

# Embracing the Senior Palate: A Methodolgy for Responding to Diversity

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## Brief Description:

Meals-on-Wheels Greater San Diego has created a methodology for developing new meals and menus more quickly and effectively in the face of a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse senior population. As nutrition needs change based on health requirements and/or tastes, this methodology will help senior nutrition providers respond more rapidly...so no senior goes hungry<sup>®</sup>.

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*This submission was selected as part of a national challenge issued to leaders in all communities seeking new "best practices" and "best possibilities" for the future of nutrition and aging.*

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I am here to tell you about Meals-on-Wheels Greater San Diego's exciting adventure in creating a methodology to make it easier and faster to develop new meals and meal menus in response to rapidly changing dietary needs and tastes among our seniors—and to provide greater choice.

How many of you are vegetarians? Raise your hands- keep them up. How many prefer foods based on your background and culture, such as Hispanic or Asian food? How many have dietary needs based on health conditions? Look how many hands are up! This is the future of what will be asked of us.

San Diego, where we are located, has seen a 32% growth in its Hispanic population since 2000, including its seniors. We knew from our client demographics, 77% Caucasian, that we were not meeting the needs of Hispanic seniors. We also knew that that we needed a way to respond more quickly and effectively to the rapidly changing demographics, tastes and dietary requirements of the Baby Boomer generation—and the demands they would make of us for greater choice.

As you know all too well, adding meal choices and changing menus can be a lengthy and tumultuous process. Let me tell you a story. We decided to add wraps to our lunch menu. We had four different kinds of wraps—all selected to be tasty and meet geriatric nutrition guidelines. Immediately, we started getting complaints, "I don't like them."

“They fall apart.” “I like traditional sandwiches better.” We also got compliments, however. “I love the variety.” “They are tasty.” “Nice to have choices.” As you can imagine, the complaints outnumbered the compliments. So we conducted a survey. Low and behold, the issue was not with all wraps necessarily, but with one of the types of wraps, and with the lack of an alternative. The issue was solved with providing a different wrap as well as a sandwich alternative. But, it took a lot of effort and time to both develop the menu in the first place, and then to sort out the problems. This is only a small example of the complexities—and I am sure you all have similar stories to tell!

As we looked at ways to address the issue of how to respond to rapidly growing diversity, an opportunity came in the form of a Walmart Vision Grant through MOWAA. Our goal with this funding was to create a methodology for quickly and effectively responding to changing nutrition needs and tastes while co-creating a Healthy Hispanic menu that will help us to better serve our Hispanic seniors—because we know, as do you, that if our seniors don’t eat the meals we deliver, then we have failed in our mission!

We had two issues to address immediately, and they were tied to our success. We needed to develop the methodology and increase our connection and brand awareness in San Diego’s Hispanic community. We had identified the need for an Outreach Coordinator who was bi-lingual in Spanish and English and were fortunate to find a candidate who could not only fulfill the Outreach component of the project, but the project management as well. We were off and running.

The project was divided into three phases—information gathering regarding our internal processes for recipe and menu development and initial outreach to the Hispanic Community; recipe creation and testing as well as developing brand awareness in the Hispanic Community; and pilot testing the new meals with Hispanic Seniors while preparing communications and advertorials to support eventual roll-out of the new menu.

Gathering information about our internal processes was straight forward. Outreach to the Hispanic Community was much more complicated. San Diego has a large Hispanic population that includes all income and education levels and is spread out across the county (San Diego County is the size of Connecticut). There are a large number of organizations that represent different Hispanic constituents from the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce to the Chicano Federation. Determining which organizations and people were going to be most helpful and supportive of our efforts to reach and serve Hispanic seniors was a critical part of the first phase of the project. We were in for some surprises!

Meals-on-Wheels Greater San Diego is well connected with local restaurants and chefs because of our annual Gala Appetizer Competition. When we approached two of these Chefs who specialize in Hispanic cuisine to help us create recipes for Healthy Hispanic senior meals, they were thrilled. At a health fair, our Outreach Coordinator met the head of the Nutrition Program at San Diego Mesa College, a local community college. She was excited about what we were trying to do and asked if she and her students could help—and she recruited the head of the Culinary Program and his students to help as well. Suddenly, an exciting approach to recipe and meal development came together—our Chefs created the recipes and the Nutrition and Culinary students prepared and tested them. We are also fortunate to have a Masters level nutrition interns at Meals-on-Wheels Greater San Diego. These interns analyzed and recorded the nutrition content.

What of reaching seniors and supporters, however? Our Outreach Coordinator spent a lot of time attending business organization meetings, contacting other non-profits that work the Hispanic community, and developing a relationship with one of San Diego's community health centers—one that is located in San Ysidro, a part of San Diego that is on the border with Mexico and that has a large Hispanic client population. This health center has proven to be a wonderful partner and, through their senior center, is helping pilot the new meals that we have created. They too have been working to find ways to provide nutritious meals for their seniors—healthy meals that are also palatable to their clients. In addition, the attention we have garnered through our two Chefs has helped spread the word and raise interest and support in the project.

Our meal methodology came together not only effectively, but far more quickly and far less expensively than we imagined. By leveraging the creativity of Chefs who specialized in the cuisine we wanted to develop and enlisting faculty and students from a local community college to cook and test the recipes, we were able to create a mutually beneficial project that from the time the recipes were created to the time they were completely analyzed took only 12 weeks!

What happened on the outreach side? We knew from the get go that in order to reach the Hispanic community, and particularly Hispanic seniors, we would need to translate our website and brochures into Spanish. The MOWAA We Are Meals on Wheels So No Senior Goes Hungry PSA video, however, gave us a great opportunity. With permission from MOWAA, we created a Spanish version of the PSA and put it up on our website, using it as part of our awareness campaign. In addition, we have made sure that our new Blog includes information in Spanish. All of these efforts have helped us to substantially raise our brand awareness in the Hispanic Community, an important step to both reaching Hispanic Seniors as well as developing funding support.

With the methodology developed and our new meals tested, we look forward to beginning to roll out our Healthy Hispanic meals in the Fall of 2012.

We are pleased to be able to share our methodology and experiences with other senior meal providers. Though not every organization is the same, we hope that you are able to use what we have done as a basis for helping your organization respond to the diversity issues you are facing.