

Social Media and School Food Service

MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



Use social media to share updates, engage with, and maintain relationships with your audiences

If you're a school foodservice director, you may find it challenging to maintain relationships with so many stakeholders, from parents to students to staff to community members. Social media is the answer! By creating a presence on a social media platform, you can share updates and interact with each of these groups – all from the touch of a phone, tablet, or computer.

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

By actively sharing on a departmental social media profile, you're able to:

- Interact with many people in an easy way.
- Create a more welcoming environment for parents and students.
- Build stronger relationships with the community.
- Increase the visibility of your foodservice program.
- Share highlights and successes from your program.
- Educate the families you serve.
- Connect with fellow foodservice directors to discuss challenges, ask questions, and share success stories.

Those working in school settings concur with the benefits. Shennie Quintanilla, a dietitian in school nutrition services who works in community engagement and communications, says, "Social media gives that extra touch of flavor to school meal operation programs. Food is visually appealing, and we want to attract our customers with this vision. Social media gives schools the opportunity to engage with their



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community through updates and messages. It draws a picture of what is important to the nutrition services team and district by providing transparency with consistent communication. Photos and posts feature the long strides school meals have taken in terms of quality, nutrition, and taste.”

Danya Arnold, MBA, MS, RDN, Executive Vice President of Marketing and Business Communications for K-12 Culinary Connection, echoed these thoughts. “With so many negative viewpoints regarding school nutrition, showing what your program is doing on social media can really educate the public. When many people think of school food service, they automatically assume the food is what they grew up with—which may have been less than stellar. Programs today are not only innovative, but also focus on providing kids with amazing meals, and social media is the best way to showcase that,” says Arnold.

WHICH SOCIAL PLATFORM SHOULD YOU USE?

With so many social media platforms, it can be hard to decide which is best for your needs. According to Arnold, “Different platforms can be beneficial for different audiences. Facebook is great for reaching parents, school

personnel, school board members, and other adults in the community, whereas Instagram and TikTok may be the best route to get feedback and input from the students that you serve.”

Here’s an overview of five social platforms that you might consider using:

Facebook

We all know of Facebook as a way to stay connected with friends and family members. But it’s not just for socializing with those who are close to us. As the largest social media platform in the world, it’s



also an excellent medium for sharing updates about your program.

You can create a Facebook page, which is essentially a public-facing brand profile. Parents and community members can follow the page. As the admin of the page, you can post updates, photos, videos, and more, all of which are distributed to a proportion

of the page’s followers (unfortunately, the algorithm does not show every post you make to every follower).

Facebook also allows you to create groups, which can be a private or public social community. Groups may feel more close-knit, and more people in the group may see content based on the current Facebook algorithm. However, groups take considerably more work since you need to have an admin that admits people and moderates other members’ posts.

In general, a Facebook page is an easy place to start in the social media world – so if you’re feeling overwhelmed, try jumping in with that first.

Instagram

Because Instagram focuses heavily on photos and video, it’s more of a visual medium compared to other social

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platforms—which allows it to grab attention if used correctly. According to Quintanilla, “Instagram has been instrumental in my past school nutrition experiences.”

There are several different types of content you can produce on Instagram:

Feed posts: These are what most people think of when they refer to Instagram; a standard square photo. These offer a way to showcase appealing meals to students and parents. For example, you might share a few photos each week highlighting the meal of the day. Don’t forget to use hashtags to help your content be found by other users that might not be following you yet—for example, #schoolmealsrock, #K12, or #schoollunch.

Stories: These are fleeting vertical photos, videos (short clips up to 15 seconds), polls, or questions which only appear for 24 hours. You can share behind-the-scenes content like a series of photos about how a certain fan-favorite meal is made. You could share a poll to get a vote between two new potential menu items, or you could share a question to solicit feedback about a certain aspect of your meals.

Instagram TV: You can create longer video content on Instagram TV—up to

15 minutes. This could be fun if you wanted to offer a quick cooking demo or other long-form content for your audience.

Reels: This is Instagram’s newest format! Built very similar to TikTok, Reels allows you to make videos set to fun music or trending audio. You can stitch together several clips up to 60 seconds, and add different effects or text overlays.

TikTok

Perhaps the newest entry to the social media market, TikTok was launched to the U.S. back in 2017—but it’s gained a lot of popularity in the younger crowd over the last two years. The platform may be particularly useful for reaching your students, whether they’re in middle school or college.

TikTok is based around short-form video content. Most videos are usually around 8 to 20 seconds, and can currently go up to a maximum length of 60 seconds. Trending music and hashtags can be found on TikTok, similar to Instagram.

While it has a reputation for being focused on fun dances, there’s also a ton of educational content on the platform. You could use TikTok to share short recipe videos, behind-the-scenes shots of your kitchen, or nutrition tips for kids. The opportunities are endless!



Twitter

Twitter allows you to share 280-character messages in real time. Many school districts use Twitter to share updates about school events and snow days – but there’s no reason this also can’t include tweets about your foodservice program! You could build your messaging into the school’s main profile, or start an additional profile specifically for the foodservice department.

