

Increasing the Impact of Signs and Slogans

W. Edwards Deming told us to eliminate signs, slogans, exhortations, and objectives from the workplace. What did he mean? Did he mean we ought to stop giving people directions to follow and goals to shoot for? If he did, he was denying the basic Activator-Behavior-Consequence (ABC) framework for behavior-based safety. Substantial research has verified that behavior is influenced markedly by activators (or stimuli like signs preceding behavior) and by consequences (pleasant or unpleasant events following behavior).

I don't think Dr. Deming was disregarding behavioral science principles with his point about eliminating signs, slogans, and exhortations. Rather, he was criticizing the standard top-down development and display of performance activators. If we keep on attempting to activate behavior with standard practices, we might as well eliminate them all together. As currently used, signs, slogans, and exhortations for safety might only raise expectations without giving relevant and meaningful direction. As such, they could do more harm than good. The ABC principle of direction from activators is not wrong, however. The way the principle gets translated into procedures or operations needs elimination or improvement.

In this article, I offer six guidelines for increasing the impact of activator techniques. These guidelines might imply that some of your current signs, slogans, goals and exhortations ought to be eliminated, as Deming suggested. But, if you follow these guidelines when developing new activators you will not only increase safe behavior and decrease at-risk behavior, you will help to develop the kind of attitudes needed to sustain behavior change.

Guideline 1: Specify Behavior

Behavioral research demonstrates that signs with general messages and no specification of a desired behavior to perform (or an undesirable behavior to avoid) have very little impact on

actual behavior. But signs that refer to a specific behavior can be beneficial. Therefore, don't expect signs or slogans with general exhortations like "Think Safe," "Eliminate Accidents," and "Meet Our Goal of Zero Injuries" to have much impact. On the other hand, activators that give specific direction can influence behavior and thus prevent injuries. Specific messages might tell people where certain behaviors are needed or appropriate (such as, "Hard-Hat Zone," "Designated Smoking Area," and "Ear Protection Required") or give direction on how to perform safely (such as "Lift With Legs," "Walk Within the Yellow Lines," and "Buckle Up for Safety").

Although activators should specify a response to perform or avoid, they should not be overly complex. Signs with a lot of words are easy to overlook -- with time complex signs just blend into the woodwork. But, of course, even simple and specific messages will also lose their impact with time. Following the next guideline explains why this is the case.

Guideline 2: Maintain Salience with Novelty

It is perfectly natural for activators like sign messages to lose their impact over time. This process is called habituation, and it's considered to be the simplest form of learning. Through habituation we learn *not* to respond to an event that occurs repeatedly. If there is no obvious consequence (good or bad) from responding to a stimulus, the organism stops reacting to it. It's a waste of time and energy to continue responding to an activator that seems to be insignificant.

What is the relevance of habituation for safety? It's human nature to habituate to everyday activators in our environment that are not supported by consequences. And this is the case with many safety activators. So we should expect the same sign or slogan to lose its influence over time unless consequences are in place to support the message.

A sign requesting the use of personal protective equipment might eventually be ignored, for example, if consequences are not in place to support the activator. And, I don't mean only the availability of penalties if the message is not followed. Given the natural negative consequences for most safe behavior (such as inconvenience, discomfort, or inefficiency), it is essential to add some positive consequences (like positive feedback or recognition) to support compliance with safe-behavior activators.

Guideline 3: Vary the Message

What does habituation tell us about the design of safety activators? Essentially, we need to vary the message. When an activator changes it can become more salient and noticeable. Over the years I've noticed a variety of techniques for changing the message on safety signs. There are removable slats to place different messages. I'm sure most of you have seen computer-generated signs with an infinite variety of safety messages. Some plants even have video screens in break areas, lunch rooms, visitor lounges, and hallways that display many kinds of safety messages, conveniently controlled by user-friendly computer software.

Who determines the content of these messages? I know who--the target audience for these signs. The same people expected to follow the specific behavioral advice should have as much input as possible in defining message content. Many organizations can get suggestions for safety messages just by asking. But if employees are not accustomed to giving safety suggestions, they might need a positive consequence to motivate their input. I've transitioned to the next guideline.

