

TIPS FOR MARKETING PLANT-BASED SCHOOL MEALS

Effectively marketing plant-based meals to students can make nutritious options more enticing, leading to greater satisfaction and higher participation in school meal programs. By adopting taste-forward marketing strategies and engaging language that resonates with students, schools can generate excitement around climate-friendly, plant-based entrees.

Tip #1: Focus on Flavor Driven Names

Taste is the primary driver of student meal selection. When students associate healthy, plant-based, and climate-friendly meals with great taste, it helps break down barriers to acceptance and encourages them to try something new. By emphasizing the delicious flavors and textures of these meals, schools can create a positive experience that students are eager to embrace.

Examples include:

- "Southwest Veggie Tacos" instead of "Black Bean Tacos"
- "Zesty Marinara Pasta" instead of "Vegan Spaghetti"
- "Crispy BBQ Cauliflower Bites" instead of "Roasted Cauliflower"
- "Sweet & Spicy Singapore Curry Noodles" instead of "Noodle Bowl"
- "Teriyaki Veggie Bowl" instead of "Veggie Bowl"
- "Spicy Nachos with Cheese" instead of "Nachos"
- "Creamy Cauliflower Tikka Masala" instead of "Cauliflower Tikka Masala"





Tip #2: Describe the Experience

Describing the experience of a meal, such as "savory, slow-simmered lentils with a hint of garlic," engages students' senses and sparks their curiosity. It helps them visualize and anticipate the flavor, making the meal more enticing and memorable. This approach not only highlights the taste but also elevates the perception of plant-based meals, making them feel more gourmet and exciting to try.

Examples include:

- "Creamy coconut curry with tender vegetables and fragrant spices" – This highlights the rich texture and aromatic flavors of the dish.
- "Crispy chickpea tacos with zesty lime crema and fresh avocado" – This emphasizes the contrast between crispy and creamy elements while teasing the fresh toppings.
- "Smoky grilled portobello mushrooms topped with a tangy honey glaze" – This conveys the savory depth and umami flavors of the mushrooms with a hint of sweetness.
- "Hearty crunchy salad with roasted sweet potatoes, crunchy almonds, and a citrusy vinaigrette" – This focuses on the wholesome, satisfying ingredients and the bright, refreshing dressing.

Tip #3: Eliminate Phrases Like "Vegan" or "Plant-Based"

Eliminating words such as "vegan" from dish names can make meals feel more inclusive and appealing to a broader audience, as some students may have preconceived notions about plant-based foods. Focusing on the delicious flavors and experiences allows the dish to stand on its own merit without labels that might deter non-vegan eaters. This approach helps shift the focus to the taste and quality of the meal, making it more enticing for all students.



Tip #4: Use High-Quality Images

Including vibrant, high-quality images of the meals can make a huge difference in attracting students. Students are more likely to try a dish if it looks visually appealing, so showcasing meals in a way that highlights their colors, textures, and overall presentation can help spark interest and encourage selection.

Tip #5: Highlight Environmental Benefits

Describing the dish as "climate-friendly" aligns with students' growing awareness about environmental sustainability and concern about climate change. Highlighting the environmental benefits of plant-based meals can foster a sense of pride and responsibility. This approach also taps into a growing trend of students wanting to support initiatives that contribute positively to the health of our planet.

Tip #6: Offer Customization Options

Allowing students to customize their meals—like choosing toppings, adding sauces, or mixing and matching sides—gives them a sense of ownership over their meal and enhances the likelihood they'll enjoy it. Marketing these options, such as "build your own pho soup bowl," can increase student engagement and participation.





Tip #7: Use Fun and Playful Language

Incorporating playful or whimsical language can make school meals feel more fun and relatable to students. For example, referring to a healthy salad as "a crunchy rainbow of flavor" or a veggie burger as "a savory veggie stack" or a soup with pasta shells as "mermaid soup" can help make meals feel more approachable and exciting.

Tip #8: Stuck on Marketing? Try ChatGPT!

