

Food Service Professional's Guide To **Balanced Menus**

Part IV.

Putting It All Together



Partner with
Balanced for
FREE one-on-one
support and get
started today!

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WELCOME

Thank you for your commitment to improving the lives of the people you serve. Like you, we understand the intimate connection between food and health, and we recognize that food environments heavily influence customers' dietary choices. In an era of widespread diet-related disease, we believe that everyone deserves access to healthy food, no matter the circumstance. Moreover, we believe that the healthiest choices should be easy and convenient to make, which is only possible in a food environment that values, encourages, and supports a more balanced way of eating.

At Balanced, we understand the challenges of today's modern food system, and like you, we're determined to overcome them for the sake of improving public health. In providing food for large numbers of people every day, you and your team have an incredible opportunity to prevent and reverse the leading causes of disease, disability, and premature death in the United States. We know this is not an opportunity or responsibility you take lightly. This is why we're so grateful to collaborate with visionary leaders like you as we work together to *change menus and save lives*.

ABOUT US

Balanced is a public health and nutrition advocacy organization focused on improving the healthfulness of institutional menus by providing food service professionals with the tools, resources, and supports they need to balance their menus. We believe community institutions are a key lever in the fight against chronic, preventable diet-related diseases and it's Balanced's goal to help prevent and reverse them in children, families, and communities.

Audrey Lawson-Sanchez

Audrey Lawson-Sanchez is the founder and executive director of Balanced. A decade-long educator, Audrey was inspired by the birth of her daughter to start Balanced and advocate for the healthiest possible future for all families. She is passionate about and committed to combatting our country's leading cause of disability, disease, and premature death: unbalanced nutrition. Audrey is proud to call Kansas City her home, where she lives with her husband and daughter. You can reach her at audreys@balanced.org.

Madeline Bennett

As the Manager of Institutional Outreach and Support, Madeline Bennett will be your primary point of contact at Balanced. Her role is to provide strategic support, practical insights, and to problem-solve for partner institutions. Previously, Madeline researched retail food environments for the nutrition policy department at Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, D.C. As an intern with Selamta Family Project, she conducted household food insecurity assessments and advocated for higher nutritional standards in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She studied nutrition, food policy, and economics in her undergraduate and graduate education. You can reach her at madelineb@balanced.org.



Implementing Menu Changes & Getting Feedback

In this final stage—after the necessary preparation, testing, and training—your team will implement the inaugural changes to the menus in accordance with the action plan.

Together, we can help you monitor the uptake from students indirectly through sales and directly through solicited feedback. Feedback can be gathered at multiple time-points, such as prior to implementation, one month post-implementation, and during taste-testing throughout a period of recipe development and sampling.



YOU'VE BALANCED YOUR MENUS, NOW WHAT?

How to market your menu improvements effectively

We know that the technical changes associated with improving your menus are only part of the process—and likely the part you're most looking forward to! However, marketing these improvements and successfully investing your customers in these changes might feel overwhelming or challenging.

In an effort to make the menu improvements a seamless, stress-free process, we've done most of the work for you, and we've designed many of the tools and resources you'll need. Combining research-backed behavior change strategies and innovative food-marketing techniques, we put together a list of best-practices, tips, and tricks to help simplify the process for everyone. So you can get back to what you do best—ensuring those you serve are provided a quality meal they'll enjoy!

We've broken up the strategies for marketing your menu improvements into five sections. While these sections can be used independently, they are typically most effective when used in combination.

The five strategies are:

- **Stealth Health**
- **Choice Architecture**
- **Watch Your Language**
- **Make Healthy Eating Cool**
- **Highlight the Impact**

Strategy 1: Stealth Health

In many cases, the improvements your team makes to the menus won't need to be promoted at all because the changes won't impact the flavor or quality of the foods you serve. Perhaps some changes, simply by virtue of their being new, might feel like they should be promoted, but that's not always the case and could even backfire.

Stealth health improvements can be made without fanfare and without impacting the overall experience of your customers.



For example, let's say you reduce or replace some amount of meat in a chili dish. Subtle changes to the menu from "Beef Chili" to "Hearty Chili," or even simply calling the improved dish "Chili," are almost certain to go unnoticed.

Other stealth health changes could include:

Replacing unhealthy salad bar toppings like bacon with sunflower seeds or crunchy chickpeas, and reducing the number of cream-based dressings.

Switching to 100% whole grain products instead of whole-grain rich (51-99%).

Using plant-based milks or an egg replacement like aquafaba in a recipe that calls for dairy or traditional eggs.

Reducing the portion size of animal products and processed food items.

Limiting the variety of toppings at a deli or pizza bar. Instead of Meat Lovers, Pepperoni, and Sausage pizza, replace one with a veggie option. There will still be two pizzas with meat options, but a third, meatless option will encourage more people to make a healthier choice.

The same applies to processed deli meats. Swap turkey slices for avocado or hummus and you're improving the healthfulness of 1/3rd of the toppings offered!

