



Six Ways to Spread the Word

How to Market your Menus and More

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As a director and menu planner, one of the hardest things you have to do is to entice students to participate in your program on a regular basis. That's where good marketing techniques can come in handy. In my 18 years as a foodservice director, I have learned some valuable lessons that have helped my department achieve a consistent level of

success. These may work for you, as well:

1. Be Open to Creative Ideas

Appeal to students' desire for variety and interest. Walk in their shoes, so to speak, and see things from their perspective. Find out what appeals to them and respond to their preferences as much as possible.

For instance, to keep things interesting in our middle and high schools, we have set up convenient double-line serving stations at lunch, and now offer different menu options each day. We have increased participation by being accessible and convenient for students.

2. Communicate Proactively

Nobody will know the good work you're doing if you don't reach out and tell them. Find as many ways as possible to "advertise" what you're doing.

We do weekly announcements through the school offices, we e-mail news to faculty members, and we add information to our Web site and school newsletters. We have implemented a "Spotlight of the Week" program where, each week, we select a fruit or vegetable to promote. We highlight its nutritional information and share fun facts for people to use. We post flyers in each cafeteria, and on our Web site, and we e-mail the flyer to district faculty, too. As a result, parents are calling us to find out where they can purchase the items we feature.

3. Be Creative Beyond the Menu

Menus are an invaluable marketing tool, but there is so much more departments can do to attract people's interest. For instance, we addressed the thorny issue of meal charges by implementing a "Lunch Lay-a-Way" plan where parents can deposit money in their student's account all summer long, thereby ensuring that funds are available prior to the start of the school year. This has alleviated much of the pressure on the cashier the first day of school, and has made it easier for us to pay those first, big food supply bills at the start of the school year.

4. Form Creative Partnerships

We always have more to do than we have time or resources to do it with. So why not find people who can help you to get the work done. In the last year, we have teamed up with one of our local universities to have dietetic interns come and work in our department. Students do inventory data entry, sort through our ingredient database, find and collect CN labels for our entrées, plan theme days for our schools, and do onsite kitchen reviews for us.

Forming strong relationships with your vendors is another great technique. You'll gain a reliable source of information on nutrition and on new products, as well as secure support for your department's bottom line. It's great to be able to call or e-mail a vendor, and know they can help.

And don't forget about one of the most important partnerships you can form: the one with your students. Have them sample and taste-test new products. Let them know you value their opinion. Both sides will benefit from working together.

5. Don't Be Afraid to Make Changes When You Need To

Change can be a positive thing. When I first became director, my superintendent advised me not to "rock the boat." But I knew that some aspects of our program needed to be enhanced. The change process can be challenging, rather like pulling a band aid off a wound. Although it hurts at first, it heals more quickly once the initial pain has passed.

6. Stay On the Leading Edge of Learning

Stay current with new regulations, and keep your program fresh and inviting to students. Don't be shy to "borrow" or "copy" ideas from other people or districts, or to ask questions of experts you encounter. Attend conferences, participate in webinars, or do whatever it takes for everyone in your department to keep ahead of the child nutrition curve.



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