



RISK MANAGEMENT

Fair Warning

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My first impression of the water-safety signage we use in this country is that it is old, antiquated and uncreative. Yet we have been recycling the same signs at aquatics facilities for nearly a century.

While I do not have all the answers, and because there are so many unique aquatic situations, I offer the following suggestions as food for thought. Perhaps readers can come up with their own signage. Too many people either don't read our warnings or claim that they just didn't see them, particularly after they have an accident.



Indeed, there is a lot of important information that should be communicated to our guests at pools, waterparks and beaches, but I strongly believe we are guilty of "sign pollution." That is, we attempt to sign everything and, as a result, don't convey anything. In all types of aquatics facilities, most rules and regulations can be broken down into three major categories:

Information that is NICE to know
Information that SHOULD be known
Information that MUST be known

A major problem is that we attempt to convey all three simultaneously and haphazardly. Just think of the shotgun-blast approach we have: "No Glass," "No Pets," "No Food or Drink," "No Diving," "No one under 12 permitted without a parent," "No cut-offs," "Showers Required before Swimming," etc.

As I see it, the problem is that the MUST information is often lost amid the NICE and SHOULD.

We need to sign against catastrophic injuries more aggressively. Noncatastrophic injuries can, and should, be de-emphasized somewhat because they clutter the landscape and take away from our real, important issues.

Of all the rules, regulations and information we want to sign, there are three "biggies" that should get top billing:

Parents PLEASE watch your children
NO DIVING in shallow water
NO breath-holding or prolonged underwater swimming

At our large, outdoor, 50-meter pool at Penn State University, which is open to the public, these

three warnings have been carefully crafted and hung conspicuously at the entrance to the pool. Our other 18 rules have been downgraded to secondary importance and are now found on a glass-enclosed bulletin board.

Open-water areas do not appear to have nearly the same problem with breath-holding. So, we may want to keep the rules about parents and diving, but replace breath-holding with rip currents or some other dangerous local phenomenon.

Color counts: Red/white and black/white are the traditionally accepted warning colors, although black/yellow is now sometimes used to mimic danger signs found on our highways.

While many prefer red/white for conveying danger, it is important to understand that red will not hold up to the UV rays of the sun. Black lasts almost forever. If you do select red for outdoor warnings, be prepared to repaint annually.

Significant symbols: International DO NOT signs (red circle with diagonal slash through it) also should be used to convey the big dangers. Danger diamonds copied from our highways also can be incorporated into our most important warnings.

The Five C's: Above all, remember the Five C's of signage as you attempt to better communicate important information:

CREATIVE: Stop using the same old, tired, prefabricated signage.

CLEAR: Test the clarity of sample signs with staff and guests before posting them.

CONCISE: Keep it brief, keep it simple, make your point.

CONSPICUOUS: Place the most important signs where they will be read most. Channel foot traffic around these signs, if at all possible.

CONSISTENT: Develop a scheme that uses different colors and symbols for the categories of information you wish to convey: major warning signs, regulatory signs, informational/directional signs.

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[Return to Top](#)

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