

# Nutrition

"Open positioning of a food as 'healthier' makes kids suspicious about the taste - and taste drives everything," maintains Olson.

## Trick Treat?



### Marketing and the Message

Sharon Olson is a foodservice veteran who consults frequently with industry and serves as a partner in Y-Pulse, a research firm that focuses on food and beverage marketing to youth and young adults. She sees stealth nutrition as a positive addition to a school nutrition operation's arsenal. "Open positioning of a food as 'healthier' makes kids suspicious about the taste—and taste drives everything," maintains Olson.

She notes that many foods marketed to children *are* getting healthier, due in large part to the fact that food scientists are finding ways to make nutritious foods taste better. "Years ago, healthy cereals with whole grain used to taste like the box!" Olson recalls, explaining that a "taste memory" can make today's consumers cautious about trying better-for-you foods. Nonetheless, "We're seeing more positive interest in healthy food," she observes, "but that's because there are more tasty products" available on the market.

Olson doesn't discount the challenges school nutrition directors face in incorporating healthier products into their menus. "By the time they get to college, many kids see nutrition as chic and part of the popular culture. College operators are very responsive to that and have a lot more flexibility. By contrast, [K-12] school foodservice directors are very limited in what they can do—and they do a phenomenal job with what they have!"

Olson suggests that school nutrition directors capitalize on branding tactics to attract kids to healthier options. She cites as an example a director in the Midwest confronted by competition from the purveyor of popular high-fat, high-calorie coffee drinks coveted by her high school students. In response, she created her own high school hangout, a coffee café called Tiger Perk (after the school's mascot), and stocked it, quietly, with decaf coffee, low fat milk and sugar-free syrup. Tiger Perk became a top destination for students, who didn't seem to miss the caffeine or the calories!