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Cigarette warning labels that combine powerful images and messages found more effective at getting smokers to think of quitting

Cigarette-pack warning labels that combine graphic images with lengthier explanations of the dangers of smoking were found to be more effective than images or brief warnings alone at convincing smokers to consider quitting, a new study has found.

The study, by researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania and at the Ohio State University, tested more than 2,600 people with eight combinations of warnings and images. It found that using photos or illustrations with the lengthier, “elaborated text” was a more powerful deterrent than the simple warnings featured on the side of cigarette packs or those short warnings accompanied by images.

The study says the U.S. Food and Drug Administration “lost a crucial opportunity” to “enhance the impact of their warning labels” by not including the elaborated text, which expands on the brief warnings now on cigarette packs. Canadian health authorities approved labels with elaborated text and graphics in 2000.

“This study shows that the combination of images and lengthier text warnings appeals both to the emotional and the thoughtful sides of smokers,” said Dan Romer, a researcher at the Annenberg Public Policy Center who co-authored the study. “The images increased smokers’ worries about their health, while the text messages strengthened the overall believability of the warning. Both of those made smokers think more positively about quitting.”

The Food and Drug Administration’s proposal for graphic warning-label images on cigarette packs is on hold. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia struck down the F.D.A.’s proposals for graphic-image warning labels in August 2012 as a violation of the First Amendment right to corporate free speech by tobacco companies. The F.D.A.-proposed labels featured short text warnings and images, including a diseased lung and a smoker with a tracheotomy. The court said that “the images do not convey *any* warning information at all ... [and] are unabashed attempts to evoke emotion (and perhaps embarrassment) and browbeat consumers into quitting.”

“The court ruling criticized the warning labels as lacking information and seeking to scare smokers into quitting,” Romer said. “Our analysis suggests that combining a powerful image with a powerful message is the most effective path to deterring smoking.”

Among those people who were less worried about their health, the elaborated text warnings played an especially important role, because they enhanced the believability of the labels and strengthened feelings toward quitting smoking.

The study, published in August 2013 in *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*, was the first to examine the contribution of elaborated text on the labels. A label using such text shows a cartoon image of a baby with the text: “Warning: Smoking During Pregnancy Can Harm Your Baby.” Underneath the image, it also includes the words: “Every cigarette you smoke during pregnancy reduces the growth of your baby and increases the risks of infant illness, disability, and death.”

Another example shows a graphic image – a cigarette being held against someone’s arm as if it were a hypodermic needle – with the text, “Warning! Cigarettes Are Addictive.” The version with expanded text continues: “Cigarettes Are Addictive. Studies have shown that tobacco can be harder to quit than heroin or cocaine.”

The abstract and study can be found here:

<http://ntr.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/08/13/ntr.ntt124.abstract>

The study was based on an Internet survey of 2,648 people who were interviewed in 2010. In groups of approximately 300, they were assigned one of eight different cigarette warning-label designs. Two different main designs were tested, each in four variations: basic text only; basic text plus an image; and basic text, image, and two versions of the elaborated text.

The **Annenberg Public Policy Center** (<http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org>) was established in 1994 to educate the public and policy makers about the media’s role in advancing public understanding of political and health issues at the local, state and federal levels.