

Marketing and Communications

RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH GUIDE

Rethinking School Lunch – a project of the **Center for Ecoliteracy**
2528 San Pablo Avenue, Berkeley, California 94702 www.ecoliteracy.org



Marketing and Communications

RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH GUIDE

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

“You can’t devise a campaign before you’ve found out about the attitudes, language, beliefs, and behaviors of the people you’re trying to reach. . . . Get them talking about what they like about food, that descriptive language, so that you can use those very same words to describe the food that you’re planning to serve. . . . You need to get behind the answers to understand what they are really looking for. Do parents really want their kids to get more vitamins, more iron? Or are they really saying that they want their kids to be healthy?”

—Andy Goodman, communications consultant



WHAT’S INSIDE?

RETHINKING MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS:
The goal, the challenge, and some key points to remember.

**INTERVIEW WITH COMMUNICATIONS
CONSULTANT ANDY GOODMAN:** Valuable insights
into marketing to students and parents.

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS RESOURCES:
Once the new farm-to-school program is ready to go,
take some time to help parents and students feel just like
you do: It’s a great idea! Learn how to successfully market
a farm-to-school approach to school lunch, and explore
general resources on marketing.

RETHINKING MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

The Goal *To help school districts successfully promote healthy meal programs and meaningful learning environments to parents and students.*

The Challenge *Developing a message that helps administrators, educators, parents, and students understand that the farm-to-school model supports their efforts to improve student performance and enhance their well-being.*

The healthy school lunch program has competition. Even though choices are made at the district level, the support of parents, students, and other stakeholders can be crucial in ensuring the success of your program. Food advertisers spend nearly \$7 billion yearly on television advertising. Children see about 21 commercials on TV per hour, or three-and-a-half hours of commercials a week. This means that getting the message across about healthy eating is often a matter of being heard through the noise.

Messages about healthy meals compete for students' attention with messages from commercial food manufacturers promoting high-calorie, low-nutrition foods. That's why it's crucial to do market research about what actually appeals to students, and what prompts parents to enroll their children in healthy programs.

Targeting the message to the specific audience — whether it's the district, whose food policy you want to change; or parents

and students, who need to understand the connection between a healthy school environment and its effect on student behavior, achievement, and health — will help it be heard and accepted.



KEY POINTS

School Boards Can Factor in the Need for Marketing

When adopting a district food policy, school boards can factor in marketing as a necessary part of the launch of the new program. It helps when the school board, district superintendent, and food service director all understand that student acceptance is linked to the way the program is positioned and promoted, and that parent acceptance is highly influenced by student acceptance.

The quality of the dining experience has been shown to significantly influence student acceptance or rejection of school meal programs. That's why many district policies address this issue directly. In addition, district food policies often wisely restrict commercial advertisements and à la carte snack and beverage concessions on school campuses that conflict with or undermine the district's own meal programs and standards.

Enlist Student Input in Marketing Campaigns Students can be effective ambassadors of improved school meal programs, so include them in designing marketing campaigns that promote school lunch to students. With adult support, they can conduct taste tests, videotape interviews with peers, lead student focus groups, suggest selling points adults may not consider, and participate as student members of the district nutrition advisory committee.

Know the Audience When planning marketing campaigns for student meal programs, it's vital to know who the audience is and to understand their needs. As communications

consultant Andy Goodman says, "You can't devise a campaign before you've found out about the attitudes, languages, beliefs, and behaviors of the people you're trying to reach. . . . Once you've heard their language and attitudes, . . . then it's your task to come up with messages that speak their language and encourage what they're hopeful about and speak to what they're concerned about."

Here are some questions to think about:

- **Who is the target audience** for the campaign? Students and their parents represent two separate audiences for messages concerning improvements in school meal programs.
- **How can the inquiry process uncover the most useful information** about student, family, and community attitudes toward school meal service, food preferences, and the dining experience at school?
- **Where do members of the target audience(s) receive information** about school programs that they are likely to trust and use? What opportunity does that present for promotion?
- **Who are the most influential spokespeople** for the program?
- **What are the important messages** to communicate about the new food program and the dining experience, and what messages are right for which audience?

- **What research has been done** with parents and students about pricing of improved meals?
- **Are improvements to the meals** themselves mirrored by improvements to the dining experience?
- **What improvements to the dining venue have the most appeal** to students? (For example: cleaner, nicely painted, softer lighting, more comfortable furniture, more time to enjoy meals and to eat with friends, better presentation of food, a variety of serving styles, music, and so on.)

