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**COVID-19** with

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SCHOOL NUTRITION

The Official Publication of the  
School Nutrition Association

It's Time To  
**MOBILIZE  
YOUR MARKETING**

Promote your  
school meal program  
as if your job depends on it—  
because it just might.

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Facing

**COVID-19** with

Courage • Commitment • Compassion

# It's Time To **MOBILIZE YOUR MARKETING**

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD

Promote your school meal program as if your job depends on it—because it just might.



*Showcasing mouth-watering menu items (Maine's Windham Raymond RSU #14) and safe packaging measures (Alabama's Tuscaloosa County) are top priorities for school meal marketing, especially in the age of COVID-19.*

**Y**ou're coordinating meal preparation and service in the cafeteria in one school, classrooms in another and multiple meal packs for parent pickup.

You're short-staffed and short on multiple menu items. Three parents have publicly taken your team to task for running out of pre-ordered meals, two principals reported complaints from the custodian about foodservice trash and one school site is investigating a reported virus outbreak. Someone from SNA reaches out and asks about your plans for promoting National School Lunch Week (NSLW) next month. *"Are we celebrating NSLW this year? Are you kidding? Of course, we (are/aren't)!"* Think carefully before you finish that sentence.

School nutrition professionals are always pulled in multiple directions, especially at the start of a new school year. But 2020 has dumped significantly heavier burdens on your shoulders. Something's gotta give, and the sustained creativity required for marketing efforts may seem the most dispensable candidate. But that could prove an unwise decision. The challenges of 2020 mean that marketing may be

the most important priority for your time and attention.

Whether you are making the meal experience irresistibly fun for kids or reassuring their parents of safety standards or raising awareness about the passionate professionalism of your team, all campaigns lead to one destination: increased participation in your program. **Participation drives everything.** While districts should take deserved pride in distrib-



Showing off a new touchless barcode scanner system is one way to build parent trust about safe meals in Tuscaloosa.

**WELCOME BACK!**  
 The health and safety of our students has always been our first priority. While schools were closed, we took great care to continue serving our students. As we welcome you back to our school, we remain committed to this promise. But we need your help.

**WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM US**

- HEALTHY TEAM MEMBERS**  
daily temperature checks
- CLEAN SURFACES**  
tables disinfected after each visit
- SOCIAL DISTANCING**  
reconfigured layouts
- PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT**  
masks on every team member
- FREQUENT HANDWASHING**  
and hand sanitizers placed in several locations

**WHAT WE ASK OF YOU**

- GIVE OTHERS THEIR SPACE**  
at least six feet
- A MASK IS RECOMMENDED**  
when picking up food
- DO NOT CONGREGATE**  
around the doors or high traffic areas

**TOGETHER WE CAN KEEP EACH OTHER HEALTHY**

Keshia Williams, School Nutrition Director in Coweta County, Ga., reached out to SEA Level Social to create this infographic and gave permission to share the concept with other districts.

uting hundreds of thousands of meals when schools were closed in Spring 2020, these numbers were, for the most part, downright dismal compared to normal operations. And in many communities, some, most or all students are still at home this fall.

“Marketing our child nutrition programs has *always* been an important aspect of our jobs, but due to the serious financial deficits that we’re all facing, it should be considered one of our top priorities,” says Donette Worthy, SNS, Child Nutrition Director, **Tuscaloosa County (Ala.) School District**. “Telling our story through marketing will be one way that we can turn our finances around to the positive. It can be the tool that we use to help gain the trust of our parents and the community, which,

hopefully, will drive more students to eat with us.”

Sharon Glosson, SNS, Executive Director of School Nutrition, **North East Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas**, agrees. “It’s important for communities to know that their support of the local school meal program is crucial for our survival. We saw the devastating impact that a decrease in participation causes our programs.”

**MASTERING THE MESSAGE**

“We need to sell the convenience, the affordability, the deliciousness, the nutritional value and the *comfort* of school meals,” says Jeanne Reilly, NDTR, SNS, School Nutrition Director, **Windham Raymond (Maine) RSU #14 Schools**. “We need to make it clear that having

a school lunch, whether in school or at home or in a learning pod, brings some normalcy to the school day and offers relief to parents who are exhausted by trying to plan breakfast and lunch menus day in and day out.” (Never mind the stress of trying to supervise remote learning!)

