

A Lighter Approach to Warning Labels: Creating Cooperation Through Humor

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Warning labels are a very serious subject when you're trying to get the general public to *not* do something. One of the most extreme examples occurs in zoos where visitors throw coins into animal pools. There is a high risk that the animals will eat the shiny metal objects, resulting in stomach problems that are often terminal.

The inspiration for this paper came from a suggestion that a lighter approach to some rather gruesome warning signs be tried. In order to understand the feelings that will be addressed, you will benefit from participating in a little game.

Before you read further, please take a minute to relax. Imagine yourself as you were in the first grade. Think of where you lived and a place that was particularly fun for you; your room, a special spot in your yard, maybe some place in your neighborhood. Now think of your favorite toy, one you liked to play with either alone or with a close friend, or you might have had an imaginary friend or two. Remember what it felt like to play with that toy. Did it make any noise? Did you? Was it a truck that needed appropriate sound effects to run right? Was it a particular doll that needed a lot of tender care? Was it an imaginary friend who would accompany you on secret adventures? For the next 30-60 seconds, allow yourself to think about that toy. Remember its color, its texture, what you did with it, and how you felt when you were playing with it.

Please put this paper aside while you remember your childhood for a minute.

If you have done the above exercise, you are probably smiling to yourself. You may be bathing in the glow of a pleasant personal memory. The feelings you are experiencing are very close to those your visitors feel when they come to your park, museum or zoo. They remember and look forward to *reliving* some kind of happy childhood experience. Our adult visitors use the children they bring with them to access that perhaps

subconscious memory. Therefore, in essence what we're dealing with is a whole bunch of kids when a family comes to the zoo.

However, Dr. Raymond Moody (1978) writes that the idea of presenting serious subjects playfully is very hard for many professionals to accept. Dr. Moody calls this phenomenon "professional solemnity." By the time a person has worked hard enough to earn an advanced degree and/or has gained years of experience, it becomes increasingly harder to access the delight and laughter he or she felt as a child (Bramley, 1992). A four-year old laughs 500 times a day, an adult, 15. As adults, we need to bridge that gap if we are going to release our own creativity and become more effective educators.

Here are three of my favorite chuckles:

Sign on an Indiana Shopping Mall Marquee:

Archery Tournament. Ears Pierced.

Headline on local newspaper's sports page:

Grandmother of eight makes hole in one.

Message found in a Fortune Cookie:

Still hungry? Have another fortune cookie.

A smile, chuckle, or laughter relaxes the whole body. Therefore, the mind also becomes relaxed and is more receptive to a new thought after experiencing a little mirth. If our messages are constantly solemn or serious and if our warning labels are consistently authoritarian, we are slowly eroding the childlike anticipation of our visitors. Dr. Moody mentions that laughter actually gives a "cosmic" perspective, relief from the sympathetic pain we feel about depressing topics. If used properly, laughter converts these issues into stimulants. From our refreshed mental set, we are able to think of creative ways to do something about the problem at hand.

Many zoos have to cope with the "wishing well syndrome" where people toss coins into virtually any body of water they can find—exhibits for seals, sea lions, otters, or penguins—to name just a few. While many parks may put up ineffectual "Do Not..." signs (Bramley, 1990), some other warnings get more heavy-handed. One zoo threatens a \$50 fine for throwing coins in the alligator pool. (Has the threat ever been enforced?)

Occasionally an animal park will choose to display a warning sign which depicts an animal autopsy in full color. At one sea lion exhibit, along a 200+ foot walkway the only warnings installed are very gory. There are five signs with the same photo of an open animal stomach, coins glittering in the flash of the camera. There's even a vandalized sixth sign on which the photo has been torn from its backing.

At this exhibit it has been observed informally that many people glance at the sea mammals but, when they are confronted with the morbid warning, hurry on without enjoying the exhibit and its educational opportunities. Remember, most people came to this park—and maybe this particular exhibit—with a sense of happy anticipation.

A suggestion was made at the 1992 Visitor Studies Conference to intersperse these morbid signs with a lighter approach: "Let's imagine that about 8 feet away there's another sign, a cartoon. An unexpected cartoon would provide food for thought, reinforcing the important message that coins in pools are mortally dangerous. Also, it may relax some people who had [become tense at] the existing sign, giving them incentive to look more closely at the animals" (Bramley, 1992).

Initially, the idea of finding a humorous approach to the warning label message was met with enthusiasm by the exhibit staff at the zoo. However, each level of rough sketch was diluted with a new reason for disapproval from different staff members.

Eventually a different animal park agreed to work with the test sign. The seal cartoon used was a two-part message using a lift-door mechanism. On the front was a picture of a young seal with a question mark in a thought balloon pointing to seal "ghosts" arising from a graveyard (see Figures 1 & 2).

Upon lifting the panel, the visitor sees the old timer's response and would notice that the halos were nickels, dimes and quarters. The old timer, leaning on his cane says, "They died because they ate the coins off the bottom of the pool." Under the border of the picture is the message, "Seals eat coins as if they were shiny fish. Please use your money to buy souvenirs. Thank you."

This lift-door cartoon prompted a discussion at the test site among a dozen professionals from a national park system, botanical garden, maritime museum, aquarium, natural history museum and zoo. While some mentioned a personal bias about the animals as depicted, all readers interacted with the sign while at least smiling over the unexpectedness of the message. They listed different exhibits that could benefit from some kind of two-part cartoon warning message and agreed that this approach would be worth testing further.