Interviewing Strategy Is Important Information gathered in focus groups, informal surveys, or peer-to-peer questionnaires can be used to design program improvements. Good interviewing is an art. Andy Goodman offers many valuable ideas later in this section.

Here are some basic points to keep in mind:

- **In a focus group situation**, people often say what they believe the interviewer wants to hear, rather than what they truly believe. Interviewers need to dig deep enough to get to authentic responses.
- **Interviewers should not assume** that they know what a subject is thinking. Instead, they need to listen for information and find ways to elicit honest answers.
- **Subjects are more likely to answer truthfully** when interviewed by their peers and people they trust, and when they are assured that their privacy and confidence will be respected.

Make Sure Communication Continues After the Program Is in Place Successful programs will elicit feedback on a regular basis in order to continually improve their service. A successful marketing strategy will include a variety of approaches, channels, and messages that can be refined as the program grows. Once the program is up and running, it is equally important to revisit the customer base of students and parents to elicit reactions to the new service and to respond to feedback.

Here are some key points to consider:

- **Establish a routine of eliciting opinions** from students and parents about the school lunch program. Food service staff can ask informal questions on a daily basis about student satisfaction with particular menus or with the dining atmosphere itself. Make printed, anonymous questionnaires about food service available in the lunchroom and send parent questionnaires home.
- **Invite students and parents to serve on the nutrition advisory committee** to make certain that student and parent concerns and recommendations are represented.
- **Remember that a student's decision to eat or not eat at school** may have more to do with the total lunch experience than with the lunch itself. In promoting an improved school meal program to students, recognize that social factors often outweigh meal quality in determining preference.

- **Keep in mind that the least expensive form of marketing** is word of mouth. When improvements to school meals are reinforced by improvements to the total dining experience, students will build enthusiasm for the program with their peers and with parents.
- **Taste-testing food with students** is one of the most effective ways of promoting and marketing improvements in school meal programs. Students feel respected when their opinions are solicited as a part of developing new programs, and they invariably contribute good ideas.

- **Students can be prepared to accept improvements** in the school meal program *before* the improvements occur. Students are much more likely to enjoy unfamiliar foods if they have grown them in the school garden or prepared them in a cooking class.

RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH

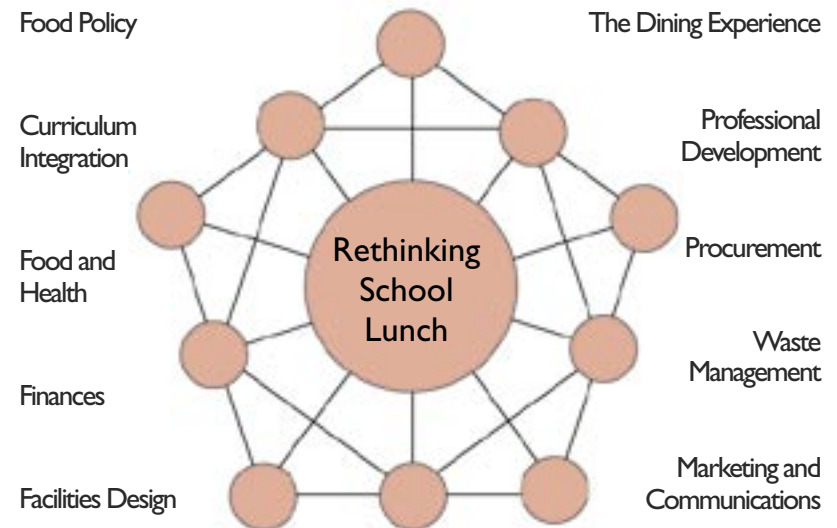
Web of Connections

This document is part of a comprehensive **Center for Ecoliteracy** project that provides helpful information on topics related to redesigning school lunch programs.

The diagram illustrates our systems approach to integrating school lunch programs with curriculum, improving student health and behavior, and creating sustainable communities.

School administrators, food service directors, teachers, and parents will each approach this project from their unique perspective. Readers can begin with the topic that interests them most, then explore the other related topics.

The entire Rethinking School Lunch project is available at: www.ecoliteracy.org/rethinking/rsl.html





Interview with Communications Consultant Andy Goodman

by Janet Brown program officer for food systems at the Center for Ecoliteracy and Michael K. Stone, Center for Ecoliteracy

Center for Ecoliteracy: *Many school districts are hoping to improve school meal services by offering meals prepared from fresh, organic or sustainably grown ingredients, purchased from local farms. How would you advise them to communicate to students and parents about these improvements?*

Andy Goodman: We want to help them position that offer in the best way, so that they don't step into any potholes. I can't give anybody specific advice about the best way to proceed until they've done some preliminary research. You can't devise a campaign before you've found out about the attitudes, language, beliefs, and behaviors of the people you're trying to reach.

