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Title of Entry: Dining at Harvard – The undergraduate dining experience at the country's oldest university
Time Period of Project: January-December 2002
Brief Description: At the country's oldest and most prestigious college, Harvard, dining is viewed as a component of a broad and well-rounded education. Harvard University Dining Services (HUDS) crafts – and must market – an unparalleled experience that emphasizes a depth and range of services, new food experiences, fun in the community, and great value for the dollar.

NEED/OPPORTUNITY

The country's oldest college is also home to the country's oldest collegiate dining service. Harvard University Dining Services (HUDS) serves more than 5 million meals annually with a staff of approximately 600 people. While we offer an array of services, including retail dining and catering, our reason for being is to serve the undergraduate community in their residential dining meal program.

Dining is viewed as an extension of one's education at Harvard. Harvard has a residential experience called the House System. As upperclassmen, students live and eat in one of 12 small communities, called Houses. (First-years live in Harvard Yard and dine in the splendid environs of Annenberg Hall, a gothic-style memorial to Civil War veterans.) Each House becomes a very personal community, of which each dining hall is a part.

HUDS is charged with sustaining students both intellectually and physically. We provide the expected dining experience – a well balanced, nutritious, diverse menu. In addition, we offer an experience equal to that of the classroom, with a global view, bent on trying new things, challenging the status quo, seeking and incorporating feedback, developing responsible citizens, and more. All the while, HUDS' must feel home-like and nurturing. Research conducted in 1999 with key University administrators defined the role of HUDS dining operations as “the places in which Harvard turns the academic experience into a community experience.”

The marketing program for HUDS must communicate all that. We must make explicit the basic components of the meal plan, as well as all the special features that make a student's required participation in it a great value for the dollar. We guide the student experience, and the detailed interaction between HUDS and the undergraduate

community, helping the service program turn on a dime to improve guest satisfaction and participation.

INTENDED AUDIENCES

Harvard's undergraduates range in age, but the majority are 18-22. They come from every state in the country, and more than 100 nations worldwide. They represent every socioeconomic scale, race, religion, political philosophy, and any other demographic conceivable. It is the design of the University that its population be as diverse as possible.

Our marketing efforts are targeted to appeal to undergraduates, who number approximately 6,600. Each year we study generational briefs or cultural analyses for the general age-range of our students. (For recent generations, these highlight a growing awareness of and impatience with advertising or marketing.) It allows us to tailor our message, colors, and design styles. In addition, we compete for attention with every other department in the University, and the jam-packed urban setting that surrounds Harvard.

Our answer to all that is marketing that is very graphically oriented, with fast and frank messages, authentic and culturally diverse offerings, and an injection of often self-deprecating humor.

GOALS/OBJECTIVES

HUDES is, by our mission, "dedicated to the liberal art of eating." This slogan embodies our overall goal of opening students' eyes to the world of food, not just as fuel but also as inspiration and art. We are fostering community and broadening perspective of the world centered on a common and constantly changing food experience.

Our objectives include:

- heightening their understanding of different cuisines;
- satisfying their diverse tastes;
- providing nutritious and balanced food and information about eating well and safely;
- soliciting and incorporating their feedback;
- making specific improvements to the dining program based on student input;
- and meeting their needs meal-to-meal, day-in and day-out.

People are predisposed to think of institutional dining as "cafeteria food" – or less than that, even. The general bias is that dining halls serve less palatable foods, made of low-quality ingredients, troughed out in stainless steel. This is largely a historical cliché, as institutional dining has changed radically – in even just the past decade.

What's more, because the residential dining board plan is mandatory and unlimited – 99 meals a week if you like – students don't expect significant efforts to be made on their behalf.

Beginning with the brochure *Dining at Harvard*, which is mailed to all freshmen before they arrive at Harvard, and continuing through their welcome to their first dining hall, HUDS shatters those notions. We offer an immediate experience that challenges all the senses, and breaks all the molds.

We measure our success through participation rates, sales, student interaction, and departmental flexibility and change. "Holding steady" is an indication of failure. We expect our program to change noticeably year-to-year. Our marketing strategy is to communicate and facilitate change, and a constant interaction with undergraduates.

