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# SN

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A portrait of Beth Wallace, a woman with shoulder-length brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a bright blue button-down shirt over a white top, and a necklace with three silver and gold beads. The background is a soft-focus green outdoor setting.

## **Beth Wallace**

### **SNA's New President Mixes Pragmatism with Positivity**

**COVID Disruptions  
Expected to Linger**

**How SMART Is Your  
Customer Service?**

**Farewell to the  
Legendary Gene White**



# All About the ASK

BY SHARON OLSON

Student loyalty hangs on customer research. How effective are your customer surveys and feedback tools?



Today's young, school-age consumers are savvy foodservice customers, and they appreciate having a voice and expressing their opinions about *everything*—and that includes everything about the school meal program, from the menu choices to the portion sizes to the food quality to the cafeteria environment to the friendliness of the staff. And you *want* their opinions! Customer feedback is essential to helping you meet and exceed expectations, retaining and growing participation and earning and maintaining a reputation as a desired foodservice destination.

But how best to capture these definitive opinions? Customer research approaches vary from simple techniques to comprehensive studies that all can be tailor-made to fit your resources (staff and budget), and help you achieve your goals.

No matter which customer opinion strategy you adopt, you can make the job easier and more effective with a little planning and strategic reflection. Here are three steps that can set the table to help make your surveys best in class:

## STEP ONE: Define Your Audience.

*Well, that's easy: We want to survey all of our students!* It's fair and understandable to want to be inclusive and get feedback from *all* of your customers. But you already know that elementary, middle school and high school students can have *very* different relationships with food, so a one-size-fits-all research tool won't be as effective in delivering the quality results you seek.

Narrow your scope. Identify the specific types of students you want to survey and be very intentional about what you want to learn from them.

Food has become so much a part of today's youth culture that many young consumers consider themselves to be "experts" on innovation and the preparation of meals and snacks. Presume that kids know a little more than you think they do about food culture. You

want your survey instruments to reflect an understanding of the culinary experience and language of your audience and not talk "down" to them.

Also, consider all of the important influencers in your student customers' lives. You may want to collect some insights about kids today from parents, teachers, coaches and other adults who are important to them. Since your aim is to collect feedback on your foodser-

vice operation, your audience background research should also include some outreach to culinary leaders in your community, like chefs/owners of restaurants popular with families, along with dietitians and health professionals specializing in pediatrics.

### STEP TWO: Take a Deep Dive Into Secondary Research.

There is a lot of research freely available through online sources, including SNA, its state affiliates and many of the vendors that serve the K-12 school foodservice segment. Dive in to get a general sense of what's important to young consumers on a national level. This can be especially helpful if your aim is to compare your school nutrition operation against national trends. Even if your goal is simpler, familiarizing yourself with background research may uncover an insight that will allow you to streamline or reframe your survey.

Look for secondary research that provides a broad perspective on kids' food lifestyles. Children of different ages have varying benchmarks for what they consider "great" food. Home-cooked meals are typically a favorite, but many younger kids will also consider the fare of quick-service restaurants as their quality benchmark. As they get a bit older, table-service restaurants rise in estimation as the higher standard. As children continue to grow up, their experiences likely will broaden to include a more diverse array of restaurants, convenience stores, food trucks and food halls.

Remember that the goal of this research review is to learn as much as you can *before* you start writing your own survey. It will save you time, effort and, in some cases, money, and provide you with rich insight.

### STEP THREE: Focus Your Inquiries on "Must-Know" Insights.

Essentially, beware the temptation to go down the rabbit hole! The enthusiasm for embarking on a new research project is a great motivator, but it can be a potential hazard if you approach it with a big bucket of items you "have

always wanted to understand." The magnitude of your project should be based on the resources you have available to collect and analyze the information that is relayed.

Similarly, you want to be sensitive to the attention span and time availability of those who will take your survey. Have you ever agreed to participating in an online survey and it winds up taking you 20 minutes because they are asking numerous—and complex—questions?

Did it leave you soured, as a customer, on both the experience and the company?

Scrutinize your questions from different perspectives. Are some likely to confirm what you already know? Are others collecting interesting, but essentially, tangential, feedback? Which questions really get to the heart of the insights that will allow you to reach the goal of this customer feedback outreach?