First you have to sit down with groups of students and groups of

parents and ask very basic questions to get a much clearer idea of what their attitudes and beliefs are, what they're looking for from school lunches, what language they use around food, and how they react to the terms that we would use.

I think we know intuitively that we don't want to be coming at them with fancy language like "sustainable" this or "organic" that, language that they may not understand or that carries baggage for them.

So you ask them, "What terms do you use to describe food that you like?" If you ask, "What's your favorite food?" and they say "Cheeseburger," then ask "Why?" Get them talking about what they like about food, that descriptive language, so that you can use those very same words to describe the food that you're planning to serve. Sometimes, you'll have to drill down a little bit. For example, if they say that they enjoy what is served at the "food court," you need to pursue that answer all the way to what it really means, which might be "multi-ethnic, multi-choice." They may be asking for something that they don't know how to ask for. You need to get behind the answers to understand what they are really looking for. Do parents really want their kids to get more vitamins, more iron? Or are they really saying that they want their kids to be healthy?

Their level of understanding about food and nutrition will determine where you go from there. A lot is going to depend on what the parents and kids tell you. You may have to phase some things in slowly, if you're working in an environment where there's tremendous ignorance, or just deeply ingrained bad habits. If you try to move too quickly to a fully healthy diet, people might reject it simply because they're just not ready.

CEL: *Kids have their own language for talking with each other. How can we get that kind of honesty in the focus group?*

AG: That's a very good question. The research process is fraught with pitfalls where people give you the answer they think you want you to hear, and then do the complete opposite. I'll give you an

example. A department of health was researching an anti-smoking campaign for teens, and hired an ad agency to help. The agency knew that if they put kids in a focus group around a table with fluorescent lighting and adults asking questions, the kids would tell them what they wanted to hear, not what the kids really thought. So the agency hired teenagers, gave them video cameras, and said, “Find kids who are in line at a movie, or at a mall, or just killing time. Explain that you’re collecting opinions about smoking for a project. Ask them some questions.” It was kids asking kids in their own relaxed environment, where they felt a level of privacy and confidence. The answers they got from the kids were extremely candid. That’s where they got their themes for talking to kids about not smoking.

There’s a great focus group story from Sony. Boom boxes used to all be black, but Sony thought, “Let’s introduce some new colors.” So they brought in these “typical teenagers” to talk about boom boxes. They showed the kids some boom boxes in yellow, green and red, etc., and said, “What do you think of these new colors?” And the kids said, “Wow! New colors! Exciting!” After they asked the kids for their opinions, they let each kid choose a boom box to take home with them as a thank you gift for coming. They had a whole lineup of boom boxes in every color set out, and every kid chose black. The researcher said, “That’s where we learned that the answers you get on the survey may not be consistent with what kids really think.”

CEL: *In addition to peer-to-peer questioning, what other ways can interviewers elicit authentic opinions from students?*

AG: Let’s say I’m one kid interviewing another kid. The conversation goes like this:

- Tell me your three favorite things to eat.
- Pizza, cheeseburgers, hot dogs.
- Why do you like pizza?

– It’s greasy. It’s cheesy. It tastes good.

– Why do you like cheeseburgers?

– They taste good.

– Why do you like hot dogs?

– They taste good.

They probably won’t be any more eloquent than that. So I ask them, “Tell me something that your parents made you eat that you were surprised that you liked.” Or, “Tell me about something that someone told you was good for you that actually tasted good.” I try to get them talking about something that they tried that was different, that wasn’t a hamburger or a cheeseburger or a hot dog, and that actually tasted pretty good. That kind of question will start to elicit from them some different things to eat, and maybe some different reasons for why things taste good.

CEL: *What about exploring messages that reach parents?*

AG: The same process goes for parents. If you can create an environment where they don’t feel as though they’re talking to researchers or outsiders, but talking amongst themselves, you’ll get more candid interest there as well.

Try to find some setting such as a dinner party where, on a peer-to-peer basis, the host could pass around a simple survey and say, “I’m doing some research and I need to get 20 friends to talk to me about the foods they like. Could you fill this out for me?” The questionnaire asks questions such as, “Tell me about your last five dinners. Tell me what you ate. Tell me about your last five lunches. Put a check if you prepared it yourself or someone prepared it for you.” It can be fairly tame. See if you can prompt some conversation around that. In a professional focus group setting, the gathering would be taped to listen to afterward.

