

When Do Safety Trinkets Improve Behavior? It's in the Rationale and Delivery

Baseball caps, key chains, coffee mugs, umbrellas and ink pens are often used to promote personal safety and health. Do these safety trinkets work? Do they impact safety-related behavior?

Methods of delivering safety trinkets vary widely. For some companies, a low injury record calls for delivery of safety trinkets throughout a work force. Sometimes trinkets are given to individuals after a particular safety-related behavior, such as completing a behavioral observation, removing a safety hazard, or reporting a “near miss.” In other situations, safety trinkets are not contingent on any safety-related outcome nor behavior, but are distributed to everyone as an awareness booster.

Do Safety Trinkets Work?

Viewpoints about the impact of safety trinkets vary from one extreme to the other. Most, if not all, behavior-based safety consultants advise against basing the delivery of safety rewards on injury-related outcomes. As I reviewed in an earlier *ISHN* article (“Safety Incentive Do’s and Dont’s,” Nov. 1992), this approach can stifle the report and discussion of personal injuries, a critical process for injury prevention. In that early article I recommended safety trinkets be behavior-based, meaning they should be contingent on behaviors that contribute to injury prevention.

While most behavior-based safety consultants advocate the use of behavior-based rewards, some claim they should be avoided altogether. This argument is based on the premise that rewards for safety can detract from an individual’s intrinsic motivation. Some research supports this notion, but most does not.

A Rationale for Safety Trinkets

Rather than re-visit issues of intrinsic vs. extrinsic consequences and outcome-based vs. behavior-based contingencies, I'd like to offer an entirely different perspective. I propose the meaning or rationale underlying a safety trinket has the greatest impact on behavior.

What does the safety trinket mean to the individual? Does the trinket remind the person of a special safety-related lesson, behavior, or commitment? Is the individual proud to wear the cap or use the coffee mug with a safety slogan? Does the safety trinket connect to a memorable event in the individual's life, thereby contributing to making safety personal? Answer: The story behind a safety trinket and its meaningfulness to the individual receiving and displaying the trinket determine the behavioral and attitudinal effects. Thus, the words and emotions linked to the delivery of a safety trinket are critical determinants of its impact.

Illustrative Anecdote: The LiveStrong Wristband

Most readers are probably familiar with the yellow "LiveStrong" wristbands. Early last year these trinkets could be purchased in bike shops nationwide for \$1.00. They are developed and distributed by the Lance Armstrong Foundation, which uses the proceeds to support cancer prevention research and help people live with cancer. Because of my own trials and tribulations with cancer (as revealed in my *ISHN* contributions for June & October, 2002), I was particularly interested in the story behind the yellow wristbands. I immediately purchased 100 of these trinkets and distributed them to my university students. Each delivery was accompanied with an explanation of

the special meaning of the yellow wristband. Most already knew of my bout with prostate cancer.

Wearing the LiveStrong trinket reminds me of the life I took for granted before cancer, and of the need to continue with the kind of lifestyle that increases my chances of staying “cancer-free.” When my wristband broke, I was quite disappointed because at the time, every bike store I called was “out-of-stock.” The yellow wristband I now wear was given to me by a friend and professional colleague. He said he could no longer wear this trinket, which I had given him earlier, because he started smoking cigarettes again after a nine-year hiatus. It was inconsistent for him to wear the yellow wristband while he continued this unhealthy behavior.

This latter part of my story reflects the greatest benefit of safety trinkets that are meaningful to those who display them. Behavior inconsistent with the rationale behind a safety trinket can cause tension, thereby activating behavior change. Of course, this tension is also alleviated when the individual chooses to stop displaying the safety trinket.

Illustrative Anecdote: The Buckle-Up Wristband

My colleague who returned the yellow wristband now wears a maroon one, as do I. These maroon wristbands, which I purchased from the same company that produces the LiveStrong bands, are embossed with the message “Buckle Up for Someone You Love – A.R.K.” The initials ARK represent the name of a university student – Ashley Ryan Krueger – who was killed in an automobile crash because she was unbuckled.

University students, faculty, and staff purchased the maroon wristbands at a well-attended memorial service for Ashley. I gave the keynote address at this campus gathering, and focused on giving special meaning to the buckle-up trinkets. We sold

1000 wristbands, and we've started a re-order list. Several students have expressed interest in distributing these wristbands at their local high schools.

Wearing these wristbands may be a fashion statement, since maroon is one of our university colors. But, I'm confident the personal story and emotions linked to this safety trinket, as well as the relevant buckle-up message, activates safety-belt use and perhaps even other safe-driving behaviors. Indeed, it would be inconsistent and hypocritical to wear the wristband and not buckle up.

Illustrative Anecdote: Future Possibilities

Recently, I discussed our Buckle-Up wristbands in a series of people-based safety presentations at the Monsanto plant in Soda Springs, Idaho. At the end of one of these talks, an audience member approached me to acknowledge personal relevance of my buckle-up story. On October 10, 2004, she lost her grandson in a vehicle crash, and he likely would have been uninjured if he had been buckled up. The Soda Springs community maintains a memorial tree to remember Derek Smith. Derek graduated from Soda Springs High School, and had begun welding classes at Idaho State University VoTech. The grandmother and I visioned a community-wide distribution of black (one of the high-school's colors) wristbands with an embossed message: "Buckle-Up - - Do it for Derek."

I expect the Monsanto plant to support the production and distribution of this safety trinket. Actually, I envision a similar safety trinket for every high school and university in the country that has experienced a personal loss from a vehicle crash and wants to help prevent future occurrences of such a tragedy. Question: What about a

green wristband for safety? With significant interest in this idea, my SPS partners and I would help develop an appropriate action plan.

In Conclusion

This article considered a quality of the safety trinket that may be more important than the timing of its delivery. Specifically, I suggest the meaning and the emotions linked to a safety trinket are most influential. In fact, the term “trinket” does not do justice to its potential impact. A more appropriate label is “safety memento,” reflecting the special memory and mission linked to a safety keepsake. Bottom Line: Make a safety memento personal and influential by linking it to an emotion-laden memory and a relevant injury-prevention behavior.

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