



Isn't life tricky? Filled with potholes, loopholes, sinkholes and human threats to peace and safety. Gosh, it's so tricky and even scary that we need a constant stream of reminders and warnings about all those products that otherwise make modern life possible. Caveat emptor indeed.

You probably know by now that I'm a devotee of our military, especially as it served incredibly during World War II, and all the fabled servicemen and women who helped guide us to victory during the years that most threatened our way of life. Within that vaunted crowd, fighter pilots hold a special place for me, and my home library shelves all but groan under the increasing weight of terrific books.

One of my favorites is Daniel Ford's "Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and His American Volunteers, 1941-1942" (Smithsonian Books, 2007). (Despite his French derived name, Colonel Chennault was as American as southern pecan pie, born in Commerce, Texas). Chennault's fighter pilots flew P-40 Tomahawks for the Chinese against Japan before the U.S. entered the war directly. They were very well paid for the times by Chiang Kai-shek and recruited from across America, essentially as mercenaries.

The Japanese were well advised to fear them. In Ford's book is a wonderful photo of the Flying Tigers' "alert shack" in Loiwing, Burma (modern day Myanmar). Oley Olson, Herb Cavanah, Tex Hill, Moose Moss and other squadron mates appear under a warning sign they posted that succinctly read, OLSON & CO., EXTERMINATORS—24 HR. SERVICE." Truth in advertising for sure. (They destroyed at least 115 enemy planes, some estimates running far higher.)

Here's another straight up product warning. I'm talking about your humble butane lighter. A popular Bic model includes a detailed label that warns the user, helpfully, to keep it away from children. It goes on to advise us simple country folks to "ignite lighter away from face and clothing" and to avoid exposing it to heat above 122 degrees. Let's also be sure to heed the

company's advice to never puncture it or "put in fire." Hmmm, no kidding butaneophiles.

So I'm all for truth in advertising and product warnings that offer legitimate cautions which help keep people safe. But there's a downside to providing too much of a good thing. Also known in some cases as taking great pains to cover one's behind. Following are some actual examples that caught my attention recently. As one observer noted,

"Only a moron would try to wash her daughter in a washing machine or light a match to check the contents of a gas tank. And yet manufacturers continue to go to laughable lengths to protect their customers, bombarding them with ridiculous warning labels or stunningly obvious explanations of how their products work."

One of my favorite warnings accompanies sleeping pills. The cautionary label advises that the pills "may cause drowsiness." [Yikes, no kidding!] Or, evidently, they may not, which could cause even bigger problems. We'll have to think about that, sleep on it if the pills don't keep us awake.

Here's another one. With all the storm related downed trees in recent years, often due to extreme winds or heavy icing, many homeowners have made good use of chain saws to clear away the debris. Good thing one manufacturer warned consumers not to hold the wrong end of the saw. While it's on, presumably. And I'm not entirely sure why they didn't just come right out and be really specific about that. (Surely they saw right though attorneys' concerns.)

And how about this one regarding auto sun shields – you know, the kind that use reflective cardboard under the windshield to keep your car cool. We're warned not to drive with the shield in place. Thanks, sun shield makers, who knows how long we would have driven around with the shield in place before crashing into something, maybe that poor fellow about to hold the business end of his chain saw or barbeque his lighter.

The same people who might benefit from these warnings are good candidates for a caution on some cartons of eggs. You guessed it, hapless consumers are advised that "this product may contain eggs." Whew, another close call! These purveyors may be in cahoots with the benevolent folks at W.H. Collins, makers of the vanishing fabric marker. Customers are put on notice that the marker should not be used to sign checks or legal documents. Wonder if law schools are up to speed here and teaching young attorneys-to-be on all the finer points of the law. Maybe we should make a note of this, with conventional pens perhaps.

Warn Me a River

Written by Jack Sparacino

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If I step up the pace here, other warnings may be briefly summarized:

- The Dremel Electric Rotary Tool cautions that the product is not intended as a dental drill.
- Liquid Plummer advises that we not reuse the bottle to store beverages.
- Windex says we shouldn't spray it in our eyes.
- Arm & Hammer Scoopable Cat Litter notes that the product is safe to use around pets.
- Endust Duster reminds us that it is not defined as flammable by the Consumer Products Safety Commission regulations. However, "this product can be ignited under certain circumstances."
- RCA has marketed a TV remote control that is "Not Dishwasher Safe."
- Komatsu's floodlight explains that "this floodlight is capable of illuminating large areas, even in the dark." [Dark and spooky too?]
- Rowenta's iron warns us to "never iron clothes on body." [Really? Never?]
- And perhaps my favorite, Nabisco Easy Cheese's sage advice: "For best results, remove cap."

Who was it that said that a fool and his money are soon parted? Maybe the same guy who

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recommended (for real) that a hair coloring manufacturer let us know we should not use their product as an ice cream topping. [Oh, you're out of hot fudge?] And that Stridex Foaming Face Wash "may contain foam."

Back to the actual real world for a moment. Arriving at Belk's last week, my arthritic feet acted up especially badly, making it very painful for me to walk around the store once I got inside. I desperately commandeered a nice young man in the men's department, gave him my size and asked him to please find me two shirts and a pair of shorts. Would a warning sign or sticker on my hat have helped? "Caution: Old Timer with Really Bad Feet, Getting Pretty Cranky, Needs A Few Things But Can't Walk Easily, Can You Help!" Or more simply, "Please help, need shirts, have Belk's card!"

I'll bet we could get some young techie to develop a small programmable electronic (LED?) sign to go on your hat or shirtfront; you know, something like the scoreboards at major league ballparks only in miniature. No pyrotechnics necessary (nothing to catch fire), or cheerleaders (no labor issues), no hotdog vendors (FDA concerns). It'll need a label inside, right? How about one inspired by the Easy Cheese wizards: "for best results, don't remove cap."

What could possibly go wrong?