Once your core inquiries have been taken care of, *then* see if it would be appropriate—managing your time and theirs—to ask a few more questions that will enrich your learning. It is always nice to be able to have one or more optional open-ended questions that allow students to really express themselves as they choose.

### CUSTOMER RESEARCH: FROM BEST BASICS TO BEST IN CLASS

The simplest form of customer research is a **comment card** that students can quickly complete to rate their experience on a specific day and drop it in a collection box. It's best to keep it *very* brief. You might fit two to three questions on the card, depending on its size. Go back to your goals. Are you seeking general customer



satisfaction? Then your questions might use a star system or a 4-point scale and ask: "How much did you enjoy today's meal?" and "How was the service?" Maybe leave space for an optional comment: "Let us know how we can improve: \_\_\_\_\_"

If you want to get feedback on a more specific area, tailor your questions accordingly. For example, perhaps you're looking for brief opinions about the menu: "What was the tastiest item that you ate today? \_\_\_\_\_" "Was there an item that you didn't eat? What was it? \_\_\_\_\_" "What item would you like us to offer more often? \_\_\_\_\_"

Short questions can also reveal valuable feedback about service. For example, you could ask: "Did you have to wait more than x minutes in line? Y/N" "Were menu items the correct temperatures? Y/N" "Were Café staff pleasant and friendly? Y/N"

Comment cards like these are an easy way for students to express an opinion and feel valued as customers. Responses take minimal time to tabulate.

If you want to get more information, there are a number of widely available free internet-based platforms that allow you to create and email an **electronic survey**. It is an ideal option for asking



To all the  
Foodservice  
Directors,  
Nutritionists and  
cafeteria staff  
keeping our  
kids fed,  
fueled and  
looked after  
at school,  
we'd like to say  
*thank  
you*  
for caring  
so deeply.

**Huhtamaki**

## RESEARCH IN THE ROUND

If your aim is to gather feedback through a roundtable discussion, the process can benefit from some insider tips. Most important, be sure to prepare a detailed and thoughtful “moderator’s guide” in advance. It will help you or someone else conducting the conversation to stay organized and make sure you get the most from the activity.

The guide should be more substantial than merely a list of broad topics you want to discuss. Include specific details and areas where you want to drill down and explore. A guide also can provide the means for the moderator to discreetly record items of unexpected interest that lend themselves to immediate follow-up.

There’s a lot going on when trying to moderate a discussion—especially among youngsters! It is easy to get distracted, especially if you are wearing a dual hat of both discussion moderator and disciplinarian. It’s also easy to get carried away by a particularly engaging conversation. The moderator’s guide helps ensure you do not miss any must-know questions. There are no do-overs after the discussion has concluded!

specific, closed-ended questions where respondents are asked to “agree” or “disagree” with a statement at varying levels or when you want them to evaluate how much they like (or dislike) a menu concept. Adding some open-ended questions will add more analysis time on your part, but the benefit is richer information. Although the majority of survey takers tend to skip open-ended questions or provide only a cursory answer, those who *do* opt to share greater detail about their thoughts often yield invaluable insight.

Traditionally, electronic surveys have been crafted on a 5-point scale, which allows survey takers to land in a middle ground, where they neither “agree” nor “disagree.” If you are comparing results to a previous survey using the 5-point scale, it is best to continue using it so you can compare results over time. However, if you are embarking on a new initiative, consider a 4-point scale instead. It forces respondents who are ambivalent to pick a side and provides more clarity on their thoughts.

Large-scale electronic surveys are a great tool if you want to establish a benchmark of insight about your program and then measure changes in student perspectives each year. Remember to ask the *exact same questions* from year to year in order to compare the data. You can certainly add questions to keep up with major changes in your operation, but you should not make modifications to questions from previous surveys if comparison is your goal.

**Focus groups** have been a time-honored consumer research approach, but they can be expensive to conduct professionally, are labor-intensive and should never be used to obtain definitive results. They are best at providing *direction* for writing a quantitative survey, which is intended to gather measurable data that can be used to justify or support different positions, actions or changes. Although it once was a common practice, most marketers today simply do not have the time or budget to stage several focus groups before they get started on the quantitative study.

**Advisory groups and expert roundtables** are gaining favor over formal focus groups for several reasons. While generally similar in approach to focus groups, one of the key differences is that the participants usually have some commitment to your success. They also enjoy the advantages of learning more about your program from an “insider’s” perspective—the opportunity to serve is perceived as a privilege. Work with different groups of students who can provide their perspectives and offer guidance for future broader-scope surveys.