In this most unusual and uncertain year, there are *So. Many. Messages.* to market about your program. School meals are safe. School meals are for everyone, regardless of income, regardless of whether you are learning at school or home. They are important to education and well-being. Our school meals are delicious and nutritious. They have value to busy parents. They connect kids with pre-pandemic normalcy. We have an awesome team



**Jeanne Reilly, School Nutrition Director in Maine's RSU #14, uses helpful apps to create attractive collages with a message.**

and we all miss the kids. We still want to engage with our students, no matter where they are, keeping the fun in our program. Plus, there are many logistical updates that parents *need* to know. Whew!

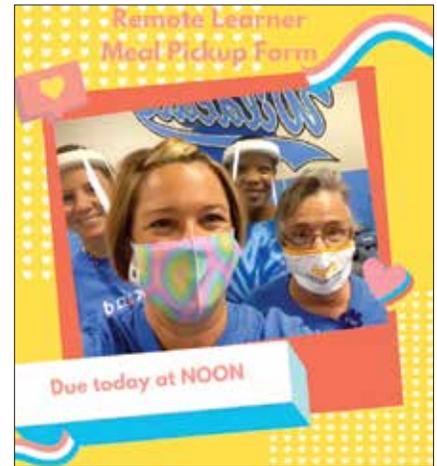
Given your limited time to produce materials, how do you identify and prioritize these different messages? Keep your goals front and center.

"Marketing equals communication, and during COVID-19, communicating with families is *essential*," stresses Reilly. "Menu changes, changes in school schedules, delivery sites and times—everything is so variable now. We need to deliver the most up-to-date information to families—in the easiest manner for them to receive it. We take a multi-pronged approach of messaging families through our district listserv and using social media, especially Facebook and Instagram."

Consultant Liz Roesel, owner of the

new school nutrition marketing-based start-up **SEA Level Social**, affirms both the priority and the means. "Logistics since March have been more complicated than ever, and parents are extremely eager for the latest news and guidance from the district," says Roesel. "Most child nutrition departments have switched from the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to emergency feeding to summer feeding to NSLP then, wait a minute, *back* to summer again. It's not only overwhelming for the nutrition team, but for parents to understand who can receive meals and when and where they can access them."

She's working on some simple "thank you for your patience and support" social media messages for her clients. "Everything *can't* run perfectly from day one. We want to gently reiterate this to our audiences to let them know that these are unique circumstances, that everyone is doing their best and that



**In Alabama's Tuscaloosa County, Child Nutrition Director Donette Worthy uses simple video tech to great effect in her outreach to parents.**

things may continue to change in the coming weeks. Get *ahead* of an angry parent reaction," she advises.

Making lemonade from the lemons of the continual programmatic changes, Roesel notes that it has created a captive audience that is eager to receive and share your next update. "Overall, social media posts announcing free meals have had the highest amounts of 'likes,' 'comments' and all-important 'shares,'" she reports.

Glosson and her team stick to core messages about school meals: Their amazing team goes above and beyond for students, providing delicious choices so that children will be allowed and encouraged to participate and get all the benefits of school meals.

Worthy believes it's most important to address the fear and anxiety that the pandemic has generated. "Showcasing our safety measures is my number one priority in our marketing efforts," she



**Free School Meals through December**  
 Why Should My Family Take Advantage of this???

- They are FREE & help you stretch your household food budget!
- They save you time & are available in school and even on virtual learning days!
- They make the school day seem a little more NORMAL... and who can't use a little normal these days???
- You are helping to create/sustain jobs & the local economy!
- They are delicious, nutritious, fun & convenient!
- They are FREE for **all kids** through December 2020.

Infographics like these from SEA Level Social (left) and Windham Raymond (above) convey several details quickly and clearly.

reports. “If our parents and guardians don’t feel as if their child will be safe eating with us, then, honestly, the look, nutrition and logistics won't matter. Once the trust factor has been established, then showing off our wonderful meals, sharing logistics with our remote learners and showcasing our amazing team will follow.”

Roesel agrees that marketing efforts can go a long way to make parents feel at ease and students feel safe and welcome. She helped to develop a flyer and social media graphic for the Coweta County (Ga.) School Nutrition team that would highlight the safety measures they had implemented and the protocols to follow when picking up meals. “Isn’t it reassuring to your audience that you are taking these precautions?” asks Roesel rhetorically.