CEL: *How would you select the parents?*

AG: You have to find people who are hubs, who have a lot of people around them, so that if they have a dinner party, they can get 15 to 20 people around the table. With some thought, you'll know who the leaders are in the community. I know there are just certain parents at my daughter's school who would be right for this. I think you probably know the same thing in your children's schools.

You want to ask some financial questions, obviously. You also want to ask questions like, "If you wanted your kid to have a balanced diet, give me five lunches that you'd say, 'Good, they're getting what they need.'" That will also test levels of knowledge, which will be helpful. You want to get their perceptions about what tastes good and what doesn't taste good. You can be even more directive like, "Have you ever had any organic food? How did it taste?" If you find that parents have the same preconceptions as the kids, it's important to recognize that parent opinion will reinforce the kids' reservations about the food. It's something you'll need to address in the marketing program.

You can ask, "When you were growing up, what kind of food did you have in your house?", "What's your favorite thing to cook?", "Tell me some things you cook for your kids." If they think you're looking for answers that spell a balanced diet, then they'll tailor what they tell you about what they cook. But if instead you are asking about what they enjoy cooking, and it adds up to a very imbalanced diet, you need to know that, because that's the world these kids live in.

Once you've interviewed the kids and their parents, and heard their language and their attitudes, assumptions, likes and dislikes, and so on, then it's your task to come up with messages that speak their language and encourage what they're hopeful about and speak to what they're concerned about.

CEL: *How might that work to promote fresh, healthy food in the school lunch?*

AG: First of all, I don't know to what degree lunch is about food, and it's dangerous to assume. Look at who's successful. Look at McDonald's and their slogans. It's all about the *experience*. There's almost nothing about the food. Burger King will try to sell you on flame broiling, but for a lot of these places the food is considered interchangeable. So you also need to find out from your audience how much lunch is about the experience of lunch, about where they sit, who they sit with, and what's going on. Maybe the food is incidental. If that's the case, then your task isn't about marketing the food as much as *creating an environment where great things are happening*.

CEL: *How much of marketing is really removing barriers—mental barriers or cultural barriers or something that blocks someone from really wanting to do something?*

AG: The question I always ask in a marketing effort is, "Is this a matter of taking something that people believe in and building on it? Or is it taking something that they're concerned about and overcoming it?" It varies from instance to instance.

Take taste, for example. Taste-testing is an important part of the research. If the food doesn't taste good to the kids, that's a barrier. I'm assuming that the food you pick will taste good. If the kids say the food tastes great, that becomes part of your campaign. But what if they basically tell you, "Yeah, the new items are fine. They're a lot like the old items"? If you find that out, then I think the message to your planning team is not to make a big deal about rolling it out. Just phase it in, and don't call attention to it. That will only get people thinking about it.

CEL: *What about the price of the meal?*

AG: I'd want to know what price is a deal breaker for families. If they say, "Look, I can't give my kid \$3.50 a day, five days a week for lunch, no matter what you're serving," you have to deal with that somehow.

CEL: *Often, only the poorest children eat the school lunch, and not even as many as qualify for it. This condition is linked to the poor quality of the food, and also the stigma associated with the free lunch. How can schools improve the program for kids that need the free lunch program and also attract more full-pay kids to the service?*

AG: We have to do things in the launch that make a fresh impression . . . that make lunch fun, cool, and their own thing. But probably no matter how good it is, most campaigns work better with a phase-in where people have a chance to put their toe in and experiment a little before they're fully committed. For example, if you substitute a healthy burrito for an unhealthy burrito that's already on the menu, and no one complains, you're fine. If you can do it without a lot of hoopla, even better, because if the foods have the same name and the same kind of look, then maybe the answer is "Don't make a big deal about it."

CEL: *Assuming that you're figuring out what your message is, and the words in which to express it, how do you decide what medium to use to deliver that message?*

AG: As part of your research, you ask parents, for instance, where they get their information about what's happening at school. "From my kid, from the neighborhood, from the flyer that comes home, from the bulletin board." Then you just get your message into that flow. The same thing with kids: When something's happening at school, how do you find out about it? "An announcement over the loudspeaker. It's on the blackboard. I'm handed something. I hear it from friends." We may have assumptions about how information is transferred, but let's hear what works for them. I think a good general rule is, don't assume anything. Find a way to ask and get an honest answer.

It's the same thing with choosing your spokespersons. Who do parents and kids believe? You ask, "Where do you get information

that you trust most about the school?" or "Whose advice about the school do you rely on?"

I think all of this comes down to being a student of human nature, and knowing what kind of circumstances permit a person to speak most honestly. The task is to create those circumstances, using your own common sense and whatever tools you have. Ask questions in the most neutral sort of way in order to get really honest answers. Parents and kids will tell you what to do in your campaign. They'll give you the answers, if they get the chance to do it candidly.

