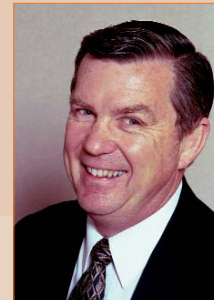


Signs, Labels & Tags in the Workplace



By George Kennedy

Every day we come in contact with signs, labels and tags saying “Danger,” “Caution,” or “Warning,” but how often do we really pay attention to them? For example, how many times have you passed a “Caution – Wet Floor” sign without even slowing down. Or, what about that label on the gas pump that says “Danger – No Smoking.” I have often seen people pumping gas with a cigarette in their mouths!

What we need to remember is that strategically placed signs, labels, decals, placards, tags and other marking devices help prevent accidents by indicating, insofar as possible, the existence and nature of potential hazards that might lead to an injury, illness or property damage. They might also provide directions on how to eliminate or reduce the hazards and/or advise of the probable consequences of not avoiding the hazard. For example, the aforementioned “Caution – Wet Floor” sign usually includes a simplified figure in the act of falling.

OSHA Standards

An effective safety management program includes provisions for the systematic identification, evaluation and prevention/control of general workplace hazards, specific job hazards, and potential hazards that might arise from foreseeable conditions. Although compliance with the law, including specific OSHA standards, is an important objective, an effective program looks beyond the specific requirements of the law to address all hazards. It will seek to prevent injuries and illnesses, whether or not compliance is at issue. Uniform and properly designed safety signage is an important contributor to the success of such a program.

OSHA regulations are limited as to when accident prevention signs must be used. For that reason, safety managers should take the time to identify hazards that lend themselves to the effective use of accident preven-

tion signs on jobsites and in shops. OSHA does require that all employees be instructed that “Danger” signs indicate immediate danger and that special precautions are necessary. Employees must also be instructed that “Caution” signs indicate a possible hazard for which proper precautions should be taken. Comprehensive safety programs take the additional step – which goes beyond OSHA requirements – and make sure that employees understand the purpose, significance and precautions associated with different types of accident prevention signs.

The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) Z535 provides some additional guidance: “Safety signs use a signal word or words to designate a degree or level of safety alerting... Signal words are the word or words that designate a degree or level of safety alerting... The signal word or words shall always be located in the a distinctive panel located in the uppermost portion of the safety sign.”

Signage Words

Accident prevention signs use several key words to convey safety warnings or instructions:

Danger: Indicates an imminently hazardous situation, which if not avoided, will result in serious injury or death. This signal word should be limited to the most extreme situations. The signal word “Danger” should not be used for property damage hazards unless personal injury risk is also involved. Typically, these signs have a white background color with a red oval inside the top black panel with white lettering; black lettering is used in the lower panel.

Warning: Indicates a potentially hazardous situation, which if not avoided, could result in serious injury or death. This signal word should not be used for property damage hazards unless there is a risk of personal injury.

Caution: Indicates a potentially hazardous situation, which if not avoided, might result in minor or moderate injury. It can also be used to alert the observer to unsafe practices that might cause property damage. These signs typically have a yellow background color with a rectangular black panel with yellow letters and black lettering in the lower panel. Caution signs should only be used to warn against potential hazards or advise caution with regard to unsafe practices.

General Safety: Indicates general instructions relative to safe work practices, reminds of proper safety procedures, and indicates the location of safety equipment. These signs typically have green background in the upper panel with black or green lettering on white background on lower panel. They might also have a green overall background with white lettering. Safety instruction signs must be used where there is need for general instructions and suggestions relative to safety measures.

Notice: Indicates a statement of company policy directly or indirectly related to the safety of personnel or protection of property. These signs typically have a blue background in the upper panel with white letters with black or blue lettering on lower panel. They might also have a blue overall background with white lettering.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

ANSI's research has shown that multi-panel signs utilizing ANSI's uniform alerting format — which includes an updated header (top panel), universal graphics and a message — can help provide greater hazard awareness. However, given the diverse nature of the American culture, providing signage that can be understood by all those who may come in contact with the hazard in question becomes something of a challenge. That is why signage with pictorial symbols/graphic representations, or a combination of a symbol and words often do a better job of conveying a universal message to persons who cannot read English.

Multi-language Signs

Similar to the use of pictorial symbols, providing bilingual signs using the languages spoken by the workforce and/or public in the area helps to ensure that the signs alert everybody. I think it is obvious that if a person does not understand the warning because he or she cannot read or speak English, it can lead to accidents. For example, the Spanish word for "Danger" is "Peligro"; unless you speak Spanish you

would not know that and vice versa. On the other hand, the word for "Caution" in Spanish is "Precaucion," which might give a Spanish-speaking person a clue as to what the sign says. The important thing to remember is to provide an understandable warning.

Color Helps Convey the Message

The colors used in accident prevention signs are specified by OSHA and ANSI to designate the severity of the hazard. The question is: Do your work crews know the color code?

Red = danger, fire protection equipment and stop

Yellow = caution, location of physical hazards

Orange = warning, machine hazards

Blue = notice, information

Green = emergency egress, first aid location, safety equipment storage

Keep in mind that some people are color blind, so the sign must always include words and/or pictorial symbols.

Giving Shape to the Message

In some situations, the shape of the sign can reinforce the message. For example, a hexagon-shaped, red sign conveys a message to stop. Here are some other examples:

Red circle with a line through it = NO

Orange or yellow triangle or diamond = hazard alert

Blue circle = mandatory action

Green square or rectangular = important information

Conclusion

Because safety signs serve such an important purpose, it is not prudent to simply assume that all workers and the public know what they say and mean. Some are standardized and others are not, so it is up to the employer to ensure that workers know what the signs used around their jobsites and facilities mean. It is also important to use due diligence to ensure that the general public understands any signs that apply to them. Don't take chances! When purchasing signs, it is important to consider not only the OSHA and ANSI standards, but also the best practices described above.

Note: The requirements for highway signs can be found in the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways (MUTCD), which is available online and in book form.

George Kennedy is NUCA Vice President of Safety.