While interest in Twitter seems to be waning among the younger generations,

many parents may still use it. It’s quick and easy to set up a profile there and compose short informational tweets, so it may be a low-investment way to get your department started with social media.

You can also use Twitter to connect with other foodservice programs, keeping an eye out for innovative ideas you might be able to implement.

LinkedIn

While LinkedIn isn’t very useful for connecting with students or parents, this professional networking site

is a goldmine for connecting with colleagues, discovering content about hot topics in food service, and job hunting. This type of social media is helpful for you to use personally to stay up to date in the industry.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Narrow down which platform you'll use. Don't get stuck in analysis paralysis; remember that you'll learn the most by simply getting started and testing out different features in the platform.

You might want to start your own department profile, or it may be easier to utilize the school or district's profile (depending on the time commitment and amount of content you'd like to share). Either way, ensure you have approval to get started, and then jump in.

If you do create a specific department profile, Quintanilla recommends that you collaborate with your school district's communication and public relations team. "Involve them in the investment of social media platforms for the department, and it keeps the relationship mutualistic. Tag or mention their social media handles as well when posting. They are a resource for you in engaging with students and families!"

Next, create a plan for what type of content you'll create, and how often you'll post. It's best to stay consistent, so figure out how many times you can realistically post each week. Make it a goal to stick with that. Ideally, aim to post at least a few times each week (or daily if you can maintain that cadence).

As far as the type of content goes, the options are limitless! Arnold says, "Have fun with it! You work hard every day

- Pictures from recent events or activities (remember to review your school district's policy on sharing photos of students – be sure you have permission to do so)
- Behind-the-scenes shots from the kitchen
- Recipe videos
- Seasonal ingredients
- Family nutrition tips
- Updates about menu changes
- Quotes or short videos from students about a meal or activity (again, review district policy before sharing videos)

As you start posting, you may experience some negative feedback. Know that this is normal—everyone gets a negative comment from time to time, and the cloak of anonymity on the Internet makes it more likely.

Arnold offers insightful advice for these situations: "I see negative feedback as a great



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and do amazing things—social media is the best way to show that to the public."

Here are just a few examples of what you could share:

- Photos of the weekly or monthly menu
- Photos of that day's meals
- Updates about upcoming activities and events
- Program improvements to quality or nutrition
- Photos of a school garden, or a local farm you partner with (if applicable)
- Policy or news updates related to school food service
- Memes or gifs related to food, cooking, or nutrition

time to educate the public and reinforce that with beautiful pictures of colorful foods that you are offering daily!" Always maintain a professional attitude and demeanor, even in the face of criticism or disagreement with someone else's opinion.

Lastly, remember the "social" in social media! Don't just

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post-and-ghost. When you share something, be sure to engage with anyone that's commented on your content. This creates conversations and connections.

SUMMING IT UP

While adding another task to your plate might seem

overwhelming, with a little time and creativity, you may be surprised at the positive impact social media can have on the relationship with the families you serve. **E**

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- *The Lunch Box. Social Media & Digital Marketing Toolkit. 2021.* <https://www.thelunchbox.org/marketing/social-media-toolkit>

CE Questions | MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



This Level II article assumes that the reader has a foundation of basic concepts of the topic. The desired outcome is to enhance knowledge and facilitate application of knowledge to practice.

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Reading *Social Media and School Food Service* and successfully completing these questions online has been approved for 1 hour of continuing education for CDM, CFPPs. CE credit is available ONLINE ONLY. To earn 1 GEN CE hour, access the online CE quiz in the ANFP Marketplace. Visit www.ANFPonline.org/market and select "Edge CE Articles" within the Publications Section. If you don't see your article title on the first page, then search the title "*Social Media and School Food Service*." Once on the article title page, purchase the article and complete the CE quiz.

- Feed posts, stories, and reels are all types of content on which social media platform?
 - Instagram
 - LinkedIn
 - TikTok
- Which of the following social media platforms would be the *best* choice for connecting students?
 - Twitter
 - LinkedIn
 - TikTok
- Which of the following social media platforms would be the *best* choice for connecting with parents and sharing monthly menus?
 - Facebook
 - LinkedIn
 - TikTok
- Which of the following social media platforms would be the *best* choice for connecting with fellow colleagues and finding job opportunities?
 - Instagram
 - LinkedIn
 - TikTok
- How often should you post on your department's social media page or profile?
 - Once a month
 - Once a week
 - At least a few times a week
- Which is likely the best way to handle negative comments on your department's social media account?
 - Delete anything that could be construed as negative
 - Maintain a professional attitude and use it as an opportunity to educate
 - Leave the negative comments up but ignore them all
- You have great photos from a recent cafeteria event. Which is the best practice when it comes to sharing these on social media?
 - Post them on Facebook that day and tag their families in the photo
 - Review the school district's policy on sharing photos of children prior to posting anything
 - Share them on your own personal Facebook profile