## WRITING YOUR QUESTIONNAIRE

A research questionnaire is like a conversation, but without the opportunity to clarify, explain or follow up if you want to know more. The care in which your questions are drafted is crucial to the answers you will receive. Here are a few tips to help you craft your questionnaire:

**Tell your audience they matter.** Let survey takers know why you are doing the survey and how the information is going to help improve their experience.

**Use simple, straightforward questions.** There is no need to get overly creative with questions; clarity for the survey taker is paramount.

**Avoid using “and/or” in ranking questions.** If you ask about more than one thing within the same question, you won't know which characteristic the respondent is actually reacting to. For example, don't ask if a menu item is perceived as “healthy and delicious.” Pick one variable per question. Is it healthy? Next question: Is it delicious?

**Be sensitive to timing.** Test the length of your survey—practice it yourself or give it to colleagues. Be realistic about the likely attention span of your audience. Five minutes is actually a long time for most people, especially students, to focus on a survey.

**Don't waste time asking questions when you already know the answers.** Sending a survey to a group of middle school students? There is no need to waste a question asking their age.

**Demonstrate respect for your audience.** Have several people proofread your survey in advance. When survey-takers see typos and grammatical errors in questions, they wonder about how much you really care about their answers.

**Make it fun.** Give the recipient a visual experience that is not boring and feels like they are evaluating a restaurant that they care about. It could be as simple as using stars instead of numbers in ratings.

**Engage student advocates for your program.** Ask recipients at the end of the survey if they would like to “apply” to serve on one of your student advisory roundtables and connect them to a link that takes them directly to instructions, details or a registration/application form. Even if you don't organize such a group, always make sure to express appreciation and stay in touch with them.

**Empower your staff with positive feedback.** It is nice to include a question specifically designed to elicit positive responses about the school foodservice experience. For example, “What do you like about eating at school?” Students can respond about the food, the socialization with friends, the interaction with staff and aspects you might have otherwise overlooked.

If you have the resources, consider creating an advisory group composed of parents, older siblings or other health, education and guidance professionals from your district. An advisory group of community experts (chefs, restaurateurs, food writers, dietitians and health professionals) could also be valuable in helping you raise your game and your operation's profile.

**Taste-testing** is another deeply rooted research tradition in foodservice—until last year. But that practice, too, has found a pivot. Some innovative ways of taste-testing are emerging, such as sampling pre-packaged portions, setting

up socially distanced tasting areas and using electronic surveys with descriptions of menu items. Moving forward with such an approach should come only after careful consideration and input from key stakeholders, school administrators and parent-teacher group leaders.

Even if you cannot do any live tasting, consider the benefits of **concept testing**, which can be conducted online. Vivid, detailed menu descriptions can generate helpful feedback that can point to the potential success or failure of an item planned for introduction. Whether you offer conceptual tests or

provide samples for feedback, consider the importance of including parents. Their influence on their children is substantial, and their feelings about what kids are eating at school can be the tipping point between success and indifference.

### THE HUMAN INVESTMENT

There's no getting around the fact that customer research requires someone's time—which can be in short supply in a school nutrition operation. Some districts look to dietetic or hospitality program interns or the service members from organizations like FoodCorps to



tackle this kind of project.

Other school nutrition teams have the bandwidth—or they find the bandwidth, if they believe a survey will support a proposal of a major initiative or help maintain a popular and effective program (breakfast in the classroom service comes mind as an example that works in both scenarios).

In addition to crafting the survey questions and actually conducting the research, there are a few other areas that require an investment of human resources. Most notably, someone will need to analyze the results! This can be a simple process, such as tallying comment cards. Or it can be more involved, such as when you need to ensure your quantitative survey audience is large enough to yield a response rate that will make the results statistically meaningful.



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## THE ADVANTAGES OF CONSUMER RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS

Research gives you the opportunity to understand your customers better and make their experience with school foodservice a positive one. It is a substantial element in building customer loyalty, giving your students a voice in the school meal operation. Depending upon how much you broaden the scope of your research to include parents and members of the local community,

you have the potential to make your school nutrition program a matter of community pride. Always remember to share positive feedback with the staff members who are so crucial to your efforts. There is nothing like a positive comment from a customer to make someone's day. **SN**

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