She reports that another priority popular among her clients is the “we have missed our students and are so happy to see them back in the cafeteria” message. “But don’t forget your virtual learners,” Roesel advises. “They are still a part of your district, and you might want to make a little *extra* effort to make them feel some of that love from your team.” This also will head

## IDEAS WORTH “BORROWING”

School Nutrition loves sharing the inspiring creativity of its readers so much that we started the “Things We Love” column back in 2016, filling it with brief examples of innovation in action every month. Some of our favorite COVID-19 marketing ideas have included handwritten messages and drawings on meal packages sent to virtual learners, how-to video links for meal kit preparation, costume days even for curbside pickup, infographics explaining meal safety and the importance of completing a meal application, chalk art in school driveways, lucky “bag” giveaways, behind-the-scenes videos and so much more!

While school nutrition operators have a longstanding reputation for generosity in sharing their advice and expertise, be mindful of how you appropriate someone else’s work. It’s one thing to replicate an “idea,” but it’s quite another to take someone’s graphics, design and text that they invested a lot of time and effort to create—and to do so without even asking permission. It’s a tactic that rankles for Jeanne Reilly, NDTR, SNS, School Nutrition Director, Windham Raymond (Maine) RSU #14 Schools. “I am always happy to help someone and share my graphics/photos/ideas, but the internet has made it too easy to steal someone else’s ‘work,’” she notes. “I don’t mind if people use something I have shared in the TIPS for School Meals That Rock files, or if they ask permission or if they literally share the post. I do gain great ideas from other districts and I may use the idea and try to adapt it to my own program, but I will ask permission first.”

off potential parental backlash that at-home learners are being treated as less important than face-to-face learners.

In the Year of the Pivot, trying to create and stick to a strategic marketing plan may be an impractical goal. When

it comes to message priority, “I really just go with what seems most pressing at the time, what I am hearing out in the community. It’s very instinctive,” explains Reilly. That said, her instincts generally point her to prioritize mes-

## PROMOTIONS & PLANS

Events like **National School Lunch Week (NSLW)**, **National Apple Month** and **Halloween** are so important when it comes to engaging students in your school nutrition program. But so far, in the early weeks of the school year, they've been relegated to the back burner by many district teams still adjusting to the basic logistics of getting meals prepped and served and foundational marketing outreach to parents to maximize participation. Plus, "It feels different with COVID-19," concedes Jeanne Reilly, NDTR, SNS, School Nutrition Director, Windham Raymond (Maine) RSU #14 Schools. "Gone are our Fun Friday theme breakfasts and our special events. But they will be back!"

When Reilly catches her breath, she's sure to start putting on her thinking cap for planning special events that work within the restrictions of the pandemic. "These are participation drivers and they help deliver the messages that school meals are fun and delicious and that we care, without really having to 'say' those things." Special celebrations are a great way to get new customers and gain their loyalty.

Donette Worthy, SNS, Child Nutrition Director, Tuscaloosa County (Ala.) School District, is going to start evolving her marketing efforts away from safety measures to focus on the high quality of school meals and the benefits to all children. "Just recently, I had one mom think that since all meals will be free until the end of December, this meant that the quality of meals would decrease," she reports.

Liz Roesel, owner of the SEA Level Social marketing consultancy, encourages school nutrition operators to take advantage of promotions like NSLW and National Farm to School Month, calling them "more important than ever!" These events allow your program to become a part of a national celebration. Plus, finding creative ways to make the most of occasions like Halloween or the World Series will help your students feel more "normal" in this unique year, she explains.



Last June, April Laskey, SNS, Director of School Nutrition, Billerica (Mass.) Public Schools, presented at SNA's popular Back to School Training Series about her thorough approach to school meal marketing—even during a pandemic. She shared a detailed plan for the year ahead, starting with back to school welcome goals and messaging:

- 🍏 Students will be nervous about going back to school.
- 🍏 Help kids feel as welcome and comfortable as possible.
- 🍏 Use meal service in any form to engage students by keeping the tone fun and bright.
- 🍏 Continue to reassure that food is safe.
- 🍏 Don't focus on "we wish things were back to normal"—stay positive.