Many other subtle changes we can help you design!

Strategy 2: Choice Architecture

In the same way limiting or redesigning the contents of familiar meals works to encourage healthier options, so does choice architecture. **By designing your food environment to encourage specific choices, your team helps promote a culture of healthfulness.**

Similarly to stealth health, completely removing less healthy choices all at once is unlikely to be an effective strategy. But when food choice architecture makes the healthier choice easier to access and more appealing in sight, description, and convenience, it becomes an excellent means of encouraging habits that promote life-long health.

Examples of choice architecture in action:

- Make the healthiest dish the “Main” or “Featured dish”
 - Display it most prominently on the menu
 - Decorate a menu-board with this dish as the featured item
- Don’t relegate healthier options to a different section of the menu. Integrate the items into the main menu.
- Ensure the healthiest dish is the easiest to access and most prominently featured as customers move through your service line
- Require an additional step for customers who wish to order the less healthy options, i.e. instead of selecting the meal from a pre-prepared host of entrées, require customers to verbally ask a team member for the secondary, less healthy option
- Position the less healthy items at the farthest end of the line. Convenience and availability are excellent drivers of choice, and people often select one of the first dishes they encounter. Make the healthiest foods the first ones they see.
- Position the healthier food items in the physical path of your customers. If you want to increase salad bar sales, move the salad bar to a central location forcing all customers to pass it, not a corner or side wall that requires customers to go out of their way to access it.
- If possible, use plates that encourage customers to take the healthiest ratio of each food group. Larger plate for salad bars or plant-based items, smaller plates for food items like chicken nuggets, french fries, and pizza. Alternately, using a lunch tray, teach customers to fill the largest compartment with the healthiest items and reserve the smaller compartments for foods that should be limited.
- Serve unhealthy foods in half-portion sizes and healthier items in full. One example is to serve half a ham and cheese sandwich alongside a full-size bowl of vegetable soup.
- Many other changes we can help you design based on your unique situation and needs!



Strategy 3: Watch Your Language

For a long time, we've known people eat their meals twice: first with their eyes, then with their mouths. **Now, new research is showing that the ways in which food is described has an impact on the dining experience as well.** As a food industry professional, this is likely not news to you, and you probably already use this strategy in your work.

Here are a few of the most recent findings to be aware of:

- The descriptor “healthy” is likely to dissuade many customers from selecting a food item, as many people view the term as signaling deprivation or blandness. If children are your customers, this term is equally as meaningless, as few children are likely to be enticed by the healthfulness of a food item.
- **The terms “Vegan” and “Vegetarian” have a significant impact on the marketability of a product—and not in a good way.** Unless the majority of your customer base identifies as vegan or vegetarian, those labels do more harm than good.
- Use positive descriptive language to increase the value and desirability of a healthier food choice.
 - Instead of “healthy green beans” try “Fresh and zesty green beans”
- Replace vegetarian or vegan as a descriptor on dishes that don't absolutely require denotation. Hearty Lentil and Tomato Basil Marinara over Pasta for example, doesn't need the word vegetarian between hearty and lentil. If a vegetarian or vegan eater is curious, they'll ask, and for everyone else, there's no need to point out something that might dissuade them from the choice otherwise!
- For children, fun descriptors like “Superhero Spaghetti Squash,” “Totally Cool Tomato Soup,” and “The Queen's Three Bean Chili” are easier to get away with.
- For children, linking a food product with a beloved adult/influential person is also a strategy some people have shared anecdotally as effective. Ask teachers, school leaders, or others on campus if they have a preferred healthy menu item and incorporate that into the menu, e.g., “Mr. Thompson's Favorite Hummus Wrap.”
- Use signage or marketing materials to highlight a healthy food item as a recommended choice:
 - “Lunchroom Pick of the Day,” “Principal Lawson Suggests...,” “Mr. Elliot Recommends...,” “Dr. Peterson's Lunch Recommendation,” “The Cardiology Team Suggests...”
- **Communicate value through words like “Premium,” “Featured,” “Seasonal,” “Fresh,” and “Local” when appropriate and authentic.** Make sure the promise of those terms matches the quality of the product customers are expecting. “Premium reheated fish sticks” is not the same as “Premium cauliflower steaks and winter harvest soup.”



Strategy 4: Make Healthy Eating Cool

Prosocial messaging—that is, **messaging that makes a person believe “everyone else is doing it”—is a powerful behavior change motivator.** Norms are influential, and people are motivated to maintain a positive, valued identity. Good thing for us, it’s easy to make that happen.

On your menus, in your conversations, and/or on any promotional materials you develop, it’s easy to use prosocial messaging, and more and more food service professionals are doing just that to increase their sales.

**So, what does prosocial messaging sound like?
Here are some examples:**

- More people are choosing the quinoa bowl than ever before!
- We know you and your classmates love to eat the veggie soup on cold winter days.
- Lots of people pick the chickpea curry when they want energy for later!
- Since its debut, the veggie pot-pie has only gotten more popular.
- More people are opting to swap their greasy burgers for fiber-rich bean burritos.