Andy Goodman is a communications consultant based in Los Angeles, California. His firm, a goodman, helps public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses communicate more effectively through print, broadcast media, and the Internet. Prior to forming a goodman, he founded and ran the American Comedy Network, wrote and produced for television, and served as President of the Environmental Media Association (EMA). He is the author of *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes*.



Marketing and Communications Resources

How Food Companies Market

Food Marketing and Advertising Directed at Children and Adolescents: Implications for Overweight

The American Public Health Association passed a resolution in support of curbing food marketing aimed at children. (PDF: 3 pages)

www.apha.org/legislative/policy/2003/2003-017.pdf

Pestering Parents: How Food Companies Market Obesity to Children

A Center for Science in the Public Interest study that documents how children are bombarded everywhere and every day with sophisticated messages promoting high-calorie, low-nutrition food products. Names are named. It also outlines strategies for fighting back. (PDF: Part One, 29 pages; Part Two, 38 pages)

\$10 at CSPI-Pestering Parents, 1875 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20009.

Part One: http://cspinet.org/new/pdf/pestering_parents_final_part_1.pdf

Part Two: http://cspinet.org/new/pdf/pestering_parents_final_part_2.pdf

Wootan, Margo. "Thought for Food." *The Lancet*. 362 (9396) (2003). The United Kingdom Food Standards Agency commissioned a review of the evidence on food marketing's affect on children's diets and health. This November 15, 2003 summary is available in back issues on *The Lancet* website.

www.thelancet.com

Help for Food-Related Marketing in Schools

Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment: A Guide to Local Action

USDA publication intended to help examine a school's nutrition environment and to design and put into action a plan for improvement, including marketing. (PDF: 48 pages)

www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/guide.pdf

The School Environment: Helping Students Learn to Eat Healthy

A brochure from the USDA with basic facts about current nutrition and health problems and recommendations for actions by schools. (PDF: 2 pages)

www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/sebrochure.pdf

How to Talk "Nutrition" to Kids

A checklist from Child Care Choices, Inc. based on the experiences of focus groups talking with children.

www.childcarechoices.net/FoodProgram_NutritionEd_NutritionTopic_TalkToKid.html

Teaching Your Kids about Food Advertising and Marketing

Tips from the International Food Information Council Foundation for helping children become media literate and able to identify the messages behind advertising messages.

http://kidnetic.com/home/bright_papers/bp_cat6_52.html

Perspectives on "Buy Locally Grown" Slogans

A fascinating report from The Food Trust on responses to a variety of slogans proposed to promote buying locally grown food at the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia. (PDF: 8 pages)

www.thefoodtrust.org/pdfs/slogans.pdf

Real-Time Marketing

A summary from a National Food Service Management Institute seminar on marketing. (PDF: 11 pages)

www.nfsmi.org/Education/Satellite/ss26/partic.pdf

School Foods Tool Kit

A guide for improving school foods and beverages, from the Center for Science in the Public Interest. Its communications sections are directed more at convincing government and school boards to support healthy school food than at persuading students and parents about the value of eating better food.

Hard copy \$10 from CSPI's School Foods Tool Kit, 1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20009. Available for free on their website.

www.cspinet.org/schoolfood/

General Resources on Marketing

a goodman: Good Ideas for Good Causes

CEL interviewee Andy Goodman's communications consulting firm helps public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses reach more people more effectively. His book, *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes*, is available for free on his website.

www.agoodmanonline.com

Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research

Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey

CEL interviewee Andy Goodman recommends this book.

www.sagepub.com/Home.aspx

Spitfire Strategies

This consulting company specializes in promoting positive social change. See "Spitfire Recommends" section on their website for helpful research and ideas.

www.spitfirestrategies.com/

The Spitfire Strategies Smart Chart

A fill-in chart identifying key decision points in a marketing campaign, including "reality check" questions. (PDF: 1 page)

www.spitfirestrategies.com/pdfs/stand_alone_chart.pdf

Cover photo: Tyler/Frog Hollow Farm/Center for Ecoliteracy





Learning in the Real World

©2004 Published by Learning in the Real World®

Learning in the Real World® is a publishing imprint of the Center for Ecoliteracy, a public foundation located in Berkeley, California.

The Center for Ecoliteracy is dedicated to education for sustainable living by fostering a profound understanding of the natural world, grounded in direct experience.

Center for Ecoliteracy
2528 San Pablo Avenue, Berkeley, California 94702
www.ecoliteracy.org
email: info@ecoliteracy.org