

THE GROWING TREND: MULTI-SYMBOL PRODUCT WARNING LABELS



By Geoffrey Peckham

As part of our series exploring the latest industry insight on effective product safety label design and symbol usage, this month's topic focuses on the trend towards multi-symbol labels, showing both hazard description AND hazard avoidance visually – and ultimately moving to a fully graphic approach.

Take notice! What's explored in this article will reshape the way you communicate safety to your products' users – if it hasn't started to already – and I believe it will become the deciding factor in future courtroom battles over what constitutes a legally "adequate warning."

A RISING VISUAL GENERATION

Our culture has changed. There's no denying that generations now coming of age assimilate information differently. They are visual. They learn quickly, responsively and best via graphical stimuli. They are driven by imagery and are bent on action, on doing things. When you watch a child with an iPad or smart phone – whether they're 3 or 15 – they use these visual devices with a skill and deftness that is seldom matched by someone in the baby boom generation. The new visual generations are our future workers and consumers. Their skillsets are helping to determine the present and future look of on-product warnings.

THE NEED FOR MULTI-SYMBOL-BASED WARNINGS

Much of what's being used for warnings today won't be effective tomorrow. Why? Because the newer generations of product users won't be "reading" word-based safety labels.

They'll benefit greatly from safety labels that use multiple symbols that show both hazard description AND hazard avoidance information visually, in symbolic form. Product manufacturers are just now beginning to understand this. The cultural communication shift towards multi-symbol-based warnings will have massive ramifications for your product safety program. It will also have a major impact on your company's future in terms of its product liability exposure. If you're mindful of this trend and react accordingly, this impact will be a positive one. If not, your company's litigation expenses could go through the roof.

A SHIFT SUPPORTED BY BEST PRACTICES

For over 25 years I've been leading a company that's helped businesses to use the latest safety sign and label standards to reduce risk and protect people from harm. From this vantage point, I can also confirm that, in the last decade, there has been a marked shift towards utilizing global safety label design principles that use internationally formatted graphical symbols to convey a portion of the label's message. To illustrate this change, see the labels in Figure 1:

- *Label 1* shows how warnings looked before 1991, compliant with a 1940s-era accident prevention facility safety sign standard, ASA Z35.1.



Figure 1: The progression towards graphic-based safety label design: 1941 to present

- *Label 2* shows a label formatted to meet the first version of the *ANSI Z535.4 Standard for Product Safety Signs and Labels*, published in 1991. Notice its more detailed content and inclusion of a symbol. The ANSI Z535.4 label format was meant to convey the proper severity level of the hazard (through its choice of signal word), and uses a word message and/or one or more symbols to convey the nature of the hazard, the consequence of interaction with the hazard and how to avoid the hazard.
- *Label 3* continues with the conveyance of this same level of content, but does so using a “harmonized” format that meets the current versions of the ANSI Z535.4 and ISO 3864-2 product safety label standards.
- And that brings us to *Label 4*. Compare it to *Labels 2* and *3*. The word message is the same, but instead of using a graphic to convey only the hazard nature and consequence information, it uses two additional graphics to convey the messages, “Do not operate with guards removed,” and “Follow lockout procedure before servicing.” Not only is a more complete safety message communicated visually with the use of multiple symbols, but the added symbols make the label more noticeable and quicker to comprehend (that is, if you know the meaning of the symbols).



Figure 2: Examples of graphic-only labels

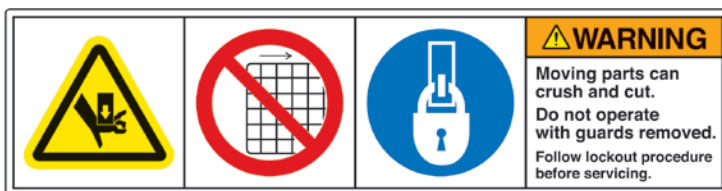
from a legal standpoint than warnings that continue to rely primarily on text when those same text messages could have been communicated by one or more symbols.

Stay tuned for the next article in this series which will focus on the importance of consistency in the use of symbols and formats for both product safety labels and facility safety signs. ☞

MOVING TOWARDS A FULLY GRAPHIC APPROACH

What’s continuing to change is this: graphically conveying only a portion of the label’s message will, at some point, no longer be considered “best practice.” When possible, best practices will dictate that the entire label’s message be communicated in graphic form. The continued use of the word message, even in the Label 4 example, serves the purpose of training those unfamiliar with the vocabulary of safety symbols. Note, though, in time, I believe the text panel will be eliminated from all but the most complex safety label messages. If you think this is a stretch of the imagination, look at Figure 2, showing safety labels now appearing on snow blowers and log splitters. The fact is graphic-only warnings are the new trend. Given the cultural push towards visual learning, in my opinion, the more fully illustrated multi-symbol labels will be judged to be more “adequate”

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