Prosocial messaging is especially powerful when you have an audience of customers who are likely to be influenced by the positive choices their peers are making.



Strategy 5: Highlight the Impact

A now notorious Frosted Mini-Wheats commercial from 2008 claimed eating the cereal boosted student attentiveness by 20%. Obviously, that was not the case and was, in fact, a blatant lie and a misrepresentation of data. But! It was effective at getting parents to purchase more cereal. Why? Because they, too, wanted that increased boost of attentiveness for their child.

And that commercial provided a valuable lesson for other companies marketing food products. **People want to know how their choices will positively impact them.** For those parents, the positive impact was the alleged improvement in their child's chances of academic success. For us, it is the very real reduction and prevention of disease and an increased sense of well-being for the people and families you serve.



So how can you apply this strategy to your food service? Here are some tips:

- Highlight the nutritional impact of swapping one food item for another.
- Choosing Jackfruit over Pork boosts your fiber intake by XX%.
- People who eat one plant-based lunch a week reduce their cholesterol intake by X% on average.
- Gather anecdotal evidence or testimonies.
- “When I picked the [healthy food item] I noticed a difference in the way I felt all afternoon. It was nice not to experience a slump at 3 o’clock.”
- Jessica said it was easier to pay attention in class after eating [healthy food item].
- Derek said the Superhero Spaghetti gave him enough energy to play all recess.
- Collect and share survey data showing the positive impact on mood, energy, experience, etc., after a customer selected a healthier food option.



Like all change, your new and improved menu may take a while for your customers to get used to—and that's OK!

Trial-and-error is a normal part of this entire process, but we have no doubt marketing menu improvements is a skill you'll master in no time! With strategic messaging and promotion, not only will those you serve grow to love the food, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you're helping them live healthier and live better.



USE DATA TO MAKE CHANGES

*Collecting and applying
feedback from the people you serve*

In this final stage—after the necessary preparation, testing, and training—your team will implement the inaugural changes to the menus in accordance with the action plan. **Together, we will monitor the uptake from your customers indirectly through sales and directly through solicited feedback.**

Feedback can be gathered at multiple time-points, such as prior to implementation, one month post-implementation, and during taste-testing throughout a period of recipe development and sampling. On the next page, we've provided a sample meal satisfaction survey as one example of how to gather these data.



Sample School Food Program Survey

What is your overall opinion of school breakfast?

(Choose only one)

I don't buy school breakfast

0 - Dislike a lot

1 - Dislike a little

2 - No opinion / don't like or dislike

3 - Like a little

4 - Like a lot

Please explain why you chose that answer.

If you don't buy school breakfast, why not?

(Can select more than one)

I don't know

I eat breakfast at home

I don't think I will like it

I've tried it before and know I don't like it

What is your overall opinion of school lunch?

(Choose only one)

I don't buy school lunch

0 - Dislike a lot

1 - Dislike a little

2 - No opinion / don't like or dislike

3 - Like a little

4 - Like a lot

Please explain why you chose that answer.

If you don't buy school lunch, why not? (Can select

more than one)

I don't know

I bring my lunch from home

I don't think I will like it

I've tried it before and know I don't like it

What is your overall opinion of _[item]_? (Choose only one)

0 - Dislike a lot

1 - Dislike a little

2 - No opinion / don't like or dislike

3 - Like a little

4 - Like a lot

Please explain why you chose that answer.



This is just an example. All surveys can be custom designed to meet your program's needs. Considerations like customer base, location, institution, literacy level, age, etc., will be taken into account when we partner to design the survey.



Given feedback from surveys and sales data, the action plan, menus, and/or promotional materials may need to be adjusted. No decision need be final, and maintaining a certain amount of flexibility is a good way to ensure that, at any point in this process, we are not locked into a decision that will hurt your department's bottom line or cause a significant loss of business.



After changes have been implemented, business has stabilized, and all stakeholders have found value and benefit in the new menus, our team at Balanced will continue to be at your disposal in a consultancy capacity. At any time, we are glad to hold one-on-one meetings or make ourselves available for group trainings, as needed.

We are extraordinarily grateful for the partnership and responsibility with which you have entrusted us, and we are **even more thankful for your commitment to the health and well-being of those who depend on the food service your team provides!** In your resolve to foster better public health, you have created new possibilities for individuals and families who rely on your institution's facilities—the possibility to establish life-long healthy habits, the possibility of greater success and achievement, and the possibility for more people to live a life free of debilitating diet-related disease.

On behalf of your constituents **who may not yet fully appreciate all the hard work you do behind the scenes for their benefit**, we thank you for your willingness to lead, to act, and to innovate in the face of a dire health crisis that at times feels undefeatable. We know this process can be difficult, thankless, and overwhelming, which is why we pledge our continued support to you and your institution, and we know that the future will be brighter for so many as a result of the collaboration you were willing to undertake with us.

Thank You!





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