The Semiotics of a Smile:

Signs of Failure on Public Trails in Dallas, TX

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ABSTRACT

Should a warning sign make one smile? To put it another way, can a warning sign be perceived as such—or even taken seriously—if the warning is communicated in a cheerful way?

A series of signs installed in 2011 along hike-and-bike trails in Dallas, Texas appears to be testing this hypothesis. Officially known as the "Happy Trails" campaign, the signs feature stylized green and orange pictograms that resemble cheerful, smiling faces combined with phrases such as "listen for others" and "look both ways."

Although intended to promote positive reinforcement of safe trail behaviors, the signs have received a surprising amount of negative feedback from Dallas citizens, journalists and at least one city council member, who have all voiced frustration at the signs' use of the "incomprehensible," smile-based pictograms. Indeed, in a busy public area such as a hike-and-bike trail — where tens of thousands of people per day may be cycling, jogging, skating, pushing strollers, walking their dogs or just walking — speed of comprehension is imperative so that the various types of trail users interacting in this environment can easily understand the sign-based messages and respond accordingly.

In this chapter, factors influencing the effectiveness of warnings are studied, as well as the role of semiotics and the effective use of standardized, sign-based

pictograms as exemplified by the Federal Highway Administration's Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices.

INTRO

"A picture may be worth a thousand words, but when it comes to graphical symbols for safety-related information, misunderstanding the message may have serious consequences."
— International Organization for Standardization, 2004, press release issued re: ISO #7010 (http://www.iso.org/iso/pressrelease.htm?refid=Ref907)

Should a warning sign make one smile? To put it another way, can a warning sign be perceived as such—or even taken seriously—if the warning is communicated in a cheerful way?

A series of signs installed in 2011 along the 100+ miles of hike-and-bike trails in Dallas, Texas appears to be testing this hypothesis, by eschewing the traditional practice of utilizing a simple-to-interpret, predominantly denotative system of symbols to communicate safety messages in favor of one that is more semiotically complex and predominantly connotative.

Officially known as the "Happy Trails" campaign, these signs feature stylized green and orange pictograms that resemble cheerful, smiling faces combined with phrases such as "listen for others" and "look both ways." Reminiscent of the iconic, yellow Smiley of American pop culture (see Figure 1), each "face" is slightly different, depending on the text it is paired with.

Figure 1: Harvey Ball, Signature Smiley (1963)

For example, the pictogram that is shown with the message "safe speed" is created by pairing a stylized profile rendered in green of a person riding a bicycle (the wheels of which are rendered to also be perceived as eyes) with a curved orange line placed below these forms to represent a mouth (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: "Happy Trails" signs photographed by the author.

To some trail users, the signs have appeared "whimsical," "clever" and "fun to figure out." (Betz, 2011b, Joiner et al, 2011). However, busy public spaces such as Dallas' hike-and-bike trails—where tens of thousands of people per day (Fisher, 2011) may be cycling, jogging, skating, pushing strollers[1], walking their dogs or just walking — are not ideal environments for safety messages that require "figuring out."

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[1] Also known as baby carriages or perambulators in Great Britain.

In her article "We Need Real Bike Paths for Real Bike Transportation," Elly Blue cites data that indicates how and why multi-use paths are actually more dangerous than major roads (Blue, 2010) because of the eclectic mix of people, vehicles and animals traveling in close proximity to each other at varying speeds. This provides a rationale to support the contention that the signs that guide and warn trail users ought to be designed so that they can be quickly and effectively comprehended and acted upon.

A close, critical observation of the *Happy Trails* system of signs undertaken between November of 2011 and February of 2012 revealed that many assumptions appear to have been made about the ease with which its diverse audiences would be able to interpret the imagery depicted on the signs. This observation also reveals the likelihood that not enough critical thought was given to how the nature of the signs' environment would affect their perception. The designers of this system would likely have benefited from following the many well-informed and standardized signage examples laid out in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), but they apparently chose to allow visual cleverness to trump ease of comprehension.

