



10 Ways to Boost Meal Plan Participation

The meal plan program is the backbone of your campus dining services department. Here are some tips to help you strengthen it.

If you want to increase participation in your meal plan program, you have to offer plans that are suited to the lifestyles of your customers and that offer more flexibility and value than those of the past. Here are 10 proven strategies we've come to rely on over the many years we've helped college and university dining services departments re-engineer their meal plan programs.

Align dining services hours of operation with customer lifestyles. The days of the traditional breakfast-lunch-dinner schedule are long gone. Today, the number one complaint of meal plan holders is that they can't use their plan credit when they want to because dining facilities aren't open at the times they want to eat.

The typical campus customer today prefers to eat smaller meals throughout the day and much later into the evening. If you want customers to feel good about the investment they've made in your program, you need to find ways to align your program, hours of operation and menu choices to match this lifestyle.

Make meal plans flexible and portable. The second biggest complaint we hear from students is that they can't use meal plans in every dining facility on campus and/or can't consume all the meals their plans technically entitle them to. To reduce this kind of dissatisfaction, FSDs must structure meal plans to maximize their flexibility and portability.

One fairly revolutionary approach is to offer a continuous-access meal plan in the context of an all-you-care-to-eat facility. Rather than purchasing a set number of meals, students instead are permitted to eat as often as they like throughout the day (five or seven days a week) in any of the board dining facilities on campus.

Generally, food costs associated with continuous access plans tend to be lower than traditional plans. Students do not eat more food, but do

eat more often; they also generally choose smaller portions, resulting in less food waste. Many clients who have adopted this strategy have seen meal plan participation and customer satisfaction significantly increase.

Eliminate meal equivalencies. Meal equivalencies were created to let customers use meal plans when their schedules or lifestyles did not match the hours of operation of all-you-care-to-eat facilities. While this offers more flexibility, it usually is detrimental to the bottom line because the cost of goods in cash operations (especially c-stores) is significantly higher than in board plan facilities. In addition, equivalencies tend to create retail operations overrun with meal plan holders, which in turn drives out cash-paying customers.

Instead of offering equivalencies, seek to maximize customer access to all-you-care-to-eat dining facilities and offer meal plans that include specified amounts of "dining dollars" (declining balance money) that students can use in retail operations.

Add a guest meal option. This is an easy and inexpensive way to add value to your program. Meal plan holders often complain that friends without meal plans can't eat with them in all-you-care-to-eat facilities. Guest meals eliminate this problem while stimulating participation.

Create easy-to-use meal plans for commuters, Greeks and non-student groups. By investing in such plans, these groups can eat anywhere on campus without having to worry about carrying cash.

Offer meal plan incentives. Customers will be much more likely to invest in a meal plan if there are incentives for them to do so. For example, University of Georgia FSD Michael Floyd offers commuter meal plan holders free parking if they dine in one of his all-you-care-to-eat dining facilities. After introducing the program, meal plan sales to off-cam-

pus students significantly increased.

Make it easy for customers to sign-up for and add money to meal plans. The more convenient it is for students to manage meal plan accounts, the more successful the program will be. At Louisiana State University, the meal plan office is right next to the extremely active food court in the LSU Student Union. Many campuses also allow students and parents to manage their meal plan accounts directly over the Internet.

Keep dining facilities and menu options appealing. It is common for prospective and current students to pass on purchasing a meal plan if dining facilities are outdated and/or if they find menu options unappealing. On the other hand, there are plenty of examples where a college has redesigned an outdated facility or expanded menu variety and meal plan purchases have increased.

Continually seek input from meal plan and non-meal plan holders. You may want to consider hiring an independent organization to conduct campus-wide comparative surveys each year to gauge customer satisfaction and identify opportunities and challenges that may not be on your radar screen. Continuous assessment of the market, followed by program changes addressing concern, will help ensure your meal plan program is meeting customer needs.

Market your program. Most dining departments market meal plans at the beginning of the school year or semester and neglect marketing efforts at other times. To keep meal plan and dining services options top-of-mind among customers, you and your staff must market your services to the campus community throughout the entire academic year.

H. David Porter is CEO of Porter Consulting Worldwide, Inc., a Crofton, Maryland-based foodservice consulting, strategic planning and design firm.