The discussion that followed developed an understanding of recent material by one Ned Herrmann (1990). Work by Betty Edwards (*Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* [1989]) and a number of other current authors (Marguiles, 1991) address the metaphor of right- and left-brained thinking. Since 1978 Herrmann has developed the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument, a questionnaire that shows which of four brain areas the participant uses most. Herrmann found that there are actually upper and lower hemispheres (cerebral right and left, limbic right and left) as well as the left and right hemispheres understood over two decades ago. Herrmann has established that people are usually dominant in two quadrants, not always simply left or right.

With a data base of over one million participants, Herrmann has been able to make some fascinating suggestions about where people in different professions "live" within their own mental functioning! His metaphor of the whole brain reports the most common configuration to be people who

are emotional, right-limbic dominant (e.g., communication specialists). The second most common configuration is the full left-brained model, covering both the left-limbic and left-cerebral quadrants (e.g., detail-oriented, list-making people).

The third most common dominance is the dual right-brained person (e.g., artists, writers, dancers, teachers). However, most people use all four quadrants to some degree.

A study of Herrmann's work is extremely useful when we try to reach our public with any message. It may be particularly important when trying to make warning labels effective. If we remember that, while we as individual writers may prefer a protective or even threatening approach to our warning labels, at least some of our visitors will respond better to a more visual, cartoon approach. Some will learn best by the tactile experience of lifting a door to get further information. Others will remember more if the message is very simple (Bramley, 1990; Bitgood, Carnes, Nabors, and Patterson, 1988).

"16¢ was all it took" reads a sign at a Midwest penguin pool. That brief sentence, along with news coverage of the death of one of the charming residents of a brand-new exhibit, is all it has taken to stop the coin-toss problem! The sign goes on to explain in one sentence that the penguins eat coins and other shiny objects as if they were fish.

"Pennies Make Tummy Aches" is the title of a short sign at a New Jersey zoo's turtle pond. The illustration is a bunch of coins with the international "no" symbol superimposed; the 30-word text explains that the animals get stomach ulcers and die if they eat metal objects. This simple warning label has virtually eliminated the coin problem in the pool which is sheltered from the keepers' sight.

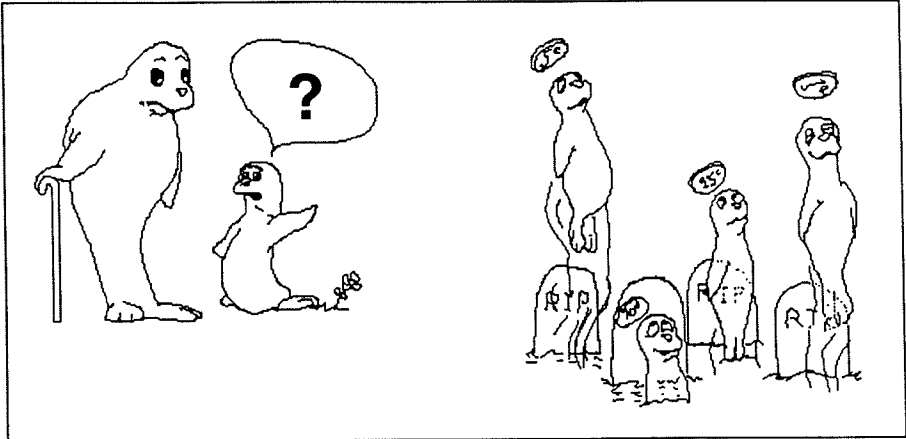
Conclusion

The best part about these gentler approaches to warning messages is that they reinforce the impression that your facility is truly a delightful place to visit. They dissolve the undercurrent of hopeless sympathy that morbid warnings engender (Bramley, 1992). Adults who bring their children to a day at the local zoo, a new science museum, or a safe park setting consider these facilities as educational, but most of all, as places where they can spend time with their families. The more we support the impression that our parks and buildings are enjoyable places to visit, the more opportunity we will have to tell and retell our stories about our exhibits. Our public enters with the happy anticipation of a child. Can your warning-sign system ensure that they leave with an equally positive impression?

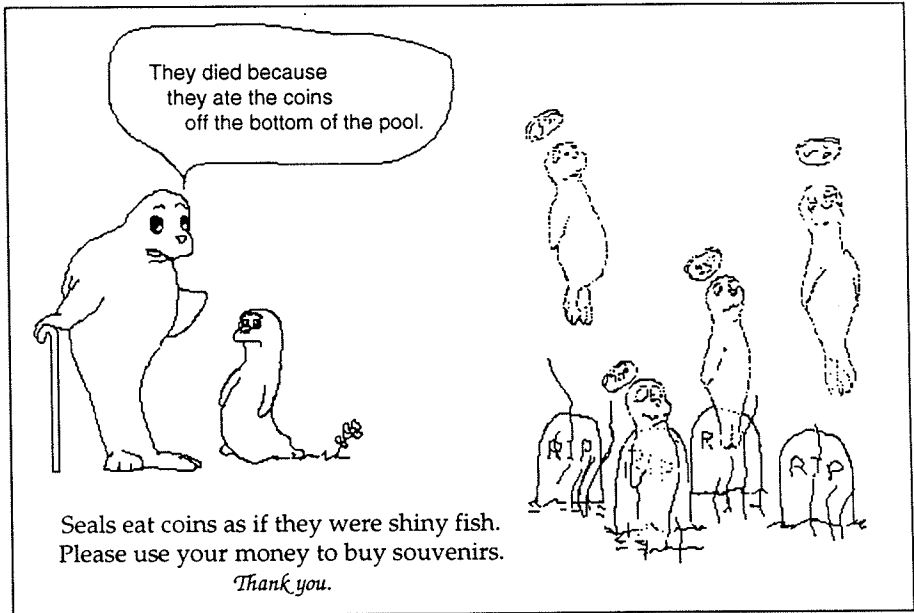
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Figure 1



Panel 1.



Panel 2.