ± 0.89), and "menus are updated to support marketing initiatives" (3.42 ± 0.74) as the three practices with the highest importance. Seventeen out of the 23 practice statements had a mean score above 3.0, indicating high levels of importance. Practices rated least important included "commercial/local restaurant concepts were used in marketing initiatives" (2.36 ± 0.96), "electronic newsletters are sent to stakeholders as part of marketing initiatives" (2.50 ± 1.04), and "pamphlets promoting the SN program are distributed to stakeholders" (2.60 ± 0.99). The current status levels were considerably lower than levels of importance. Out of the 23 practice statements, 20 statements had mean scores between 2.67 ± 0.91 to 1.80 ± 1.07 . The highest current status levels reported were "printed menus are sent home with students" (3.46 ± 0.97), "menus are updated to support marketing initiatives" (3.06 ± 0.91), and "SN director attends conferences/seminars to stay current on marketing trends" (3.05 ± 1.00). Table 1 represents the means and standard deviations for each of the 23 statements in descending order of importance.

Table 1. *Level of Importance and Current Status Regarding Practices Contributing to Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N = 208)*

Practices	Importance^a Mean ± SD	Current Status^c Mean ± SD
SN director attends conferences/seminars to stay current on marketing trends.	3.46 ± 0.81	3.05 ± 1.00
Printed menus are sent home with students.	3.45 ± 0.89	3.46 ± 0.97
Menus are updated to support marketing initiatives.	3.42 ± 0.74	3.06 ± 0.91
Marketing initiatives are communicated to stakeholders (students, staff, parents, district/school administration).	3.32 ± 0.79	2.50 ± 0.84
Student input is used to market the SN program.	3.31 ± 0.77	2.61 ± 0.94
SN managers provide feedback on marketing initiatives.	3.28 ± 0.81	2.67 ± 0.91
SN staff is involved in planning and implementing marketing initiatives.	3.25 ± 0.79	2.64 ± 0.92
Marketing is consistent in all school cafeterias.	3.23 ± 0.84	2.43 ± 0.92
Marketing initiatives are implemented in all school cafeterias.	3.21 ± 0.89	2.66 ± 1.01
District/school administration demonstrate support for marketing initiatives.	3.20 ± 0.94	2.30 ± 1.01
Students provide feedback on the implementation of marketing initiatives.	3.20 ± 0.83	2.36 ± 0.94
SN director visits other school districts to gain marketing ideas for their SN program.	3.18 ± 0.88	2.60 ± 1.06
Training on implementing marketing initiatives is provided to SN staff.	3.17 ± 0.79	2.32 ± 0.96
SN managers are provided professional development on marketing the SN program.	3.16 ± 0.82	2.48 ± 0.97
Trends in food service are evaluated for marketing ideas.	3.11 ± 0.84	2.59 ± 0.93
Advocates within the school district promote the marketing initiatives of the SN program.	3.04 ± 0.85	2.24 ± 0.90
Marketing initiatives are evaluated routinely.	3.02 ± 0.88	2.21 ± 0.97

Practices	Importance^a Mean ± SD	Current Status^c Mean ± SD
Resources are sought for planning and implementing marketing initiatives.	2.97 ± 0.83	2.35 ± 0.95
Stakeholders are involved in implementing marketing initiatives.	2.87 ± 0.92	2.14 ± 0.88
A written marketing plan is developed to guide the marketing initiative of the SN program.	2.68 ± 0.92	1.81 ± 0.98
Pamphlets promoting the SN program are distributed to stakeholders.	2.60 ± 0.99	1.99 ± 1.02
Electronic newsletters are sent to stakeholders as part of marketing initiatives.	2.50 ± 1.04	1.80 ± 1.07
Commercial/local restaurant concepts were used in marketing initiatives.	2.36 ± 0.96	1.97 ± 0.90

aScale = 4 (very important) to 1 (not important)

bImportance mean and standard deviation scores in descending order

cScale = 4 (fully addressed) to 1 (not addressed)

Challenges and Barriers

Of the 12 challenges and barriers listed on the survey, the strongest level of agreement reported was “find funds for marketing initiatives” (3.41 ± 0.87), followed by “time commitment to plan and implement marketing initiatives” (3.40 ± 0.72), and “SN staff’s perception of increased workload” (3.21 ± 0.85) (Table 2). Respondents did not rank “SN staff’s resistance to change” (2.80 ± 0.96) or “find a consultant/advisor to develop marketing initiatives” (2.38 ± 0.97) as major challenges to marketing their SN programs.

