

# WHY SAGE DOESN'T POST CALORIES IN SCHOOLS

THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF ATTENTION RECENTLY ON POSTING NUTRITION INFORMATION AND SPECIFICALLY CALORIES ON MENUS. THIS GATHERED STEAM WHEN NEW YORK CITY REQUIRED RESTAURANTS TO DO SO IN 2006, AND IT BECAME THE LAW FOR CHAIN RESTAURANTS NATIONWIDE UNDER THE 2010 AFFORDABLE CARE ACT. FROM TIME TO TIME, OUR CLIENTS HAVE ASKED US WHY SAGE DOESN'T POST CALORIE COUNTS WHEN SOME OF OUR COMPETITORS DO. THE ANSWER IS BECAUSE POSTING CALORIES ABETS AND EXACERBATES EATING DISORDERS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE, AND WE SEE DOING SO AS VIOLATING OUR MISSION.

## BACKGROUND

In the early 1990s, SAGE introduced an automated system for posting nutrition information on menu signs, something common in corporate cafeterias. Every SAGE unit manager received a reference book to help put accurate nutrition information on our line signs. For students, we posted calories, protein and fat. When we were feeding an adult community, we posted sodium, calories, carbohydrates and fat.

We were dismayed when the heads of some of our girls schools asked us to stop. They explained that posting calories, in their words, allowed students with eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia to “keep score” on how they were doing. Frankly, we were shocked. Nothing had prepared us for that response.

Abiding by their wishes, we dropped this labeling at their schools and continued labeling elsewhere until 2005, when we rolled out our SAGE Spotlight Program®. This, we figured, would solve their calorie problem and correct for the very real issue of portion sizes and recipe variations. (Calorie counts can never be precisely accurate unless the product is preportioned and comes from a truly controlled environment like a factory.)

# EATING DISORDERS

Psychiatrists will tell you that eating disorders are frequently a symptom of, or a coping mechanism for, other psychological issues troubling a person. As a normal part of growing up, our customer base, largely adolescents and teenagers, faces many issues, and inevitably some seek to exert control over their lives by restricting calories. Surprisingly, anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. You can't overemphasize the seriousness of this problem.

The percentage of adolescents and teenagers who have run-ins with disordered eating is larger than you might think. For a review of some really disturbing statistics and studies, we recommend that you visit the website of the National Eating Disorder Association: <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/get-facts-eating-disorders>

In 2002, the Multiservice Eating Disorders Association (MEDA) in Massachusetts put out a publication for educators, "Promoting a Safe School Environment". It contained the following warning for educators:

Avoid displaying the calorie or fat content in meals served at school. This may exacerbate someone's pre-existing inclination to obsess about calories and fat grams and set him/her up to ignore their hunger for fear of gaining weight. Promote staying active as a way for students to live healthier lives instead of eating low-calorie or low-fat.

<http://www.medainc.org/uploads/File/docs/4.pdf>

In 2008, Harvard University removed nutrition information from line signs in its many cafeterias, again citing concern for students with eating disorders.

In a 2011 editorial in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, George Lowenstein cited publications dating back to 1985. "Calorie labeling can potentially amplify such neuroticism, converting eating from a necessary and pleasurable activity to one fraught with anxiety and internal conflict." In fact, there is a lot of research showing that posting calories can actually backfire among young people and lead to greater consumption. (Am. J Clin Nutr 2011;93:679-680.)

In short, the advice we received from our clients in the 1990s appears to be backed by decades of medical, dietetic, and behavioral research.

## SAGE'S APPROACH TO PREVENTING EATING DISORDERS

NOT TO OVERSTATE IT,  
BUT WE MAY HAVE HELPED  
TO SAVE SOME LIVES.

In 2011, after two years working with the staff of the Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt Hospital, SAGE rolled out our Approach for Preventing Eating Disorders. Frankly, it took this long to review every single piece of print material of ours for tone and content. We needed to make sure that our communications contained only positive messages about food.

Recognizing that SAGE's cafeteria personnel are in a privileged position to spot changes in the behavior of the young people we serve, our program on preventing eating disorders has three facets:

1. **EDUCATE** our staff on what eating disorders are and what they aren't. Explain the hidden causes and the visible warning signs.
2. **ELIMINATE** negative messages about food and body types. Teach our people not to engage in conversations that might exacerbate the situation. Communicate that all foods are good.
3. **ESTABLISH** a protocol for communicating our concerns to a contact person at our client schools.

This program has paid off. In each year of its existence, we have identified students to their respective schools, and in each case, this resulted in those students receiving the professional help they needed. Not to overstate it, but we may have helped to save some lives.

## NUTRITIONAL LABELING AT SAGE

In conjunction with the rollout of the Approach to Preventing Eating Disorders, the SAGE Spotlight Program® was retooled to more accurately reflect our philosophy that all foods are good. We recommend that students practice Variety, Balance and Moderation as a means to a healthy lifestyle.

Every SAGE recipe and every SAGE menu is reviewed by one of our registered dietitians before publication. The dot colors are assigned by the dietitians. We call this SAGE Signature Service®. As part of this review, all our recipes include a full nutritional breakdown. Our managers can see this information, and starting in the Fall of 2013, any one of our clients can elect to have this information visible on our online menus. (It won't be displayed on serving lines or at the point of sale.)

WE AT SAGE BELIEVE THAT OUR APPROACH IS SAFER, MORE ACCURATE, AND MORE APPROPRIATE FOR THE POPULATIONS WE SERVE. WE BELIEVE VERY STRONGLY THAT OUR MISSION IS TO PROTECT THE CHILDREN THAT ARE ENTRUSTED TO OUR CARE. OUR DECISION NOT TO POST CALORIES IN SCHOOL CAFETERIAS REFLECTS THAT MISSION.

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