HISTORY

The events and rationales that informed the design of the *Happy Trails* signs are compelling, and reveal several key insights about how they came to be formally configured as they are. In October 2010, a female cyclist riding on Dallas' popular Katy Trail (a paved, 3.5-mile hike-and-bike trail winding through Dallas' trendy Uptown neighborhood) collided with a jogger who made an unexpected u-turn in front of her. Although the cyclist sustained only minor injuries, the jogger suffered a severe head wound and died a few days later (Vega, 2011). The event immediately made headlines in the local media, and brought a "long-simmering feud" between Dallas' cyclists and joggers to the attention of city officials (Betz, 2010). In response to the public outcry and what quickly became a very public and emotionally charged debate between these two groups, the Dallas Parks Department formed a Trail Safety Advisory Council and announced plans to

launch a comprehensive safety-awareness initiative in the hope of better educating trail users "so they can share the space safely" (Simnacher, 2011b).

Within a matter of days after the accident, the City had selected a local advertising agency—Jake:Ferguson—to design and produce the campaign, and in May of 2011 (seven months later) the empirically smile-based "Happy Trails" signs began to be installed (Simnacher, 2011a).

In addition to the signs, the agency created a series of television and radio commercials featuring the iconic 1950s American western swing tune, "Happy Trails," which was written and popularized by American television and film cowboy-couple Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. The TV spots, which introduced the signs, depicted various Katy Trail users—including some local celebrities such as Mark Cuban (owner of the Dallas Mavericks[2]) and the Dallas Cowboys' cheerleaders[3]—all happily walking, jogging and cycling along the Katy Trail. In addition, the agency created several radio commercials, a social media campaign, and a website with trail maps, safety tips and helpful links (Simnacher, 2011a).

The overarching goal of this campaign, according to officials, was to increase safety awareness along Dallas hike-and-bike trails through "positive reinforcement" (Betz, 2011b), a tactic that is fully supported by the Federal Highway Administration's Recreational Trails Program.[4] However, while positive reinforcement of safety messages is a worthwhile endeavor, it is imperative that trail users be able to correctly interpret the messages that are being communicated — and, according to media interviews with users conducted just after the designs were unveiled, interpretation was a very serious problem.

SIGNS OF FAILURE

"Successful design, whether of solid or intangible things, rests on anticipating how failure can or might occur."

- Henry Petroski, 2006, *Success Through Failure* (Princeton University Press)

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[2] A Dallas-based, professional basketball team and winners of the 2011 NBA (National Basketball Association) finals.
[3] ,Affiliated with the local National Football League team.
[4] The FHA's 12 Principals for Minimizing Conflicts on Multi-Use Trails states that "Providing positive interactions both on and off the trail will help break down barriers and stereotypes, and build understanding, good will, and cooperation" (Moore, 2004).

In early 2011, Dallas trail users got a "sneak peek" at the new signs, and the feedback, according to several Dallas newspaper articles, turned out to be overwhelmingly negative. Various trail users were quoted as saying the signs seemed "confusing," "cluttered," "incomprehensible" and even "stupid." Some interviewees said they were "difficult to look at" and that the images reminded them of a "funny monkey face" (Betz, 2011b, Wilonsky, 2011b). Even city council member Angela Hunt worried about the signs' potential for failure, saying "If it's confusing people, it's not doing the job. It needs to be effective over being cute and clever" (Betz, 2011a).

Several commenters opined that the puzzle-like pictograms would be more appropriate in an ad campaign than on warning signage, and lamented that the campaign was created by an advertising agency instead of a wayfinding firm (Wilonsky, 2011a). But Dallas Parks' board president Mike Rawlings (who also happened to be running for mayor of Dallas at the time) was quick to defend the department's decision to hire Jake:Ferguson. In an official statement addressing the public backlash (released just a few days before the mayoral election was to take place), Rawlings pointed out that "the creative director for Jake:Ferguson is nationally-recognized for creating the Crash Test Dummies seatbelt campaign[5] for the U.S. Department of Transportation, and to get this level of experience for our safety campaign was a win for the Parks Department" (Wilonsky, 2011b).

However, experience in advertising does not equate to experience in the design of safety signage systems, and Rawlings' statement, although meant to deflect the mounting criticism from the Dallas media and the public, seemed to reveal a critical lack of knowledge about the difference between the types of knowledge and skill sets required to design effective signs and those required to develop effective advertising campaigns.