The plan went on to identify tactics that were tailored to different grades/buildings, as well as incorporate them on signage, menus, labeling, principal newsletters and, of course, social media. At press time, Laskey reports that a simple mantra—"Smile and Feed Kids"—directs every decision. "It's a simple idea I have repeated for 15 years, but it's never meant so much as it has over the last six months," she notes.

During the session's Q&A, Laskey went on to describe how she makes marketing a budget priority, including purchasing a costume for all major—and several lesser-known—holidays. Regular celebrations are a priority at each site, although she concedes that not every manager fully embraces the responsibility. "There are some that will only do what they are told to do—and then I provide a basic set of materials. But others want to put their own stamp on it."

sages about delicious and nutritious meals—and how important they are to all students, no matter where learning takes place.

The *most* important thing is to do *something*, Reilly urges. "Prioritize marketing and messaging, and spend at least 5 to 10 minutes on it *every day*. Start small and as you find your voice, it will become more natural and the ideas will start to flow."

### MAXIMIZE YOUR RESOURCES

When you're pressed for time—and when marketing isn't really your jam—all advice and ideas are invaluable. Some general strategies follow, but also check out some of the ideas worth borrowing on page 4.

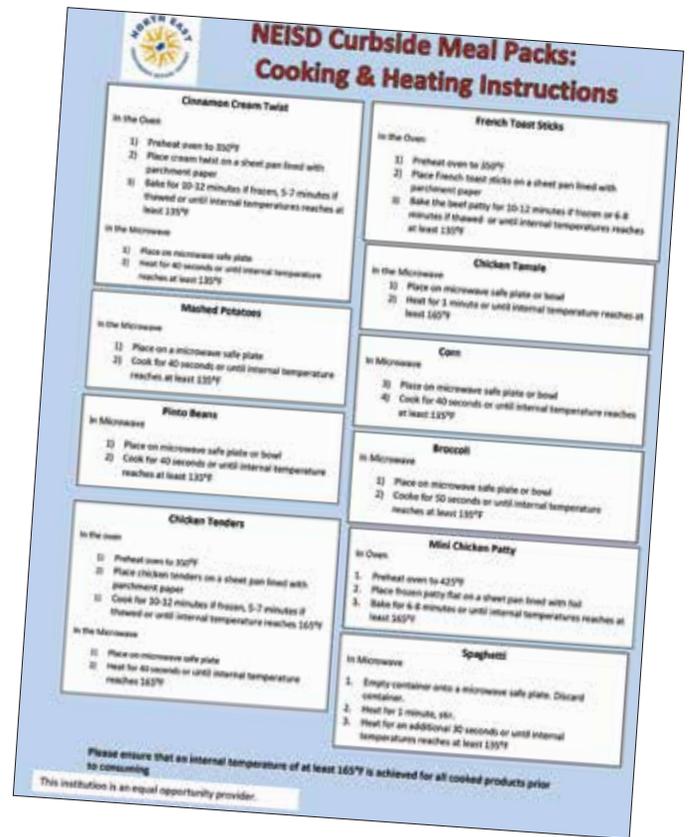
"When crafting any marketing message—especially on social media where everyone is scrolling quickly and you are competing for attention—it's

important to keep your message and phrasing as simple as possible. Parents don't understand what 'waiver flexibility' means, but they can understand that meals are free at this time," says Roesel.

She also encourages a fair amount of re-purposing (AKA "stealing"). Materials from organizations like SNA or government agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are



Photos and flyers showcase how the school nutrition team at North East Independent School District (NEISD) in Texas is adjusting to COVID-19.



great to share with anxious parents. Reilly agrees: “Make the most of tools—graphics, messages and other marketing content—provided by SNA, your state affiliate, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, vendors and even other directors that are shared on social media. Save these for the days when you don’t have even a minute to spare or for when you are fresh out of ideas.”

Roesel also applauds how “our school nutrition family so effortlessly shares and builds each other up,” noting that the infographic developed for Coweta County has been customized for other districts and shared on school nutrition Facebook groups.

Glosson is lucky to have a good-sized team to help her market school meals, and she recognizes that this priority can be another burden for smaller districts with fewer resources and time to invest. But she notes that a perceived negative *can* be turned to a positive: “I think it would be fun to find a student group that could help with marketing, possibly as part of a class project. Students have creative ideas and tactics to reach their peers.”