Table 2. *Barriers and Advantages to Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N = 208)*

Barriers^a	Mean ± SD^b
Find funds for marketing initiatives	3.41 ± .87
Time commitment to plan and implement marketing initiatives	3.40 ± .72
SN staff's perception of increased workload	3.21 ± .85
Utilization of existing facilities to market the SN program	3.12 ± .81
Achievement of consistent practices and services throughout the SN program	3.12 ± .81
Knowledge on how to develop marketing initiatives	3.11 ± .82
Renovation of existing facilities to implement marketing Initiatives	3.11 ± .93

Barriers ^a	Mean \pm SD ^b
Prioritize the continuous efforts to market the SN program	3.08 \pm .75
Staff acceptance of marketing initiatives	3.08 \pm .80
Prepare a budget for marketing initiatives	2.92 \pm .94
SN staff's resistance to change	2.80 \pm .96
Find a consultant/advisor to develop marketing initiatives	2.38 \pm .97
Advantages ^a	
Student satisfaction with food choices	3.70 \pm .53
Updated menu	3.68 \pm .52
Increase in student participation	3.64 \pm .63
Increase in student selection of healthier food products	3.64 \pm .60
SN staff feels part of a team	3.61 \pm .58
Professionalism of SN program	3.61 \pm .57
Positive school meals image in community	3.61 \pm .61
Increase in student selection of fruits and vegetables	3.57 \pm .68
Improved communication with stakeholders [students- staff-parents- district/school administration]	3.53 \pm .63
Improved stakeholders' perception of the SN program	3.50 \pm .66
Fewer complaints from stakeholders	3.35 \pm .83
Assist with open campus competition	2.59 \pm 1.16

^a Items in descending order by mean

^bScale = 4 (Strongly Agree) to 1 (Strongly Disagree)

Advantages

Almost all of the statements were seen as being important advantages to marketing SN programs, with 11 out of the 12 statements receiving a mean rating of 3.35 or greater (Table 2). The strongest level of agreement reported was “student satisfaction with food choices” (3.70 \pm 0.53), followed by “updated menu” (3.68 \pm 0.52), “increase in student participation” (3.64 \pm 0.63), and “increase in student selection of healthier food products” (3.64 \pm 0.60).

Factor Analysis

Principle components exploratory factor analyses with varimax rotation were performed on each of the sections of the practices section (importance and status). Both factor analyses yielded adequate KMO and Bartlett's tests. Due to the congruence of the questions, identical solutions were obtained for both the importance and status scales. Four factors were retained for each scale accounting for

a total of approximately 61 percent of the variance of each scale. The four factors were named staff involvement, stakeholder support, development and implementation, and communication. Salient factor loadings, eigenvalues, and Cronbach's alphas of each factor are given in Table 3. All factors had acceptable loadings, percentage of variance extracted, and Cronbach's alphas.

Table 3. *Factor Descriptions for Marketing the School Nutrition Program (N = 208)*

Question	Importance Loadings ^a	Status Loadings ^a
Staff Involvement		
Marketing initiatives are implemented in all school cafeterias.	.520	.572
Marketing is consistent in all school cafeterias.	.593	.596
SN managers provide feedback on marketing initiatives.	.604	.700
SN director attends conferences/seminars to stay current on marketing trends.	.691	.703
SN staff is involved in planning and implementing marketing initiatives.	.727	.613
SN managers are provided professional development on marketing the SN program.	.793	.704
Training on implementing marketing initiatives is provided to SN staff.	.645	.596
Marketing initiatives are evaluated routinely.	.700	.619
Eigenvalue	9.721	9.379
Percent of Variance	20.51	20.29
Cronbach's alpha	.910	.893
Stakeholder Support		
Student input is used to market the SN program.	.686	.795
Advocates within the school district promote the marketing initiatives of the SN program.	.528	.608
District/school administration demonstrate support for marketing initiatives.	.621	.416
Students provide feedback on the implementation of marketing initiatives.	.700	.760
Menus are updated to support marketing initiatives.	.520	.586