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[5] The well-known American "Crash Test Dummies" advertising campaign, developed in 1985, featured two talking crash-test dummies named Vince and Larry who "dramatized what could happen [to you] when you don't wear a seatbelt" while driving. ("Seat Belt," 2003)

Even more damaging news surfaced in April of 2011, creating such a backlash that it threatened to derail Rawlings' bid for mayor. In an exposé by Brett Shipp, a reporter for News 8 in Dallas, it was revealed that Rawlings and the owners of Jake:Ferguson were longtime friends, and that the $82,000, taxpayer-funded contract that paid for the design of this now critically panned signage system had been offered to the agency *without* competitive bids being solicited from any other firms[6] (Shipp, 2011). Citizens, journalists and (not surprisingly) mayoral challengers were all quite vocal in their disapproval, chastising Rawlings for his poor judgment and questionable ethical decision-making (Medina, 2011, "Rawlings," 2011, Shipp, 2011, Thompson and Bush, 2011 and Wilonsky, 2011c), but these critics stopped just short of using the word "nepotism" in their harangues.

Rawlings was quick to release a statement in response to the criticism by arguing that it had ultimately been the City's choice to commission Jake:Ferguson to design the signage system, and that he was only responsible for *recommending* them (Wilonsky, 2011b). Nevertheless, City Auditor Craig Kinton, council member Ron Natinsky and then-Mayor Dwayne Caraway responded by announcing plans to facilitate an official investigation of the Parks Department's hiring practices (Shipp, 2011, Wilonsky, 2011c). Interestingly, media coverage of Rawlings' involvement seems to have stopped on May 14, 2011 — the day of the mayoral election. It is unclear if this investigation ever actually took place and Rawlings was successfully elected Mayor of Dallas.

It is plausible to argue that Rawlings and the City of Dallas, wanting to respond quickly to the public outcry for action to be taken to ensure the safety of trail users following the jogger's death, may have taken the path of least resistance "to get something done" by hiring a friend whom they thought had the expertise necessary to do the job well. It is also possible that the pre-election timing of this series of events and Rawlings' probable desire for the public to view him as a viable mayoral candidate may have played a role in determining the speed with

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[6] According to City of Dallas purchasing regulations, professional service contracts worth more than $25,000 must be opened to public competition (Shipp, 2011).

which Jake:Ferguson was hired. For whatever reason, all parties involved appear to have to failed to consult the substantial amount of data available regarding how people in public spaces (such as hike-and-bike trails), especially when they are moving, cognitively process sign-based messages.

There are several key factors a designer or a design team must account for when creating signage for these areas (especially when that signage is communicating safety awareness and the potential for bodily injury) that appear *not* to have been considered during the design process that eventually yielded the *Happy Trails* signs.

In "Factors influencing the effectiveness of warnings" Michael Wogalter (1999) points out that much of the research about how people process warning messages can be organized into a sequential process model based on ideas gleaned from cognitive psychology (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Michael Wogalter's "human information processing model showing a sequence of stages leading to compliance behavior" (Wogalter, 1999)

This model is useful not only for "organizing the factors that influence the effectiveness of warnings," but can be utilized to explain *why* a warning message could fail to achieve the intended goals of "informing people about the hazard and promoting safe behavior." (Wogalter, 1999). He also notes that before the intended change in behavior can occur, processing of the warning must effectively advance through each of the successive factors. The effect of the first two factors on users' ability to comprehend the intended meanings of the various signs that comprise the *Happy Trails* systems will be examined most closely, as they appear to play the most significant causal roles in this scenario.

ATTENTION

The first criterion for success that any sign must satisfy is to be visually arresting

enough to be noticed (Mollerup, 2005). Considering several users' comments that revealed that they did not notice the *Happy Trails* signs after their installation was completed in April of 2011, even after multiple visits, (Simnacher, 2011a), reveals an early bottleneck in the stages leading to compliance behavior articulated in Wogalter's chart. In comparison to the standardized traffic signs that Americans have come to traditionally associate with warnings (such as bright yellow, triangular shapes that contain bold, black, sans serif text and/or pictograms), the *Happy Trails* signs seem visually inconspicuous and do not connote a tone of urgency.

