



THE GOLDHABER WARNINGS REPORT



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HOW BEST TO COMMUNICATE A PRODUCT WARNING

An effective warning must be seen, read and understood so that the user can decide how to proceed safely and avoid injury from using a product. In the last issue of this newsletter, I listed four components that appear in many warnings:

1. **Clear Statement of the Hazard/Danger:** For example, a swimmer who is about to dive into a swimming pool needs to know that “shallow water” presents a hazardous condition; a person opening a soft-drink bottle should be aware that the “contents are pressurized”; or an installer of insulation products needs to be warned about a possible “inhalation hazard.”
2. **Specific Consequences Resulting from Exposure to the Hazard/Danger:** For example, as a result of diving into shallow water, a swimmer may “become paralyzed”; a person hit by a bottle cap blown off by pressurized contents may “lose an eye”; or an insulation installer who inhales insulation particles may over time suffer from a “lung disease”.
3. **Specific Instructions to Reduce Likelihood of Exposure to the Hazard/Danger:** For example, “No Diving” or when opening a bottle, “point away from face and people” or “use a NIOSH-approved respirator to avoid breathing dust particles.”
4. **Appropriate Signal Word to Inform Product User of Hazard Severity and Likelihood of Occurrence:** For example, “Danger” should be used for life-threatening or serious consequences that are likely to occur immediately (such as electrocution from contacting the third rail of a subway track); “Warning” should be used also for serious and/or life-threatening consequences but typically when they are not as immediate a threat (such as smoking cigarettes may lead to lung cancer over a period of years); and “Caution” should be used for consequences that lead to less serious and non-life-threatening injuries regardless of how immediate they are (such as playing football may lead to bruised or broken bones).

In addition to containing the above information, an effective warning should gain the attention of the product’s user at the time of use. Some of the following MAY improve the conspicuousness of a warning:

1. Use bold print, sometimes with uppercase letters, with an appropriate font size and type style consistent with the distance a typical user will be from the warning when reading it.
2. Use contrasting colors, if possible, adhering to the combination of red, white and black for “danger”; orange, white and black for “warning”; and yellow, white and black for “caution.”
3. Use borders, underscoring, white spacing, etc. for desired emphasis.
4. If necessary, repeat the warning in more than one location on the product, depending on its size and other necessary information to be communicated.
5. Possibly consider using tested and readily understood symbols or pictures to accompany textual warnings.

The situation, along with guidelines from available published research in the field of product warnings, will determine what combination, if any, of the above may be helpful. The next issue of this report will provide specific examples of some product warnings that have used some of the above techniques to improve the conspicuousness of a warning. Future issues will address what we have learned about some of the most important factors, outside of a warning’s design, that may influence a warning’s effectiveness. Feel free to pass this newsletter on to any of your friends and colleagues.