



THE GOLDHABER WARNINGS REPORT



VOL. I

JULY 2009

DOES FAMILIARITY BREED CONTEMPT WITH WARNINGS?

There is an old saying about human relationships that ‘familiarity breeds contempt.’ Unfortunately, those of us who have conducted research studies on the effectiveness of warnings have seen a similar pattern develop. One of the major conclusions of research conducted by myself and my colleagues in the field of warnings is that the more experience a product user has with a product, the less likely they are to pay attention to and/or follow the warning. Young people with more swimming and diving experience are more likely to dive into shallow water in pools or other bodies of water, despite the presence of warning signs alerting them to the dangers of doing so. Campers with many years of experience still take propane-fueled devices into enclosed areas, such as tents, for purposes of providing more heat, despite warnings present on those devices not to use them in enclosed or unventilated areas. Drivers with years of experience with automobiles ignore national safety campaigns and ample automobile manufacturers’ warnings about the need to wear their seat belts. And, of course, the “granddaddy” of all warnings, heavily communicated and promoted for almost fifty years and that is still ignored by more than one fourth of our U.S. population are the tobacco warnings about the dangers of smoking.

Why do experienced product users ignore even the best of on-product warnings? There are many theories proposed, but among the leading suggestions is the theory of “habituation.” As a result of repeated exposure to a warning, people tend to ignore it and treat it almost as part of the “background noise” of their daily lives. In one study of vehicle back-up aural warnings, it was concluded that drivers’ accidents occurred at increasing frequency despite the presence of the conspicuous warnings. Anyone whose automobile theft-alarm system has gone off while his or her neighbors totally ignore it can appreciate this research finding. People become habituated to these warnings and ignore them; they expect them to occur, so when they actually do, they fail to get our attention. Another study found that people become desensitized to warnings if their experiences over time are benign or without adverse consequences. Consider, for example, the current U.S. terror alert system. As our experiences at airports and other locations continue without terrorist activities disrupting our lives, we become more lax and less diligent, even annoyed with reports that interfere with our desire for “normalcy” in transit.

Other studies have also provided evidence in support of the “habituation theory” to explain why we ignore warnings as a function of our experience. Engineers, for example, over time, were less likely to pay attention to warning signs about hazards associated with construction equipment; and students were less likely to pay attention to a warning posted outside their classroom door as the semester progressed and their benign experiences with the potentially hazardous condition increased. If a product is used over time without adverse consequences, the product users will develop confidence in their own abilities and be less likely to comply with product warnings. Their safety concerns decrease and they may actually filter the warning out of their thoughts. This may explain why one study in the insurance industry found that people tend to insure against high probability, low-cost events rather than the reverse.... think about the many people living in California’s earthquake zones WITHOUT earthquake insurance.

If you would like more information about the “familiarity effect” in warnings, please read my article “**Effects of Consumers’ Familiarity with a Product on Attention to and Compliance with Warnings,**” (G. Goldhaber and M. deTurck, *Journal of Products Liability*, 11:1, 29-37, March, 1988) or “**Effectiveness of Warning Signs: Familiarity Effects,**” (G. Goldhaber and M. deTurck, *Forensic Reports*, 1:281-301, 1988). Future issues of this newsletter will address other factors that may influence a warning’s effectiveness. Feel free to pass this newsletter on to any of your friends and colleagues.

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