Wogalter describes several factors that can aid noticeability. First, warning messages and graphics must contrast significantly with their background (dark forms on a light background, or light forms on a dark background). The typeface should be relatively large and bold, so that the signs are attention-getting regardless of whether they are placed in sunny or shaded locations. This is especially important when considering the varying speeds at which individuals in the target audiences may be moving, and also considering how their relative speeds affect the time required to both notice and then comprehend the message. For example, on the Katy Trail and Dallas' longer and also heavily trafficked White Rock Lake Trail—two locations where the *Happy Trails* signs are installed—the lighting conditions vary widely. Some areas get full sun throughout the day, while other areas are partially covered by trees or bamboo, and still others are totally shaded (Joiner et al, 2011).

Second, the use of color is integral to making safety-related messages stand out in environments where they must compete effectively with visual clutter — not only in terms of the issues of contrast, but also with regard to the meanings that certain colors convey to select groups within larger populations (Wogalter, 1999, Flink et al, 2001). For example, section 1A.12 of the MUTCD (2009) establishes a list of 11 colors they have identified as being "appropriate for use in conveying traffic control information," such as the use of red, orange and yellow on the backgrounds of traffic signs to alert drivers to potentially hazardous areas. These particular hues, along with their relative chromas and values, have come to be associated with different levels of alerts or warning messages through what

Donald Norman, in *The Design of Everyday Things* (2002), refers to as the theory of "multiple-exposure," which explains that through repeated viewings of an object or a consistently-designed family of objects, audiences come to associate a certain formal design treatment or language with a certain type of message. Therefore, a red, orange or yellow background on a particular genre of signage, even if seen only for a fraction of a second, can quickly convey that the sign contains a message of potential danger and should be heeded. In the case of the *Happy Trails* signs, the combination of high chroma, pure-hued orange and green images on a white background is neither as high-contrast as it could be, nor does it connote the potential for danger or injury to audiences accustomed to viewing American road warning signs.

Third, designers must consider the activities and characteristics of the target population that will need to recognize and act upon the messages conveyed by the signs (Wogalter, 1999). Public trails in Dallas, as in other major metropolitan areas, attract a wide range of people of different ages who use these spaces in a variety of ways. In a recent study performed on the Katy Trail during peak usage hours, researchers observed the following types of users: walkers (alone and in groups, with and without strollers, with and without dogs or children), joggers (alone and in groups, with and without strollers, with and without dogs), cyclists (alone and in groups, moving at a variety of speeds) and in-line skaters (alone and in groups, with and without dogs). There are also several rest areas and intersections where these some of these users tend to stop and talk, stretch, or drink water (or some combination of these), which can create a hazard for the other still-mobile users who must maneuver around them (Joiner et al, 2011). Thus, in this potentially crowded and busy environment, it is imperative that the utmost consideration be given to the design of safety-related signs if they are to be noticed, much less acted upon effectively.

When considering how to affect the behavioral characteristics of a large, predominantly mobile target audience in a confined environment like a hike-and-bike trail, designers must assume that the different types of people who constitute this audience will possess varying levels of sensory and interpretive abilities. For example, the designers must account for the sensory limitations of older users, as

well as the abilities of non-English-speaking users to interpret whatever language is used on the signs (the 2010 U.S. census revealed that 53% of the adult population of Texas speaks Spanish as a first or second language). Regarding the latter, it seems that the *Happy Trails* designers did factor in Dallas' large Latino population (42%, according to the 2011 census), and provided Spanish-language versions of the signs on their website. However, *actual* Spanish-language signs on the trails themselves are literally few and far between. On the 3.5-mile-long Katy Trail, only one of the 10 signs posted is in Spanish. And along the *nine* miles of trail around Dallas' White Rock Lake (where, interestingly, there are only *six* total signs), only *one* Spanish-language sign exists (according to observations made by the author on May 14, 2012).