SOLUTION OVERVIEW

Stated most simply, our solution is to stay in front of our students with economical messages – statements made as briefly and clearly as possible, about the value of our program and our place at the university – and questions about their experience, interests and personal tastes. We use several channels for communication:

- Posters offer periodic event reminders or important messages
- Table tents capture service and program details and highlights, wellness pointers and student ads
- TidBits is a newsletter-style detailed review of dining issues important to students
- Brochures capture take-away messages and detailed program features
- The website summarizes all HUDS features and major areas of interest
- Surveys are in-depth inquiries of student opinion
- Feedback cards capture small comments and requests

Marketing to undergraduates is understandably youth-oriented in design. Printed pieces rely heavily on bright colors, extensive images, and direct messages. Along with messages about the meal program, HUDS' offers free advertising for student groups, advise on health issues, volunteer opportunities, and even classes to improve their culinary skills upon graduation. By allying ourselves closely with student needs and activities, we gain their appreciation and thereby their attention.

Undergraduates are required to participate in the meal plan. We position ourselves to be here for their satisfaction, and remind them regularly, "If you don't see it, just ask!" We strive to be the best customer service department at Harvard and ask for their frank feedback at every opportunity. Authenticity, diversity and variety are paramount, but the meal plan must also be viewed as a well-rounded, integrated program, thus demonstrating the overall value for their dollar.

IMPLEMENTATION/CHALLENGES

HUDS' marketing (for four divisions, of which residential dining is one) is completely carried out by a team of four people. Each HUDS division and the department as a whole must be presented distinctively, but with a unity of message and professionalism. The department marketing budget represents less than 1% of HUDS total budget. Residential Dining is by itself a \$30 million business.

We use Macintosh systems with a full compliment of graphic design programs (Photoshop, Illustrator, Quark, Dreamweaver, Acrobat). Printing is done on a black and white laser printer, a color laser printer, a large format color plotter, and through professional printers (both offset and digital 4-color express).

Marketing's greatest challenge is consistently putting forward cost-conscious pieces and programs that further HUDS' reputation with students and within the University as a culinary expert, a customer service and sales leader, and an innovator. Simultaneously, students have to feel that their dollars are being well spent, with an emphasis on food. It is a fine balance of presenting a highly professional appearance with a modest budget.

Everyday posters and table tents are produced with a few days notice. Brochures are usually designed in a four to six week period. Surveys are conducted over one-week stretches, and initial response to the results is generally offered within three weeks.

Due to the small staff, the high production volume, and the short attention span of the student population, time is essential and fleeting. The pace of the HUDS marketing office is intense, but charged with the energy of doing fun, relevant work.

MEASUREMENT – EVALUATION OF OUTCOMES

Revenue for the FY '02 residential dining program increased \$2,531,578 over the previous year. This most directly reflects the University's satisfaction with our services through a continuation of modest cost-of-living increases in the board rate.

HUDS more keenly evaluates its success through the number of meals taken in the board program. In Calendar year 2002, undergraduates ate 2,600,932 meals with us, a count comparable to the previous year, though there were approximately 7 days fewer meals served in 2002 due to the late start of the school year. This equals approximately a 2% increase in participation.

Additionally student surveys were extremely successful, with high participation levels (averaging 20% or better) and very good ratings (overall satisfaction of 3.29 out of 5). And a renewed Feedback Card program has increased student comments and interactions with staff. In the previous school year we got 348 feedback cards, using a long-standing

card system. The introduction of a new system launched in September 2002 has already doubled last year's tally by infusing new life and responsiveness into the program.

Finally, change continues constantly. Each student comment or survey allows HUDS' to reconfigure its services, from a change in cereal (thanks to student input, we rotate more than 40) to the addition of all new menu items (Chicken Tikka Masala debuted three weeks after a quorum of students requested it), to all-new services (breakfast bags to go).

The French gourmet Anthelme Brillat-Savarin famously said, "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are." Harvard has entrusted HUDS with its students and with the responsibility that Brillat-Savarin's statement implies. Our marketing strategy centers on ensuring that these young men and women come to the table and consume a world of variety, enlightenment, diversity, satisfaction, and intrigue.