



What is Marketing (and Public Relations)?

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Marketing is simply merchandising, advertising, promoting, and selling products and/or services to customers. In our field of School Nutrition, this can relate to any strategy for School Nutrition Professionals to get foods and beverages into the hands and bellies of our number one customers- the students we serve each and every school day. This also includes site cafeteria staff, Principals, Administrators, Teachers, Aides, Custodians, possibly visiting parents or School Board Members, and the list goes on.

A “*marketing mix*” is simply defined by its’ four applications: Product, Pricing, Placement and Promotion.

The **products** we offer and serve can be advertised by means of a posted and advertised menu. This could be done on menu boards, during morning announcements, on the food service department’s website and the easiest (and free) promotion is by word-of-mouth discussions from student to student, to their teachers, parents, relatives, etc.

The **pricing** has to be so that it is affordable and somewhat aligned with food vendors outside of our campuses to get them in the door. Current trends for students also include price but price is not the most important variable of why they frequent or don’t frequent our lunch lines.

Placement means location, creative merchandizing and easy access, short wait-times and eye-appeal. Most students at the secondary level will usually not wait in the lunch line more than 10 minutes to get their lunch. They also need their lunch period to socialize with their friends while enjoying a nutritious meal at the same time.

Promotion is advertising the benefits of eating foods offered at school, positive publicity gained by providing nutritious, fresh foods in an inviting and safe environment. It is also the emphasizing of the need for our food programs that exists due to the socioeconomic status of a great majority of students served state-wide.

Conversely, **public relations** is developing and maintaining external relationship-building communication channels. These are centered on trust and visibility with those entities our food service departments serve and are accountable to. These channels could be, based on your department’s policies and procedures, the local news media, PTSA, District web-sites, open Board Meetings, Facebook, Twitter, Insta Gram, YouTube, etc. These outlets may be a powerful tool to promote the food services department. Subsequently, such efforts may increase school meal awareness and its benefits to students that may rarely or never frequent the cafeteria. These strategies may increase participation and popularity, a win-win situation for all of us.

In closing of this article, I learned a few simple strategies to get the word out of what you do every day in your kitchens. They are simple, stress-free and cost you nothing.

These strategies may include:

- If you can, slowly incorporate simple, scratch-cooked menu items at your sites
- Whole-heartedly use your entitlement funds to strengthen your menu offerings
- Be flexible in your menu- trends change
- Provide on-going staff training to boost confidence and gain buy-in for enhanced marketing of your program
- Tell others your story! If you don’t tell your story of what you’re doing in your kitchen, someone else will- it could be good, bad, or ugly
- Attend local wellness fairs to learn new trends and strategies to increase participation
- “Choosing” is a new mind-set for students. The opposite of choosing is settling for the default
- Don’t make your kitchen/cafeteria the default at meal time. Make it the students #1 choice in their learning day to help them succeed in the classroom and beyond