COMPREHENSION

Once a warning message has successfully captured the attention of the viewer, it must be quickly and easily understood so that he or she can make an informed decision about how to respond to it. As stated in the previous sub-section, this is even more important—and more difficult—when viewers are in motion, or are in a crowded environment. Sign designers must consider that within the broad set of target audiences that constitutes public trail users, cognition levels and cultural backgrounds can vary widely, and what seems like "common sense" to some viewers may not seem so to others. Therefore, assumptions of any kind must be avoided (Wogalter, 1999, Laughery, 1993).

One common misconception made by designers is that everyone in the target audience (or target audiences) understands the need for a particular warning sign as well as he or she does (Wogalter, 1999). In the case of the *Happy Trails* signs, the designers may have assumed their audiences were already familiar with proper trail etiquette (such as the practice of bicyclists "calling left" on U.S. trails to announce their presence to pedestrians[7]), or that the audience would have already visited the *Happy Trails* website (happytrailstexas.org) and had read and

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[7] In America, common cycling etiquette dictates that bicyclists announce their presence to slower-moving traffic such as pedestrians and joggers by calling out "passing on your left," or a similarly-worded phrase, as they approach.

remembered the explanations of the signs' meanings, or possibly that the audience had seen and remembered the commercials that briefly aired on television around the time the signs were installed. The designers may have also failed to consider how the potential scenarios of use on the trails would be different for tourists and other first-time trail users (who may lack knowledge of proper trail etiquette as well as the potential dangers associated with traveling on a multi-use trail). As the fourth-largest metropolitan area in the U.S., Dallas attracts an extremely large number of tourists every year — more than 28 million, according to the Dallas Convention and Visitors' Bureau (Dallas… Just the Facts, 2010) — and it's logical to assume that a percentage of this population will visit at least some portion of Dallas' extensive network of hike-and-bike trails while they are in town.

Designers may also wrongly assume that all members of a given target audience or audiences have the same level of cognitive ability. But people who lack strong language skills (such as children, those with limited education, and those without robust knowledge of the language in which a given message is written) (Wogalter, 1999) can find it difficult to correctly interpret a sign-based message whose meaning is not explicit—especially when there is a visual component, such as a pictogram, that must be deciphered in order to effectively convey the intended meaning. When designing pictograms, it is important to remember that each of the images chosen to create a given pictogram, as well as the visual gestalts that occur when two or more of these are combined, can and will be interpreted both denotatively (the literal meaning of the symbols used) and connotatively (the variety of meanings that are associated with particular symbols and their combinations).

But even those familiar with the "language of pictograms," as it has been applied to signage systems since Otto Neurath and Gerd Arntz introduced the ISOTYPE[8] within them in the 1930s (Hartmann, 2008), can be confused by the *Happy Trails* signs. At first glance, the smiley-faced designs appear clean and simple, and bear a stylistic resemblance to the pictograms used throughout the U.S. Department of Transportation's system of traffic and wayfinding signage. For example, the

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[8] International System of Typographic Picture Education

pictogram on the "Safe Speed" sign[9] shows a simple human silhouette that is similar to the ubiquitous figure used on men's restroom signs throughout the US and around the world. Because of this, the signs (again, at first glance) seem to connote a sense of familiarity and simplicity, and trail users may wrongly assume that interpretation of the *Happy Trails* signs will be similarly quick, easy and effectively actionable.

Another potentially dangerous assumption that may have been made by the *Happy Trails* designers is that viewers of this system of signs would find the images as easy to interpret as the ones in use by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT). But the USDOT's current library of pictograms (select examples of which are depicted in Figure 4) was produced only after decades of testing and refining (beginning with Neurath's and Arntz's ISOTYPEs), and their now-familiar associations are facilitated not only because of their finely-tuned simplicity, but because of the aforementioned process of their audiences' repeated exposure to these pictograms in particular environments that have been specifically designed to facilitate particular types of experiences.

Figure 4: Examples of the passenger/pedestrian symbols designed by the AIGA for the U.S. Department of Transportation (Symbol Signs, 2012).

In *Visualizing Social Facts: Otto Neurath's ISOTYPE Project*, Frank Hartmann warns that when a new pictogram is introduced to an audience, its intended meaning can sometimes be misinterpreted, and "although there are certain signs which relate to certain objects… the implications for meaning become extremely complex when we combine them" (Hartmann, 2008).

