

## Tami Cline

*Getting to the heart of what students — and operators — really want*

**M**uch of Tami Cline's life has been centered around child nutrition, first as foodservice director for one of the nation's largest public school districts, in Boston, and later as director of nutrition and education for the American School Food Service Association. So it makes sense that Cline would have strong opinions on what kids want and how to get that information.

Cline recently partnered with another consultant, Sharon Olson, to create a service called Y-Pulse. It is designed to gather data and opinions from foodservice directors in elementary and secondary schools, as well as in colleges and universities, about what their customers like to eat. That information is used to help operators and vendors work together to develop better products and services for their customers.

### How did the idea for Y-Pulse come about?

My partner in Y-Pulse is Sharon Olson, and basically it was the two of us sitting around brainstorming about ways to gather information. You know, there are polls, focus groups, surveys — a variety of things. But we were thinking that there had to be a way to do it more efficiently, to learn about trends and concepts more cost-effectively. We decided we could leverage our own experience in this industry to come up with a plan.

### How does Y-Pulse work?

Well, we have our vision, which might shape up to be quite different by the time we get through with it. What we plan to do is put together panels up front of [primary and secondary] school, college and university operators. The panelists would agree to complete X number of surveys per year. They also would agree to test products occasionally.

### How large would those panels be?

Our goal is to have 50 to 100 primary- and secondary-school directors and 50 to 100 college and university operators, knowing that not everyone can respond to every survey. We want to be able to have a large



Tami Cline, right, with Sharon Olson, her partner in the Y-Pulse venture

enough sample to get projectable results from the surveys.

### How have you gone about selecting panelists from demographic and geographic standpoints?

We have been using a variety of contact lists. We've purchased some lists from professional associations, and we also are looking at the largest operators in each segment. In all likelihood we'll fill in the panels

with [some of the contacts we've gathered] over the years.

### How often would you conduct surveys?

We're thinking that we'll do quarterly surveys. But if there was a company or an organization that wanted to commission a survey, that would be done in addition to our regular work.

### When do you plan to start?

We're hoping to be able to do our first survey in the next month. We're drafting the survey now.

### What kinds of information besides menu topics will you try to elicit from the surveys?

There are so many things out there that people want to know more about. For example, a lot has been said about health and nutrition lately. But how is that issue going to play out?



Another topic that is on everyone's mind is doing more with less. Labor issues are very topical because the traditional foodservice worker of 10 or 20 years ago is not the same as the employee of today.

Other topics are the commitment to professional development, food preparation — convenience versus scratch cooking, central versus on-site kitchens and contract versus self-operation.

### How will the information be used?

There will be information that we will make available to operators and suppliers, and there will be some proprietary information gathered for manufacturers that won't be widely published.

### For years on-site operators largely were ignored when it came to consumer surveys, but now on-site foodservice seems to be getting more attention from outside marketers. Why do you think the shift is occurring?

That's a very good observation. You never used to see on-site operators being polled except by their own organizations — I think because people never really saw the opportunities that were possible. Now people are realizing that, at least with young consumers, there is a quick and easy way to reach those consumers through a single gatekeeper, the gatekeeper being the foodservice director.

That idea has been tried in areas outside of foodservice, but it hasn't been very successful because it has been seen as too commercial. So there's been resistance. We hope we can overcome that resistance.

## At a glance

**Name:** Tami Cline

**Title:** owner, Cline Consulting, Los Angeles

**Career highlights:** serving as foodservices director, Boston Public Schools; serving as director of nutrition and education, American School Food Service Association; pursuing a Ph.D. in foodservice and lodging management, Iowa State University.

**Hometown:** Lamar, Colo.

**Education:** bachelor's degree in food science and nutrition, Colorado State University; master's degree in nutrition and communication, Boston University.