

Stories from the Field: Massachusetts

Marketing to Successfully “Pitch the Fat” in Fall River’s Healthy Dining Program

“It’s Sales 101,” says Mike Ramos, when asked about the key to success for the Healthy Dining Program of Fall River, Massachusetts. “It’s an invitation, not a mandate.” Mike is both the brains and the brawn behind this citywide initiative to foster healthier restaurant eating by enhancing the existing restaurant licensing system.

The need for a program to foster healthier restaurant eating in Fall River is clear: According to 2009 data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 60% of adults in Massachusetts are overweight or obese, more than 25% of residents are not consuming the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables, and the majority of meals are consumed outside the home. Knowing that Fall River has a large immigrant population and a restaurant on nearly every block, Mike felt strongly that any citywide nutrition program would need to focus on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and decreasing fat intake.

Mike drew on the efforts of other cities to establish the Healthy Dining Program in Fall River. The initiative is straightforward: by choosing to meet a set of recognized criteria for healthy restaurant dining, restaurant owners applying and re-applying for a city license can have their food establishment designated as one known to offer healthy and nutritious food options. The following are the criteria participating restaurants must meet to earn the city’s healthy dining designation:

- Offer at least two choices of fruits and/or vegetables (not potatoes).
- Allow free substitution of salad or other vegetables instead of fried potatoes.
- Clearly designate low-fat and low-calorie menu items.
- Offer 1% or skim milk.
- Offer some dishes in a smaller portion size.
- Enforce no-smoking laws within the establishment.

As part of the program, the city lists the names of designated healthy food establishments on a website and also encourages city government event planners to order food from these healthy establishments. Mike also advertises for the city’s healthy food establishments at local health fairs and gives them an opportunity to bring food for community members to sample. Mike felt that in a challenging economy, business owners would welcome any opportunity to increase revenue while also being viewed in a positive light by community members.



A business owner himself, Mike is sensitive to the needs and priorities of local restaurant owners. He saw it as important that there be no mandate to participate in the Healthy Dining Program and no penalty for not participating. His sales pitch was simple yet compelling: "This is an invitation to be a part of something to help your business thrive and to help your community get healthy."

Although the initiative is self-sustaining now that it has been incorporated in the licensing system, Mike met with some interesting challenges along the way. For example, one New England restaurant chain did not offer 1% milk at any of its locations. Mike had to work with local franchise owners to contact the national headquarters for permission to offer 1% milk. While the franchise in Fall River is still the only one in the restaurant's chain to offer 1% milk, Mike is hopeful that this effort will help to set a precedent for other locations in the chain throughout New England.

Mike attributes his success in recruiting participating businesses to his deep knowledge of the community and his ability to build relationships with people. Mike has eaten at nearly half the restaurants in the program, which has given him more opportunities to become known to restaurant owners. Similarly, Mike has made personal connections with people working in city government, which better enables him to gain their support for his initiative.

Savvy like Mike's may be learned in business school, but Mike has a more unusual story. A high school dropout who earned his high school General Equivalency Diploma at age 33, Mike was one class away from earning his bachelor's degree in Human Services at age 40 in March 2011. Further, when he decided at age 30 that he needed to get his education in shape, Mike also decided he needed to lose weight and get his body in shape. As he describes his decision, "I finally got sick and tired of feeling sick and tired." He began exercising and improved the quality of his diet significantly. Mike is now a passionate advocate for obesity prevention initiatives who also has the credibility to engage others in following his lead.

Importance of Early Success

Since the Fall River Healthy Dining Program became fully integrated in the city's restaurant licensing program, it has continually added new restaurants to its ranks. The program is useful in that it increases availability and offers a greater variety of healthful foods to Massachusetts consumers. As of March 2011, nearly 70 restaurants have joined the program. Mike is proud to report a positive response from restaurant owners: "The response to our invitation is a clear indication that local establishments are interested in providing options to people who choose to eat a healthier diet."

Lessons Learned

- Focus on building relationships first. Invest significant time up front in getting to know the people you want to engage.
- Understand what motivates the people you wish to engage, and focus on helping them understand how your initiative can benefit them.

Contacts:

David S. Weed
Phone: (508) 324-2411
Email: drweed@cox.net
Web site: <http://www.gfrpartners.com>

Christina Nordstrom
Phone: 617-994-9859
Email: christina.nordstrom@state.ma.us

Resources:

Healthy Dining Program Criteria
<http://www.gfrpartners.com/PersonalHealth-HealthyDiningProgram.html>

Healthy Dining Program Designated Establishments
<http://www.gfrpartners.com/PersonalHealth-Restaurants.html>

