

Could, Would, Should and Can Which Word Should Be Used in Label Comprehension Testing?

In the broader context of label comprehension testing, there will always be an unresolved issue on where the responsibility of the communicator ends and the consumer's responsibility begins. It is interesting that nearly everyone agrees about the extremes on this continuum. For example, no one argues that it is proper for communication from the manufacturer to the consumer to be either inadvertently misleading or, worse still, deliberately deceptive. At the other extreme, most non lawyers agree that if information is communicated clearly in simple English, and a given consumer does not comprehend it or chooses to ignore it, the fault lies with the consumer, not the communicator.

When testing a label to determine how well consumers understand certain elements of it, a difficult decision comes up. Are you asking consumers what they have learned that they could do, should do, or what they can do? Where does what they say they would do fit in? How one answers these questions depends on a number of considerations.

Suppose, for example, the product is an analgesic gelcap and the question concerns the maximum daily dosage. Assume the label says "Do not exceed two gelcaps in 12 hours." Which of the possibilities do we ask?

"What is the greatest number of gelcaps you *can* take in a 24-hour period?"

"Can" is imprecise. In English, it contains elements of prescription (what is the proper thing to do) and elements of possibility (what are you physically able to do). If used, it suggests the questioner is not certain what to ask.

This question, as worded, would provide responses very difficult to interpret, since some respondents would answer the question based on what the label says is permitted and some would answer based on what they are physically able to do, which is to overdose.

"What is the greatest number of caplets you *could* take in a 24-hour period?"

"Could" implies that the questioner is interested in physical possibilities. It is tantamount to asking: "What are you able to do?" It is hard to imagine a place for it in label comprehension testing, unless one wished to learn whether consumers believed something to be physically impossible.

"What is the greatest number of caplets you *would* take in a 24-hour period?"

"Would" addresses consumer intent. In cases where the objective is to measure comprehension, intent muddies the waters. As K. Lechter, LL.D, Ph.D, has indicated, in many instances "would" presents a marketing question, e.g., "would you buy it?"

However, in the area commonly referred to as label comprehension testing, there is another type of objective, specifically to determine if consumers who are at risk in some way intend to use the product (label warning testing). In these cases, a control or comparator is vital, in order to compensate for an inherent positive bias in these testing situations, and "would" is the appropriate word to use.

"What is the greatest number of caplets you *should* take in a 24-hour period?"

"Should" is purely prescriptive and, as such, seems appropriate for label comprehension testing. Properly unbiased questioning determines what consumers comprehend, based on the information that has been given to them.

Using "should," and assuming that comprehension testing demonstrates consumers do understand, an "ordinary individual" would conclude that the communicator has done as much as is reasonably possible to convey the labeling information clearly. Frequently, the communicator will go even further, elaborating in advertising, promotional pieces and package inserts, but, at the very least, this testing can give assurance that the basics are clear to nearly all potential users who have an honest interest in the product.

Stephen J. Hellebusch, Ph.D., is president of Hellebusch Research & Consulting, Inc. in Cincinnati, OH. His email is steve@hellrc.com.

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