



THE GOLDHABER WARNINGS REPORT



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DOES FAMILIARITY ALWAYS BREED CONTEMPT OF WARNINGS?

In the July issue of this newsletter, we discussed one of the main conclusions of research conducted by myself and others in the field of warnings, that the more experience a product user has with a product, the less likely they are to pay attention to and/or follow a warning associated with that product. While this is GENERALLY true, there is one exception to this rule: when an individual perceives a product to be hazardous or very dangerous. The warnings literature is very clear on this point. A consistent conclusion of this literature is that when an individual, no matter how familiar they are with the product, perceives a product to be very hazardous in its use, they are more likely to follow warnings associated with that product and its hazards.

Wogalter and his colleagues at Rice University conducted one of the classic studies that documented this finding. In that study, the researchers asked 125 consumers to rate 72 different products on how hazardous they perceived them to be, how familiar they were with the product and how likely they would be to read a warning on this product. The researchers found that the most important variable predicting the likelihood that the warning would be read was its perceived hazardousness. While they confirmed that those with the least amount of familiarity with a product were more likely to read a warning, this effect disappeared when compared with perceived hazardousness.

Ortiz and his colleagues at Florida International University, almost fifteen years after Wogalter's initial work on the subject, completed another study, which showed actual behavior of subjects who rated a pest control product both on hazardousness and familiarity. The researchers observed whether or not the subjects used personal protective equipment (e.g., goggles, gloves and a mask) provided by the researchers and recommended for use in the product's warning. They concluded that those most likely to use such protective equipment (and thus, follow the warning) were those who concluded the product was very dangerous, regardless of how familiar they were with its use.

The lesson to be learned from this research is simple. For those who are constructing warnings about hidden hazards, those which consumers may not be aware of at the time of use, it might be very helpful to construct the warning in such a way as to emphasize the nature of the hazardous condition and its consequences to the user... in such a way that they perceive the product to be hazardous. In that way, the consumer is more likely to follow the warning and hopefully, less likely to become injured.

Feel free to pass this newsletter on to any of your friends and colleagues.