

Introducing Healthier Foods at the USDA

Early Steps

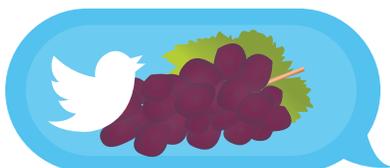
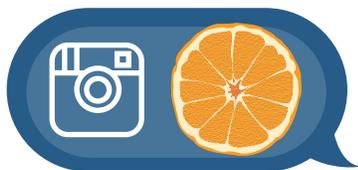
Whether they stop by the deli, the breakfast and lunch grill, or the Fresh Mex station, USDA employees can now choose from an even greater selection of healthier food and beverage items. The cafeteria menu was redesigned with the Health and Sustainability Guidelines for Federal Concessions and Vending Operations in mind.

Contracted through I.L. Creations (ILC), the South Building Cafeteria provides meals for about 6,000 employees across USDA's Independence Avenue offices. In November 2012, the work began to transform the cafeteria's menu. Nutrition and marketing were a priority, so an on-site dietitian was hired to help ILC's corporate registered dietitian with the transition.

Implementation

The strategy for changing the menu was simple: highlight healthier items while limiting, but not completely removing, unhealthier items. An early objective was to implement the guidelines as accurately as possible. This meant getting rid of the deep fat fryer, purchasing more low sodium and whole grain products, and offering more fresh fruits and vegetables. Customer satisfaction was also very important since the ultimate success of the new menu rested on employees eating the food.

Health and Sustainability Guidelines for Federal Concessions and Vending Operations



Marketing and Promotion

The team spent a great amount of time on marketing and promotional efforts. Posts on various social media accounts, newsletters, point of purchase displays, and cafeteria LED screens were all used to promote the new menu items. Beautiful presentation was also used to enhance the food's appeal.

The team of Registered Dietitians was critical in assisting with the promotional activities. They also oversaw point of sale food labeling, provided one-on-one communication to customers, answered nutrition-related questions, and showed appropriate portion sizes for different types of foods. In social media posts, the dietitians share what they are eating, including smaller portions of more indulgent items.

Solutions

Implementing the menu changes required working through a unique set of issues including: controlling meal content, effectively communicating food labels, removing fried foods, and finding healthier products to meet guidelines.

Controlling meal content required a delicate balancing act. After staff worked to create recipes that met certain requirements, other unapproved ingredients would “sneak” in. The solution was having the dietitians conduct frequent pantry audits to ensure that products not on the approved list were not in the pantry. Additionally, they set company-wide standards that certain items must be weighed to ensure they meet specifications. Made-to-order omelets, for example, fall in this group because they can vary significantly in content depending on the amount of meat, cheese, or vegetables used.

The effective communication of food labels was another issue that staff needed to address. Labeling requirements didn’t necessarily correspond with what customers would best understand. Since the guidelines required that labeling be based on ounces, many customers had difficulty translating this information into the amount of food they were actually eating. The solution was to display different food items by ounce. Signs were posted throughout the cafeteria called, “What’s an Ounce?” with different starches, vegetables, and other popular items displayed in one-ounce increments.

Next, there was the matter of removing fried foods in light of their popularity with customers. Staff has attempted to work around this by

replacing fried foods with appealing healthier alternatives. In the words of one staff member, “It’s just about limiting those high fat, high calorie options. So they exist, but much fewer of them exist because we have removed the fryers.”

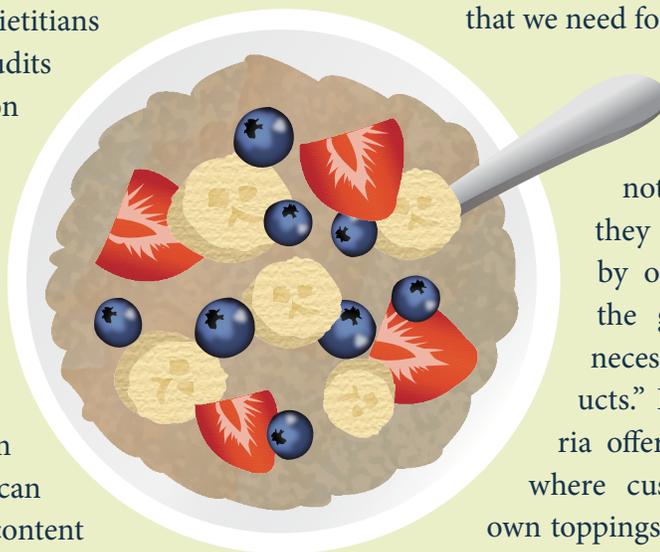
Finally, staff had to get creative when implementing guidelines for which few available products met those guidelines. “That’s a little bit of a barrier [because] a lot of these items don’t necessarily exist in the packages and the quantities that we need for food service,” says Ann

Cormany, the Assistant Director of Marketing. While staff has

not fully resolved this issue, they have worked around it by offering items that meet the guidelines but are not necessarily standalone “products.” For example, the cafeteria

offers two hot cereals daily where customers can add their own toppings, like nuts or dried fruit,

without the added sugar and salt since many cereal cups offered by their supplier fail to meet the sugar requirements.



Keys to Success

Overall, the new menu changes have been a success. Instrumental to its success has been frequent communication with stakeholders. “I talk every single day, whether in person, email, cell phone, text message with our purchasing department,” says Rachel Griffin, the Nutrition Manager. Additionally, the expertise the dietitians have provided have been invaluable according to the team. They assist with education, engagement, recipe development, and all aspects of the nutrition guidelines. “The key to success,” says Cormany – “A Registered Dietitian.”