



# Marketing Notebook

## Insta- Promotions

Get ready to package your healthy hits into a resource-filled kit.

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD

**W**e're taking back our reputation by making real, visible changes to the way we do business." It's a bold pledge on the part of the school nutrition team at Minnesota's St. Paul Public Schools—and the statement's inclusion in a video promotion accessible to anyone with an Internet connection raises the expectation bar pretty darn high. While "making it real" is the priority at the heart of the campaign, arguably the more important word to consider is "visible."

"We served healthy foods in the past, but our customers just didn't believe it," acknowledged the team, headed by Director Jean Ronnei, in its video promotion clip. "So we accepted our students' challenge to make foods *real* for them." The operation intensified efforts to make even more nutritious enhancements to offerings, pledging to implement 10 healthy menu changes every year. But menu innovations have limited impact in a promotional vacuum—and this is the logic behind an ambitious marketing effort concentrated on a single message.

**Mixed Messages?** The Nutrition Services Department at St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) long has understood the value of creative marketing approaches. More than 15 years ago, the central office team launched a program to supply the cafeteria staff at each site with a complete "turnkey" promotional kit (delivered in a large plastic tub), featuring supplies to develop monthly promotions to be scheduled throughout the entire school year. Site staff was encouraged to use the materials they received and be creative in mounting promotions based on the holidays, school mascots and other traditional themes.

While some staff reveled in the opportunity to showcase their creativity, others felt the monthly promotions were overly time-consuming. "It got too elaborate," reports SPPS Nutrition Services Manager Nathan Sorenson, RD, SNS. More importantly, he adds, "The consistency of the message and the brand were lost."

But the concept of a centrally coordinated promotions effort had its merits. St. Paul's Nutrition Services team applied this

strategy to a grander scheme: a district-wide marketing campaign focused on the core message of making "real, visible changes."

**Unpack Your Ol' Kit Bag** Today, at the beginning of the school year, each of the district's schools receives a bulletin board kit with a set of core components, including background fabric, borders, the department logo and menu. Additional elements include signage with the "Get Real, Get Healthy" slogan, the hours of operation, the mission statement of the department, the URL for the department website, a photo of the onsite staff and information about a food or food group. Materials are tweaked slightly for elementary sites (more graphic) versus secondary school locations (more factual).

"The bulletin board is the primary visual for anyone who enters the cafeteria," explains Sorenson. The SPPS Nutrition Services team purchased and installed the standard-size bulletin boards at each site; all cafeteria staff need to do is follow provided instructions for creating the display.

**Keepin' It Fresh** While reinforcement of a single, core message is the operation's prevailing marketing strategy, the SPPS nutrition team didn't jettison individual, periodic promotions, recognizing their value in attracting fresh attention. But gone are the days when the cafeteria used Halloween, Valentine's Day or Homecoming to lure students with themed menus and activities. Current promotions tend to be more food-based, reports Sorenson. For example, the central office will provide sites with the materials they need to conduct a district-wide "Surprise Veggie" promotion, including bulletin board signage that changes



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each day, offering new clues about the unusual offering. At the end of the week, students are invited to vote to bring the item back onto the menu in the future. One such promotion centered on jicama sticks, cites Sorenson.

Similarly, at press time, the operation was conducting a "Wild About Grains" promotion and contest, with students judging three different cold salad recipes that include grains. "The winning recipe will be featured on next year's menu," Sorenson notes, adding, "We also will promote a 'Farmer's Market Find,' such as Winter Melon Soup."

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In addition, the bulletin board is a place to promote the innovations discovered or created by the Nutrition Services product development team and added to the menu. These "Healthy Hits" can be spotlighted on the bulletin boards, explains Sorenson. "When we rolled out our new oven-roasted rosemary fries, we had signage that showed a nutrition comparison of our fries versus McDonald's fries."

**Catalog Shopping** Cafeteria teams at school sites also can obtain branded point-of-sale materials from the district office. Available posters, signage, static clings, product descriptions and other visual resources (including kitchen-area signage for employees) are featured in a department catalog that is sent to each school. Managers can complete an order form on the department's internal website.

Most of the branded promotional materials are produced inhouse by the district's graphics department or by the school nutrition department itself "using color printers and laminators," explains Sorenson. This helps keep costs down, as the operation can produce exactly what is needed.