Question	Importance Loadings ^a	Status Loadings ^a
Question	Importance Loading	Status Loading
Eigenvalue	1.445	1.455
Percent of Variance	16.18	14.87
Cronbach's alpha	.831	.842
Development and Implementation		
Commercial/local restaurant concepts were used in marketing initiatives.	.757	.760
Trends in food service are evaluated for marketing ideas.	.757	.671
Resources are sought for planning and implementing marketing initiatives.	.448	.516
Stakeholders are involved in implementing marketing initiatives.	.499	.488
SN director visits other school districts to gain marketing ideas for their SN program.	.479	.489
Eigenvalue	1.163	1.380
Percent of Variance	12.67	13.05
Cronbach's alpha	.791	.749
Communication		
A written marketing plan is developed to guide the marketing initiative of the SN program.	.734	.727
Electronic newsletters are sent to stakeholders as part of marketing initiatives.	.767	.704
Pamphlets promoting the SN program are distributed to stakeholders.	.545	.576
Eigenvalue	1.070	1.051
Percent of Variance	11.55	12.08
Cronbach's alpha	.712	.700

^aOnly salient (> .40) loadings shown

MANOVAs

One-way multiple analyses of variances (MANOVA) were conducted to compare the four factors in each scale with participants' responses regarding years working in SN programs, student enrollment in their school district, K-8 daily lunch participation rates, and 9-12 daily lunch participation rates. No significant differences were noted for years working in SN programs, K-8 daily lunch participation rates, or 9-12 daily lunch participation rates. For the importance factors by student enrollment a significant multivariate effect was obtained [$F(8, 398) = 3.579, p = .001$]. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs found significant differences only for communication ($p = .003$) and development and implementation ($p < .001$). Means and standard deviations are given in Table 4. Tukey's post hoc analysis revealed that for both communication and development and implementation the larger districts placed higher importance on these factors than the smallest districts. For the status factors by enrollment a significant multivariate effect was also found [$F(8,390) = 2.904, p = .004$]. Univariate follow-up ANOVAs found a significant difference only for development and implementation ($p = .004$). Tukey's post hoc analysis revealed that the smaller districts had lower current status than the medium size districts.

Table 4. Comparison of Means and Standard Deviations (SD) for Importance and Status of Marketing Factors by Student Enrollment

Factor	Importance ^b		Status ^c	
	n ^a	Mean ± SD	n ^a	Mean ± SD
Staff Involvement				
2,799 or less	95	3.09±.71	94	2.57±.78
2,800 – 9,999	72	3.25±.64	70	2.61±.69
10,000 or more	37	3.38±.64	36	2.42±.71
Stakeholder Support				
2,799 or less	95	3.15±.69	94	2.54±.69
2,800 – 9,999	72	3.31±.62	70	2.55±.72
10,000 or more	37	3.32±.53	36	2.39±.74
Development and Implementation				
2,799 or less	95	2.68±.68	94	2.19±.71
2,800 – 9,999	72	3.04±.64	70	2.48±.65
10,000 or more	37	3.15±.48	36	2.37±.56
Communication				
2,799 or less	95	2.43±.76	94	1.85±.76
2,800 – 9,999	72	2.64±.82	70	1.83±.81
10,000 or more	37	2.93±.64	36	2.01±.75

^an is based on cases included for post hoc comparisons of factors by student enrollment.