ChatGPT can assist your nutrition service team by generating engaging phrases that appeal to students' senses, such as "crispy chickpea tacos with a zesty lime crema," making healthy, plant-based school meals more appetizing. It can also suggest catchy meal names, taglines, and promotional ideas, simplifying the process of marketing meals to students!

Type in "Give me 10 taste-forward name suggestions for [NAME OF DISH] which would appeal to K-12 students" into ChatGPT to get a list of suggestions!





Tip #9: Maximize Take Rates Through Creative Menuing and Feedback

- Rotate new plant-based meals throughout the school year to maintain student interest.
- For higher take rates, refrain from serving plant-based meals on the same day as the most popular meat and dairy dishes.
- Use surveys, cafeteria observation, and sales data to refine offerings and identify popular meals.
- If you have staffing capacity, set up interactive build-a-meal stations where students can customize their plant-based meals by selecting from various healthy ingredients.
- By featuring student-driven ingredients (e.g., school garden produce), you can maximize student connection to their food.

Tip #10: Get Students Involved in Menu Development

Work with clubs and school leaders to establish a group of student representatives to provide input on school meals, including taste-tests, feedback, and marketing strategies. You can recruit and train student ambassadors to promote plant-based meals among their peers and act as cafeteria ambassadors during lunch time, encouraging peer participation and ensuring meals reflect student preferences and foster a sense of ownership.

Other Ways to Involve Students:

- Engage students in contests like Shark Tank (pitching plant-based meals) or Top Chef (teams crafting the best dish) to generate new plant-based school meal ideas.
- Encourage students to capture [high-quality photos](#) of plant-based meals and share them on your district's social media pages.
- Inspire students to take an active role in promoting school meals with plant-based art competitions to hang in the cafeteria or feature on menus.
- [Canva](#) is a great tool for creating customized marketing materials.

Tip #11: Encourage Student Taste-Testings

- Host a “Taste-Testing” or “Try It” event to offer samples while students are in line to encourage students to try new plant-based entrees on the menu.
- Prior to selecting new plant-based menu options, implement a sampling day where students try different versions of plant-based meals and/or products, such as tempeh or a plant-based burger, and provide feedback (e.g., taste-testing three kinds of plant-based burritos). For more information on taste-testing, see FoodCorps [Taste Test Guide](#).

Tip #12: Incorporate Plant-Based Lessons in Classrooms

Encourage teachers and/or garden educators to highlight the benefits of plant-based in their classrooms or bring partners into their classrooms to educate students. For sample curriculum or to ask for educational support, visit [Health Kids Happy Planet](#).

Tip #13: Invite Parents to Get Involved

Provide bite-sized portions of plant-based menu items to parents and students at school events such as Back to School Night. Engage families with a “Family Food Night” by providing plant-based meal ideas, cooking demonstrations, and nutrition education through virtual or in-person events.





Tip #14: Engage Staff with Hands-On Training

Provide hands-on culinary training for nutrition service staff on preparing, serving and marketing plant-based meals to help boost confidence and generate interest. To learn more, visit Culinary Institute of America's [Plant-Forward Kitchen](#) or Chef Ann Foundation's [School Food Institute](#).

Tip #15: Promote Plant-Based Meals to Community Members

Highlight menu features, student testimonials, and meal benefits through newsletters, websites, and district social media. Share engaging content like high-quality plant-based meal photos, staff spotlights, and student-led taste test results. Encourage parents, school board members, and administrators to champion plant-based school meals. Their support can drive policy changes, secure funding, and strengthen school meal initiatives.

Tip #16: Implement a Themed Plant-Based Day

Work with non-profit partners and your school wellness committee to implement a themed day such as [Meatless Monday](#), [Climate-Friendly Wednesday](#), or other themed calendar-day that promotes plant-based meals. Use events like Earth Month, National Nutrition Month, or School Lunch Hero Day to highlight the environmental and health benefits of plant-based school meals.