**Be the Customer** While some managers in the district were reluctant to give up their own marketing efforts—"the cute, personal touches that we had to get away from to enhance the professionalism of the operation," notes Sorenson—there has been overall support for the new campaign and approach. "'The cafeteria experience' is something we're really working hard on—not just with our staff, but also with our principals and the para-professionals who work in the cafeterias," he notes.

In fact, Sorenson revealed that the operation has launched a district-wide audit of its cafeterias, looking at every factor that influences the dining environment. "We're looking at how many posters there are on the walls, the lighting, the seating and so on," he explains. "We want to evaluate how to move the distractions away from our key messaging and better support our brand."

Other steps in building brand recognition have included creative additions to the department website, including a virtual tour of the operation; the production of the promotional video; and bright photographs and graphics gracing the sides of delivery trucks. "We're telling our story with focused marketing efforts," asserts the team, "striving to reinforce brand values at every point of the customer experience."

**100% Visibility** Some districts may lack the financial and human resources to implement a school nutrition marketing campaign of this scope. But that doesn't mean all the benefits of such an initiative are out of reach! A number of the individual strategies adopted by SPPS are low in both cost and effort, especially in consideration of the potential rewards.

What would it take to create your own centralized marketing campaign? What would you profit—and what might you forfeit? How can you turn losses into gains? For example, say you have two or three managers who excel at creating and conducting fun promotions at their schools throughout the year; it's a job responsibility they really enjoy. You can channel their enthusiasm, skill and expertise in this area by assigning them to the committee that will develop the central theme and materials to be used throughout the district!



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**Magic Takes Work** A marketing project like the one SPPS has launched doesn't have to be overwhelming if you break it down into small steps and manageable goals. As this school year comes to an end, it's a great time to think about what you can do during the summer months and early next fall. Consider the following five steps to get you started.

■ **Step One: Take a long, hard look at your operation.** View it through the eyes of your customers, as well as the parents, teachers, administrators and others who visit your sites. What do they see when they come into your dining areas and walk along the service line? How does the food look, smell, taste? What's the demeanor of staff? How are they dressed? What messages are they taking away about school meals in general—and your operation in particular?

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■ **Step Two: Identify a core message about your operation that you want to communicate.** Avoid the temptation of trying to represent *all* the benefits of school meals. A message like, "We serve healthy and safe meals that are delicious and a good value for the dollar in order to help students achieve in school and learn lifelong healthy behaviors" may be accurate, but it's simply too much information to convey! Keep it simple and concise. But don't worry about making it into a snappy slogan right at the start. A professional writer can help you add pizzazz, but only if you are very clear about your core message.

■ **Step Three: Identify one easy way you and your team will communicate your core message in August, a second easy strategy that you will add in September and a third, longer-term strategy that you will start planning in October.** For example, "Beginning in August, every menu

that gets sent home to students will include our core message. In September, managers and central office staff will attend X number of PTA meetings and back-to-school-night events and make a 5-minute presentation about our program—emphasizing our core message. In October, the following team members will join me on a committee to devise a theme and logo and discuss creating a standard bulletin board design that we will launch in January."

■ **Step Four: Identify and involve experts who work in your district.** Start with your own team and then spread out to other administrators and teachers—even students! You might be surprised to find out who has graphics, writing, photography and even video expertise—or who knows someone who does.

■ **Step Five: Keep it simple—especially at the start.** Don't sabotage your project by taking on too much, too fast. There are simply too many other tasks on your to-do list every day, and you don't want this project to be so overwhelming that you give up before you really get going. Marketing is essential to school nutrition success, but only if the approach is thoughtful, comprehensive and reinforced continually. Make it a project that you can accomplish—and that most members of your team want to accomplish. **SN**

Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition.

## St. Paul Public Schools At a Glance

- 84 serving sites for breakfast and/or lunch; 100 Summer Food Service Program sites
- 69% students eligible for free/reduced-price meals;
- 50 Provision 2 sites
- 83% participation
- \$1.60 elementary lunch  
\$1.85 secondary lunch
- Jean Ronnei, Director of Nutrition Services
- [www.sppscafe.org](http://www.sppscafe.org)