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[9] It seems that the designers also assumed that trail users would have prior knowledge of what constitutes "safe speed" on Dallas trails; no actual speed limits are posted.

For example, the pictogram on the *Happy Trails* sign that attempts to convey the message "Listen for Others" (see Figure 5) does not depict the act of listening at all, but instead attempts to compose a smiley face by combining a pair of linked musical notes for the eyes and what appears to be a type of graphical volume slider for the mouth. Perhaps the designer meant to communicate a message of turning down the volume on a portable music player, but the time and cognition required to reach this conclusion requires more than a quick glance, and anything more than a quick glance is a luxury and even a safety hazard on a busy trail — especially for joggers and cyclists.

Figure 5: "Happy Trails" sign
photographed by the author.

Additionally, the motif of a smiling "face" seems to further reinforce the connotation of familiarity, friendliness and simplicity. This can be attributed to the pictograms' resemblance to the aforementioned yellow Smiley from American pop culture, recognized around the world as a symbol of happiness (Trumble, 2004). Considering the original goal of promoting positivity on the trails, the motif at first seems conceptually appropriate. But when one considers that the true goal of safety signage should be to alert and warn audiences to the potential for danger — which is not usually a situation that lends itself to smiling — in the clearest possible way, the presence of a smiling face may actually present trail users with a significant cognitive stumbling block.

SIGNS, SEMIOTICS AND MEANING-MAKING

"A sign is quite simply a thing—whether object, word, or picture—which has a particular meaning to a person or group of people. It is neither the thing nor the meaning alone, but the two together." (Williamson, 1983)

In *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, Crow (2003) describes the work of Saussure and Peirce in the early 1900s, which focused on how the components of a sign enable us to turn "signals, in whatever form they appear, into a message which we can understand." The underlying principles of their studies, which came to be known as semiotics, can be broken down into three main areas: 1) the signs themselves; 2) the way they are organized into systems and 3) the context in which they appear (Crow, 2003).

For Saussure and Peirce, as well as modern-day semioticians, signs will either succeed or fail depending on the meaning that audiences form from the signs. As mentioned previously, sign designers must consider the characteristics and backgrounds of *everyone* in their target audience, and all the myriad ways in which they may interpret a sign by drawing from their cultural or personal experiences to create meaning. Norman (2002) underscores this line of thinking in *The Design of Everyday Things* when he describes how the process of thought "relies heavily on the experiences of life." And Crow (2003) puts it even more simply, by saying "the meaning of any sign is affected by who is reading the sign."

In the design of signs, there is no such thing as "common sense," and as stated earlier, what may seem like common sense to one viewer will seem so to another. This is supported not only by Saussure and Peirce's studies in semiotics, but also by Pierre Bourdieu's assertions concerning the pre-existing beliefs contained in the mind of the viewer, or "habitus," which can also be described as the "combination of contexts, social and historical in origin, that constitute meaning" (Browitt, 2004). For Bourdieu, the process of meaning-making always requires both common sense *and* practical sense, or the operation of the "unreflexive habits that involve neither will nor intention" (Browitt, 2004), and designers of signs would do well to follow this line of thinking.

For designers working in the consumer or business-to-business sectors, creativity and differentiation are keys to helping a piece of visual communication stand out from its competition, therefore establishing a unique and memorable sense of meaning, or "brand," in the mind of the viewer. Once the brand has been established, it is imperative that all pieces of the campaign remain visually and conceptually loyal to the brand's original guidelines, so that the brand and its associated meaning remains constant no matter what environment the pieces are viewed within.

One could extend this thinking to the genre of standardized traffic signage design, wherein strict adherance to the "brand guidelines" set forth in the MUTCD are required in order to ensure that the original meaning may be accurately and effectively conveyed. When designers ignore these guidelines and create their own original "campaign" of signs, the brand's original message is lost. For example, in the instance of the Smiley-based *Happy Trails* signs, the MUTCD's traditional message of "follow these rules or you may be injured" seems to have been replaced by "there's nothing to worry about, so smile and have fun."

