

Top tips for Marketing your School Meals Service

1. Carry out regular Market Research

School meals is about much more than just 'food'. Customers are influenced by the overall dining experience. Therefore it is important that you focus any improvement activities on the things that are actually important to them. Survey all stakeholders on a regular basis – pupils, parents, teachers, dining room and kitchen staff. Identify the most appropriate medium for each group – focus groups, electronic forms, suggestion boxes etc. Make any questionnaires accessible, short and easy to complete and return. Ensure that questions are asked in such a way that they a) help manage customer expectations about what can be achieved and b) are likely to generate informative answers upon which you can act.

2. Respond, respond, respond.

Demonstrate that you have listened. Ensure that you circulate the outcomes of any research to all stakeholder groups along with your planned actions. Where a common view is expressed and the requested action can't be taken, explain the reasons why.

3. Make sure that the product and service is right.

However well you promote your service, your promotions will not be effective if the actual dining experience is not both enjoyable and customer-friendly. Use the outcomes of your research to address this. Review the systems used to manage pupils over lunch – are they employed to maximise pupil enjoyment or purely minimise overall disruption to the school? Carry out regular audits – from both a pupil and parent perspective, to ensure that the quality of the dining room experience is maintained. Make sure that the service sells itself. Most children are now 'informed purchasers'. They are able to compare your service offer to that provided in the high street. Visually, how does yours compare? Is your service counter presented in such a way that it is likely to stimulate a purchase/request to purchase? Does it look generous, fresh, well dressed and exciting? Are the service staff pleasant, helpful and encouraging? If yes, how are those children currently not taking a school meal exposed to it?

4. Tell people what you are good at.

Don't simply 'allow them to find out'. Follow the successful promotional strategies utilized by the commercial sector. Think about all the good practices that you employ in school that most of your parents probably don't know about. For example, if your dining room team work with your pupils to encourage them to enjoy a broader diet, don't assume that parents will automatically know or remember this. Don't be afraid to repeat your positive messages regularly and in small doses – professional advertisers certainly aren't. A little and often approach is more likely to result in your messages actually being absorbed and remembered. In instances where further improvements are necessary, share your plans and timescales for these. Along with a range of special events and promotions, plan your communications across the year. Remind your target audience several times in advance of the event, again when it actually happens and report on success afterwards.

5. Get the message right

Remember that most successful marketing strategies are not based upon promoting the actual product or service - they are more about selling the benefits of these to the target market – enjoyment, convenience, improved health, beauty, status or performance, best value etc. Also that the medium selected should be convenient for the target rather than the sender. For example, regular texting may achieve more successful hits, than an item included within a newsletter. Using a wide range of media is likely to be more successful than using just one.

6. Ensure the message is consistent.

Make sure that all your team is aware of what's happening and know the appropriate messages to communicate. You don't want all your hard work to be undermined by a careless comment from a teacher or midday supervisor.

7. Review success.

Use step 1. To help you evaluate which of your activities have helped to meet your objectives and which need to be addressed further.