For her Windham Raymond community, Reilly tends to send wordier logistics-heavy communications via listserv and emails. But when using graphics on social media? “I want the picture to almost speak for itself, grabbing attention and telling the story quickly and efficiently.” She relies on her team to provide her with “great photos of the meals they are serving or interesting ‘behind-the-scenes’ perspectives that can tell a parent a lot about what goes on *in* a school kitchen.” In fact, Reilly says she’s trained all members of her team on how to take and send pictures with a smartphone. “That has saved me from having to be in many different places all at the same time. It’s a key tactic: utilizing your staff to document their days and the work they are rightfully proud of.”

Worthy also asks her staff to send her pictures throughout the week. When she uses one on social media, she makes sure to give a shout-out to the specific team in the post. “Our staff understands the importance of our marketing efforts, as I am very upfront with them about the negative effects

that the pandemic has had on our program.”

Images have been among the most-effective marketing approaches in her district, Reilly reports. “Showing pictures of our meals and of students enjoying those meals? This strategy has truly changed the perception of school meals in our district—and even helped grow our participation during the early days of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, when everyone else’s participation was dropping! Even school board members follow us on social media today and comment about our amazing school meals.”

If you have a group in the school community that supports your program, like the Board of Education, PTA, booster club or even just the district communications office, then reach out for their help in sharing your messages. “When the school district’s social media team shares our department posts on their page, they have a much larger following and it directs parents back to our page,” Glosson explains.

Indeed, this is a good time to look at your department’s website with fresh



**A brand-new delivery van carries an important message as it travels through Maine.**



**Highlighting mouth-watering menu items makes for a compelling marketing message by NEISD.**

eyes, says Roesel. Are you anticipating visitors' likely questions and providing the answers? Are these easy to find? "My favorite tip," she says, "is to ask a friend or family member to navigate your department's website and observe the steps they have to take to find information. How many clicks does it take? You want as few as possible!"

Another time-saving strategy for your social media efforts is to put together marketing posts—especially for events like NSLW or National Nutrition Month—way in advance and use the publishing tools for your Facebook page or other social media platform to "set it and forget it," says Reilly. This scheduling shortcut is very useful when you know you'll be out of the office or juggling expected projects.

Worthy is a passionate fan of the Facebook Live video feature, even more so since the pandemic began. She schedules regular live chats where she's on camera, addressing her audience and allowing them to get to know and trust her—and her team. "I had a mom

[who told me] that her oldest child was about to start kindergarten and that because she felt like she knew me now, she knew he would be safe. She felt more comfortable sending him to traditional school because she saw just how much we care for our students," recounts Worthy. "I've had multiple people stop me and ask if I am the lady from all the Facebook Live videos, and this leads to a conversation about how amazing our team is! Who would have ever thought that using Facebook Live during a pandemic would turn out to be one of the best marketing tools for our program?"

Speaking of going "live," don't limit your pandemic marketing efforts to social media. If you still have kids coming to the cafeteria or kiosks in the hallways, make use of those sites to engage students. Marketing to parents during curbside service is also essential, Roesel urges. "You have your audience right there. Use signage and flyer inserts into meal packaging to remind them to fill out that meal application.

If there's downtime at the pickup, conduct a quick poll to get feedback or share an upcoming initiative or change," she notes.

Remember that marketing is a year-round effort—and an *opportunity* to educate your audience and build your brand. "As the year progresses, take as many pictures as you can of your team, students in the cafeteria, everyone at the curbside pickup line and your delicious meals," says Roesel. "Pictures *always* get more engagement from social media audiences, and you can also publish them on your website and include them in e-newsletters."

### MARKETING WORKS

"Marketing can seem like a daunting task on top of everything else that we have going on right now," Worthy admits. "But I want my peers to understand that it is OK to start small. Set a goal, and when you accomplish it, set another. Don't give up. At first, you might feel as if it isn't making a difference, but one day you *will* see the fruit of your labors."

Reilly articulates what is at the heart of everyone's school meal marketing priorities in this strange school year: "We want families to know that we care about them. This has been a stressful time for everyone. By caring for our customers, we will win their loyalty for years to come, long after COVID-19 is gone." **SN**

*Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition.*

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