WHY THE SMILEY SIGNIFIES HAPPINESS
Since the early 1970s, the simple, round, yellow Smiley, with its black oval eyes and upturned mouth, has been an inextricable part of American pop culture, as well as a familiar signifier of simple happiness and contentment. In recent years, the connotation has been further reinforced by the widespread use of emoticons that have formally co-opted aspects of the Smiley for use in emails and text messages.

Though its exact origins are fuzzy, most historians credit the Smiley's design to a commercial artist named Harvey Ball. In 1963, Ball sketched the now-familiar cartoonish, yellow face for the State Mutual Life Insurance Company in Worcester, MA, who needed a logo to help raise employee morale following a merger. Interestingly, neither he nor his client ever trademarked the illustration,

and seven years later, entrepreneurial brothers Bernard and Murray Spain began printing it, along with the phrase "Have a Nice Day" on thousands of cheap, collectible items such as buttons, coffee mugs, greeting cards, shirts, and bumper stickers. Sales of the buttons alone quickly surpassed 50 million (Adams, 1993), and a year later the Smiley was "the hottest selling image in the country" (About Smiley, 2012).

But the success wasn't just a random fad. Although the 1970s in America may be remembered as a time of peace and love, it's important to revisit what occurred in the previous decade in the U.S. and in southeast Asia that gave rise to this culture. By the time the Smiley hit the market in late 1970, the United States was desperately in need of some positivity. A string of negative events in the 60s, such as the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, his brother Senator Robert Kennedy, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. — combined with race riots in several cities, the unpopular U.S. war in Vietnam and the repeated exposure to the graphic, full-color photographs of it being published in every major periodical — all contributed to the low cultural morale. Americans may have embraced the simple, happiness-inducing Smiley as a way to help them deal with with the psychological trauma of the era, by acting as a trigger to activate viewers' "emotionally-charged memories" of previous positive experiences such as happy thoughts of childhood (Scott & Batra, 2003).

To further highlight the connotations of the Smiley to feelings of happiness and contentment, one must also consider its even-more-ubiquitous and younger digital cousin, the typographic-based "emoticon," whose use to communicate emotion in modern internet-based messages was first suggested in 1982 by Scott Fahlman at Carnegie-Mellon University. In a 2007 survey conducted by Yahoo! Messenger (the third most popular instant-messaging platform), 82% of the 40,000 respondents said they use emoticons daily in their instant messages. Of those, 83% said the "happiness" or Smiley emoticon (made by combining a colon followed by a right-parenthesis) was the most-used ("Emoticon," 2007).

All this seems to point to the possibility that the ubiquitous Smiley, whether in cartoon or typographic form, has become so ingrained in the American

vernacular that we accept it at, no pun intended, face value. Simply stated, it is widely accepted that a Smiley communicates happiness. And when this image appears in unexpected places, such as on warning signage, it can be a catalyst for confusion.

SIGNS OF LAZINESS

Another "reason" why the *Happy Trails* signs do not conform to any standardized guidelines, according to Willis Winters, Assistant Director of the Parks Department, was that there seemed to be a lack of good examples upon which to model the system. Winters was quoted by the Dallas Morning News as saying "we've not found anything other than different municipalities' reaction to a trail incident where they imposed a speed limit on the trail. That's the safety campaign: posting a speed limit" (Simnacher, 2011a). As stated previously, the *Happy Trails* campaign does not include a speed limit, but does emphasize "safe speeds."

This begs a question regarding how Winters is defining the phrase "safety campaign." If he is referring to a traditional advertising campaign that can involve multiple methods of communication (in this instance: television, radio, social media and signage), then his statement may be true. Otherwise, it seems Winters and the Parks Department simply did not do their homework. There are in fact many examples (such as the ones found on Americantrails.org) of successful safety signage campaigns in use across the U.S., most of which follow the aforementioned federal and international standards for the design of safety signage set forth by the MUTCD and the ISO.