^bScale = 4 (*very important*) to 1 (*not important*)

^cScale = 4 (*fully addressed*) to 1 (*not addressed*)

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATION

Research Study Conclusion and Applications

The objectives of this study were to identify perceptions, practices, barriers, and advantages to implementing branding initiatives in SN programs. Based on survey responses, SN professionals believed the practice statements under the *importance of SN staff involvement* factor and the *current status of SN staff involvement* factor have a significant impact on the implementation of marketing initiatives in SN programs. These marketing practices include implementing and being consistent in all school cafeterias, providing feedback, attending conferences/seminars, providing professional development and training, and evaluating routinely. SN professionals believed that to market their SN program they need to have SN staff involved from inception to completion. This is consistent with the findings of the previous NFSMI, ARD study which identified “staff” as one of the primary methods to create a SN program’s brand personality (Rushing & Asperin, 2011). The current status of most of the practices is lower than the importance. This would indicate that many of the districts believe they have more work to do in implementing the marketing practices, particularly in the smaller districts.

In addition, SN professionals believed the practice statements *under importance of stakeholders’ support* and *current status of stakeholders’ support* have a significant influence on the implementation of marketing initiatives in SN programs. These marketing practices include: student input is used in marketing initiatives; advocates promote marketing initiatives; district/school administration demonstrates support; and students provide feedback.

SN professionals also believed that a successful marketing initiative must focus on students as well as obtain and maintain the critical support of stakeholders. As indicated by Lee, Back, and Kim (2009), customer-driven strategies can have a positive effect on their satisfaction. In order for SN programs to be competitive, they have to go beyond the core products and build a consistent brand that students relate to.

The barriers identified by participants include: finding funds for marketing initiatives; time commitment to plan and implement marketing initiatives; SN staff’s perception of increased workload, utilization of existing facilities to market the SN program; and achievement of consistent practices and services throughout the SN program. However, participants also identified several advantages associated with marketing the SN program, such as student satisfaction with food choices, updated menu, increase in student participation, increase in student selection of healthier food products, positive school meals image in community, and SN staff feels part of a team. SN professionals may focus on reducing these barriers, such as the negative perception of staff, by listening and addressing their concerns to gain necessary buy-in ensuring a successful marketing initiative.

SN directors reported *hardworking, friendly, healthy, and successful* as the leading personality traits that describe their SN program. Participants identified posters/banners posted in the cafeteria, school specific color scheme in cafeteria, and consistent, district-wide marketing as their top marketing initiatives. The resource materials most often used to plan and implement marketing initiatives were websites, other school districts, and education sessions. These resources should be explored prior to developing a marketing initiative to generate ideas and assist throughout the marketing process.

Marketing professionals have reported that customers’ recognition of the program’s existence is not sufficient. Customers need to know what the program stands for and believe in the program’s message, thus drawing them to the operation (Crutchfield, 2009; Klein, 2008). These are important factors for SN professionals who are considering how to begin a marketing initiative and for those who are assessing an existing one. SN professionals may 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 the SN program.

Limitations and Research Implications

A limitation of this study was the use of a survey instrument with self-reported data. No validation of actual observed practices was conducted. The survey was developed utilizing expert advice from a small group of practicing SN professionals. In addition, the instrument was validated by a slightly larger group of practicing SN professionals and revised based on their feedback. When selecting these panel members, researchers considered size of the school district, percent of free and reduced paid students, and geographic region to obtain diversity among panel members.

Outcomes from this study and feedback from participating SN professionals indicated research is needed to build on this project by developing a marketing resource. The resource should include instructions to guide SN professionals through the process of developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating a marketing initiative in their SN program. This will assist SN professionals develop strategies and provide services that satisfy their current customers and appeal to new ones.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication has been produced by the National Food Service Management Institute – Applied Research Division, located at The University of Southern Mississippi with headquarters at The University of Mississippi. Funding for the Institute has been provided with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, to The University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of The University of Mississippi or the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

The information provided in this manuscript is the result of independent research produced by NFSMI and is not necessarily in accordance with U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) policy. FNS is the federal agency responsible for all federal domestic child nutrition programs including the National School Lunch Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Summer Food Service Program. Individuals are encouraged to contact their local child nutrition program sponsor and/or their Child Nutrition State Agency should there appear to be a conflict with the information contained herein, and any state or federal policy that governs the associated Child Nutrition Program. For more information on the federal Child Nutrition Programs please visit www.fns.usda.gov/cnd.

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