Guideline 4: Involve the Target Audience

This guideline should be obvious by now. It's relevant for developing and implementing any behavior-change intervention. When people contribute to a safety effort, their ownership

and commitment to both safety and the improvement process increase. Of course, this guideline works both ways. When individuals feel a greater sense of ownership and commitment, their involvement in safety achievement is more likely to continue. Thus, involvement feeds ownership and commitment, and vice versa.

When public trash receptacles include the logos of nearby businesses, the merchants whose logos are displayed typically take care of the receptacle, and keep the surrounding area clean. This guideline is also supported by the success of “Adopt-a-Highway” programs that have groups keep a certain roadway clear of litter and perhaps beautified with plants, scrubs, or flowers. Group ownership of public space typically leads to actively caring for its appearance.

Guideline 5: Activate Close to Response Opportunity

It’s intuitive that the shorter the delay between a direction and the opportunity to follow the direction, the greater the probability of compliance. Thus, safety messages placed in work areas where the activated behavior should be performed have greater impact than similar messages in memos, newsletters, and safety talks. Likewise, “point-of-purchase advertising” -- or placing ads at locations where the target products can be purchased -- is an optimal form of product marketing.

This simple guideline explains why researchers found greater increases in vehicle safety belt use when “Buckle-Up” messages were located at parking-lot entrances/exits and intersections than on television. Similarly, road signs that gave drivers feedback on the percentage of vehicles exceeding posted speed limits were found effective at reducing speeding, whereas public service announcements on radio and television about vehicle safety have minimal behavioral impact. Of course, one of the most effective activators of speed reduction is

the beeping sound of a radar detector. This activator is not only salient, response specific, and proximal to response opportunity, it also has the last guideline going for it.

Guideline 6: Implicate Consequences

The salient beep of a radar detector effectively motivates reductions in vehicle speed because it enables drivers to avoid a negative consequence -- an encounter with a police officer. Field research has shown that activators which do not implicate consequences can influence some behavior when they are salient and implemented in close proximity to an opportunity to perform the specified target behavior. It's important to realize, though, that the target behaviors in these studies were all relatively convenient to perform. We're talking about depositing handbills in a particular receptacle, choosing certain products, using available safety glasses and safety belts. There is plenty of evidence that activators alone won't succeed when the target behavior requires more than a little effort or inconvenience.

Activators that signal the availability of a consequence are either incentives or disincentives. An incentive announces to an individual or group, in written or oral form, the availability of a reward. This pleasant consequence follows the occurrence of a certain behavior or an outcome of one or more behaviors. In contrast, a disincentive is an activator announcing or signaling the possibility of receiving a penalty. This unpleasant consequence is contingent on the occurrence of a particular undesirable behavior.

Research has shown quite convincingly that the impact of a legal mandate varies directly with the amount of media promotion or disincentive. Similarly, the success of an incentive program depends on making the target population aware of the possible rewards. In other words, marketing the availability of positive or negative consequences with activators (incentives or disincentives) is critical for the motivating success of a consequence intervention.

Some people add their own internal consequence to an activator. They might follow a safety rule to set an example for others or to avoid an embarrassing encounter with another person. Thus, whether talking about consequences from our external world or from our own internal dialogue, when activators implicate them, they are more powerful. As I've written in an earlier ISHN article, goal-setting will motivate as well as direct behavior to the extent the consequences achieved by reaching the goal are realized.

In Conclusion

We're constantly bombarded with activators. At home we get telephone solicitations, junk mail, television commercials, and verbal requests from family members. At work it's phone mail, e-mail, memos, policy pronouncements, and verbal directions from supervisors and coworkers. On the road there's no escape from billboards, traffic signals, vehicle displays, radio ads, and verbal communication from people inside and outside our vehicles. Only a portion of the activators we perceive actually influences our behavior. Understanding the six principles discussed in this article can help you predict which ones will influence behavior change.

Obviously, we don't need more activators in our lives. We certainly do need *more effective* activators to promote safety and health. It would be far better to make a few safety activators more powerful than to add more activators to a system already overloaded with information. We need to plan our safety activators carefully so the right safety directives receive the attention and ultimate action they deserve.

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Note: Portions of this article were excerpted from Dr. Geller's new book, *The Psychology of Safety: How to Change Behaviors and Attitudes*. For more information call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-7233.