Since its debut in 1935, the MUTCD has been instrumental in shaping public perceptions of traffic safety in the U.S., as well as expectations about how safety messages are and should be communicated visually. Its standards for color, shape, typeface, size and sign placement have all been thoroughly researched, tested and periodically updated to ensure that the necessary scenario-based messages are communicated quickly and that they require as little cognitive effort on the parts of their target audiences as possible. According to the U.S

Department of Transportation, these standards were put in place so that traffic signs would uniformly be "visible, recognizable, and understandable" (MUTCD Overview, 2012), thereby reducing the possiblity of accidents. Simply put, it is their denotative simplicity that reduces the potential for serious accidents due to misinterpretation, which could in turn instigate dangerous behavior.

As mentioned previously, the most recognizable examples of MUTCD's standards in use can be seen in the road and highway signage across the U.S. In addition to these, the MUTCD also includes very clear design standards for systems of signs to be used on shared-use paths such as hike-and-bike trails. Section 9 of the MUTCD, "Traffic Control for Bicycle Facilities," includes standards for shared-use paths that are nearly identical to those of roadway signage. For example, Section 9 depicts and describes warning signs for bicycle facilities that are configured using the same highly-visible combination of yellow backgrounds with black, sans serif text and symbols that are depicted and described in Section 2 of the MUTCD, which is the section on design standards for general traffic warning signs (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Richard C. Mouer, from the Manual of Traffic Signs (http://www.trafficsign.us)

It's important to note here that if the MUTCD's guidelines were followed as

closely by public-trail-signage designers as they are by those who produce road and highway signage, the resulting consistency could be instrumental in raising safety awareness and reducing the chance for accidents on public trails. But in its list of professional organizations that use the standards set forth in the MUTCD, no trail-safety organizations, either nationally- or locally-based, are listed.

IN CLOSING

As previously stated, a crowded public trail is not the ideal environment for posting safety messages that require extra time and cognitive engagement in order to decode. With signage design, especially safety signage, the intended meaning must be made immediately clear. Any chance of arbitrariness must be resolved through what Norman (2002) calls "meaningful structure." This is even more important when safety signage is located in a busy environment such as a multi-use public trail, where a complex array of mobile viewers can be simultaneously competing for space within its confined boundaries.

According to Norman, when there is a lack of meaningful structure and interpretation is difficult, our brains tend to search our memory banks to try to form a relationship between what we're seeing and what we can recognize from our past. In the case of the *Happy Trails* signage, trail users (having only a split-second to notice the signs) may only recognize a smiling face. If this is the case, then the only meaning conveyed is one of happiness, *not* of potential danger. And even though this tone of positivity may be what the City of Dallas and the agency hired to design the signs wanted to convey, it seems that too many assumptions were made as to whether or not trail users even understood what it was they were supposed to be happy about.

City officials—not only in Dallas, but across the U.S.—should consider enacting and enforcing strict penalties upon trail-safety signage designers who do not follow the standards laid out in the MUTCD, so that the messages communicated by trail signs are clear both because of their "meaningful structure" supplied by the decades of research that went into the designs, as well as the fact that they are visually and culturally recognized (even when seen only for a split second) as

part of the genre of "warning signs."

In the case of the *Happy Trails* campaign, it seems that the failures can be traced back to the original goal of "positive reinforcement," but positive reinforcement cannot work unless the audience knows and understands what it is that is being reinforced. Considering that the original reason for this system of signs was to address a seeming lack of knowledge of proper trail behavior that resulted in a death, are Dallas trail users, a year after the signs were installed, more aware of the inherent dangers? Or are they just happy to be on the trails?

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Image credits:

Figure 1: Ball, H. (1963)*,* Signature Smiley®

Figure 2: "Happy Trails" signs photographed by the author

Figure 3: Wogalter, M. (1999). Human information processing model showing a sequence of stages leading to compliance behavior, from Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Warnings. *Visual Information for Everyday Use: Design and Research Perspectives.* Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, Inc. 96.

Figure 4: American Institute of Graphic Arts (1979). Symbol Signs. Retrieved from http://www.aiga.org/symbol-signs/

Figure 5: "Happy Trails" sign photographed by the author

Figure 6: Mouer, R. C. (2005). Manual of Traffic Signs. Retrieved from http://www.trafficsign.us