IMPLEMENTING "WORDLESS" SAFETY LABELS

By Erin Earley

In our most recent "On Your Mark" columns, we've focused on ANSI Z535 – the U.S. standards that create a guide for the design, application, and use of signs, colors, and symbols intended to identify and warn against hazards and for other accident prevention purposes. These standards, along with their international counterpart, ISO 3864-2, can be effective starting points in helping you to develop adequate warnings. The standards are intended to be guidelines, not prescriptive instructions for the right symbol or content choices for your product or situation. And, that's why implementation can be tricky; you need to understand the standards and best practices and then apply them in a way that works best for your product and its audience. In this column, we'll look at the practical implications of implementing a "wordless" approach to your safety labels or safety label program.

WHAT ARE "WORDLESS" SAFETY LABELS?

In recent years, safety label formats have progressed to include a more graphic-based approach. When we think about safety labels that use symbols alone, without words, to communicate safety messages, there are two main standards-based options: a "symbol only" approach (a style of label that uses only ISO-formatted symbols without a word message or an ANSI/ISO signal word panel) and a "wordless" approach (a style of label that uses an ISO wordless format, meaning ISO-formatted symbols with a hazard severity panel). In this article, we're focusing primarily on the latter, the wordless format approach.

WHEN TO CONSIDER THIS FORMAT

Your goal is to make your product as safe as possible and to communicate to the user how to safely use the product. To adequately warn, reduce risk, and protect people, as well as follow the applicable best practice standards, you need to consider your product itself (including the types of risk and the physical space on the product for warnings) and your audience (including their skill level, language requirements, and location – whether domestic or international).

"Wordless label formats are able to be used domestically in the U.S. and internationally; they meet both the ANSI Z535.4 and ISO 3864-2 standards. The ANSI Z535.4 standard doesn't specifically include this label format, but ANSI allows manufacturers to use it through its section 3.1.1, which allows for the use of ISO formats," says Angela Lambert, ANSI Z535 committee member and head of standards compliance at Clarion Safety Systems.

The benefits of this type of format are that it can communicate across language barriers without translations, and that these symbols typically use less space than other types of formats. The limitations are that more than one symbol-only label may be needed to communicate the safety message, the severity of the hazard isn't defined, and that symbol comprehension testing or training may be needed.

A CASE IN POINT ON MOVING TOWARDS WORDLESS SAFETY LABELS

It can be challenging to find a balance between providing your product's user with complete safety and hazard information, so that they can make wise decisions, while also being brief and impactful.
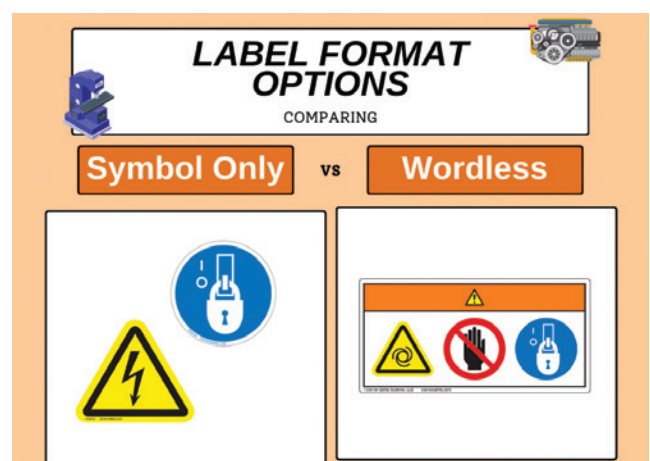

Figure 1: At left, examples of a symbol only approach to labeling and at right, an example of a wordless format label.

"While warnings do need to have complete information so product users can be fully informed, they also have to clearly communicate," Lambert says. "That can be the first hurdle that those responsible for product safety face. The existing labels being used may show a long list of information or too much text, potentially without the use of symbols. That can lead to the warning being illegible or even ignored."

A case in point is shown in Figure 2, in the example at left. The content in the label shown is text-heavy, not well-organized, redundant, and isn't complemented with symbols to call attention and reinforce meaning.

"To optimize the label shown, I'd recommend that either an ANSI-style symbol and text approach or a wordless approach be considered," Lambert says. Examples of these approaches are shown in the middle and right labels of Figure 2. In the ANSI-style symbol and text label, the word message has been simplified to present the information in a more organized and direct way, and standardized symbols have been added. In the wordless approach, a hazard severity panel has been added to color-code and reinforce the level of risk and standardized symbols alone are used to provide details on the hazard.

Lambert continues that when choosing to implement a wordless approach rather than an ANSI-style symbol and text approach, it's important to weigh the pros and cons related to the product and its anticipated audience.

"The wordless approach is acceptable for use domestically in the U.S. and internationally – and certainly has benefits when it comes to communicating across language barriers, without translations. If the aim is to have one format of label that can be used for a variety of markets, wordless format labels may be especially appealing," Lambert says.

"Those striving to implement this format will want to look closely at comprehension concerns. Consider items like use of standardized symbols and comprehension of the symbols used as well as the characteristics of the audience and if warnings are supported by a well-structured, clear and accessible manual that provides further context and instructions."

While there's not one perfect or failsafe solution to labeling or implementing a wordless approach, reviewing the standards and spending time to interpret how best to implement them can help in the journey to create effective, best practice labels, as part of a comprehensive product safety strategy. ℕ
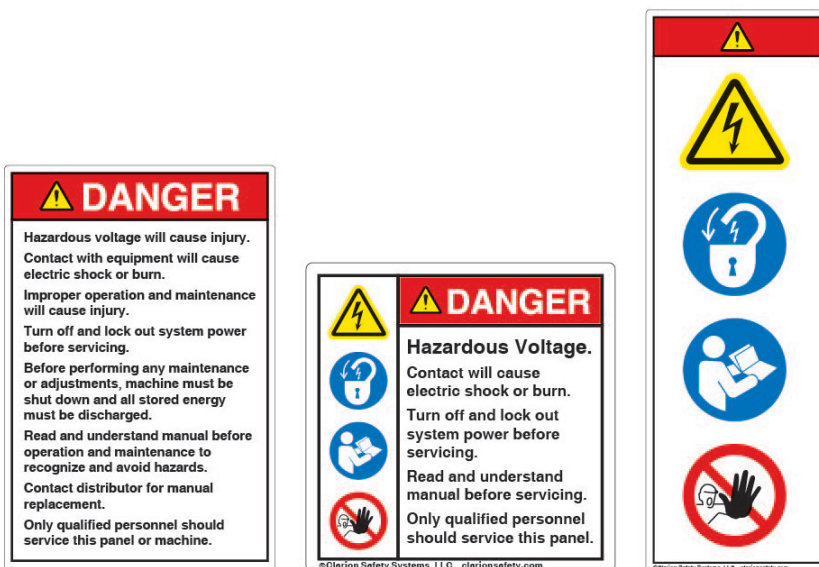

Figure 2: Examples of safety labels that use a word heavy approach (left), an ANSI-style symbol and text approach (middle), and a wordless approach (right).

Erin Earley, head of communications at Clarion Safety Systems, shares her company's passion for safer products and workplaces. She's written extensively about best practices for product safety labels and facility safety signs. Clarion is a member of the ANSI Z535 Committee for Safety Signs and Colors, the U.S. TAG to ISO/TC 145, and the U.S. TAG to ISO 45001. Erin can be reached at eearley@clarionsafety.com.

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