



CUSTOMER SERVICE & MARKETING TIPS FROM DEB MACKEY, SCHOOL NUTRITION DIRECTOR & MASTER INSTRUCTOR

Deborah “Deb” Mackey has a twinkle in her eyes and an enthusiasm to feed every student. She is bursting with energy and commitment to customer service.

Deb has been in the food service business for many years. After leaving the restaurant and catering industry, she entered the healthcare arena and became certified in dietary management. A friend encouraged her to apply for a school meals director position in a local district, the rest is history!

Today, Deb is the School Nutrition Director for Hoosic Valley Central School District in New York. Deb is also a Master Instructor for the New York State Education Department (NYSED), offering training on topics including ServSafe, offer versus serve, and production records/standardized recipes.

Deb goes above and beyond to market her district’s school meals program. No Kid Hungry chatted with Deb to learn how she’s found success so that you can, too.

“You must market to everybody!”

- Deb Mackey

Student Advisory Committee

One of the first things Deb did when she became a first-time school nutrition director was establish a student advisory committee. She learned from her experience working in health care that gathering feedback from your community is crucial for success. Students have so much to share. They have unique ideas, experiences, and preferences that, when shared, can help school nutrition programs thrive!



WHAT DEB DID



Gained administrative support – She met with administrators and principals to share her idea and offer statistics about how this could help everyone, which they liked. Deb stressed the importance of getting students involved with the school meals program. She highlighted the links between nutrition and higher academic achievement, decreased behavioral problems, and fewer trips to the nurse’s office when students receive the school meals they need, to fuel their bodies.



Started small – She started with only six students in the first year. She sent an email announcing the student advisory committee and sought applications from students in 5-11th grade. The student advisory committee met monthly for about 15 minutes and made plans for marketing via bulletin board, fun events, guest servers, and more.



Shared ownership – Students had the opportunity to have their ideas heard and implemented. They helped create a monthly bulletin board in alignment with their wellness policy and were involved in events and activities to increase participation in the school meals program.



Educated students – The students received guidance and training from Deb and other school leaders. One of their key pillars was kindness and inclusion. The students also gained valuable professional experience in school meals and marketing.

Challenges & Solutions

Change takes time and effort. You must invest in the process of being inclusive, hearing from your audience/clientele (the students), and working together in a way that allows all voices to be heard. At first, it may seem harder and take longer, but it’s an investment in creating a culture where student voices are amplified, and students feel invested in the outcomes.

These are some of the challenges Deb encountered:

- Students wanted menu items to have more flavor, specifically salt. They also requested hot pockets.
- Students did not understand the required components of a reimbursable meal or other aspects of the school meals program.

Here’s how Deb solved those challenges and others:

- Deb listened to students’ concerns and provided honest feedback. She explained that she could not add more salt but agreed to create a flavor station—an area of herbs and spices located by the cashier that allows students to add flavor to their food.
- She recreated a version of a hot pocket that met federal nutrition guidelines, which the students enjoyed and appreciated!
- Deb created avenues for feedback, like a suggestion box. That idea came from the students and allowed students to share their concerns and suggestions. She had the student advisory committee members talk to their peers and started a weekly Talk to Me Tuesday event where she would pull suggestions from the box and address the suggestions. This helped create an open communication environment with her department and consumers (the students).
- She had the student advisory committee create a commercial explaining a reimbursable breakfast meal so the students would understand it better. The commercial was played on a large monitor near the cafeteria. Although staff had tried for years to explain a reimbursable meal, hearing this message from other students created by students was more effective.

Activities & Events

Deb stayed engaged with the students and tried to offer an activity every month to keep things fun and exciting! Here are two examples:

NATIONAL SCHOOL BREAKFAST WEEK

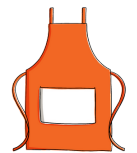


- There were guest servers from the school and community, which added to the breakfast excitement. Students love serving their peers!
- If a student participated in breakfast for five consecutive days, they were entered into a raffle to win a new bicycle, helmet, and bike lock. There was one winner at the elementary school level and one winner at the middle/high school level. The prizes were donated by their local Walmart and Target.
- Deb and her team created a fun atmosphere by setting up a photo booth with props.
- With the help of dietetic interns from local colleges and universities (Deb was their preceptor for 10 weeks during their food service management rotation), they celebrated success by tracking an increase in student breakfast participation during National School Breakfast Week.



IRON CHEF COMPETITIONS

- This started with an idea to boost participation by having students create meals that they liked and complied with nutrition guidelines for school meals.
- To promote this competition, Deb hung posters around the school, and sign-up spots were filled the first day. The competition usually included 6-10 teams, each consisting of 3-4 students. The teams were comprised of students from various grade levels, and each team needed to include one district staff member—a teacher, a nurse, a coach, or a principal.
- Students learned about meal components, like what constitutes a grain. They also learned about food safety and sanitation.
- Each team was tasked with creating a recipe based on an assigned theme. Some examples include grilled cheese sandwiches with multiple types of cheese, apples during harvest season in their area, best BBQ food, etc. The food was sourced by the school meals department.
- The winning team got bragging rights, and their item was placed on the menu for one day the month after the competition.
- The competition was held 3-4 times per year, and increased interest and participation at the junior and senior high school level every single time! Students want to be noticed and heard.



Opportunities & Gamechangers

- Stay open and flexible.
- Work with local businesses.
- Administrative support is key.
- Provide meals for staff. Deb said, “I always request that our department provide meals to staff for opening and superintendent’s conference days. I serve the same types of meals to staff that students get all year, and many of these teachers and administrators don’t normally eat at school. I feel that if they have a positive experience, they might share it with their students and encourage them to eat with us.”
 - Wondering what to serve? “The last couple of conference days, we served a taco/nacho bar with warm chips, taco meat, lettuce, tomato, cheese, banana peppers, black olives, jalapenos, sour cream, and salsa. We got rave reviews! Kid food that adults love too!”
- Use a monitor to display photos and descriptions of menu items. Ensure the photos look enticing! Each week, Deb lists the daily menu and includes photos of actual meal trays. Deb said, “I put little tips and jokes for interest and often video students and put them on the big screen talking about their favorite meals. I invite brokers to come with products they represent and cook/serve a meal to introduce new menu items and conduct satisfaction surveys after the meal.”



Learn about Deb’s Farm to School Program

Want to know about how Deb started the district’s Farm-to-School program?

Check out this video featuring Deb: [School Uses Local Buying Power to Turn Into a Farm-to-School Program.](#)