

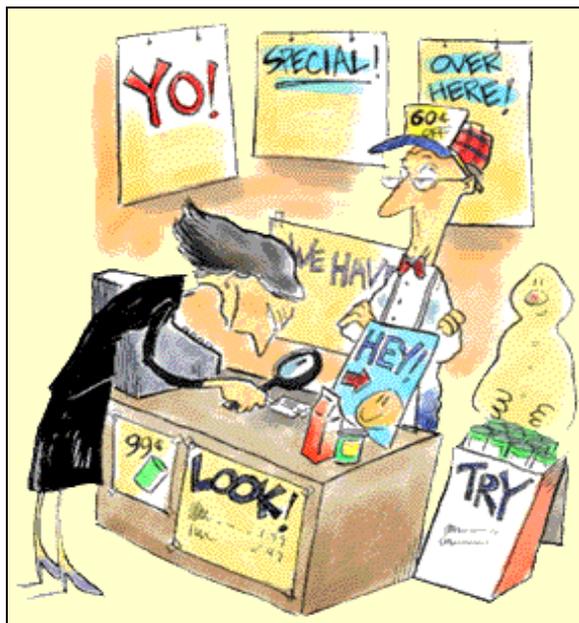
# PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

## Signs of Confusion

Brought to you with a smile by  
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On a long road trip, I stopped at one of those tiny roadside grocery stores to pick up a few items for the trip. I took my items to the cash register and asked if the store took credit cards. The cashier flashed a what-a-dumb-question look, and responded arrogantly, “Yes, there are signs all *over* the store.”



All over the store? Where? I looked around and couldn't see any such signs. But it was difficult to see *any* written information because the store had more signs than grocery items. And not just signs, but also posters, cardboard cutouts, grocery displays, cents-off ads, notices of discounts, you name it. They were attached to every shelf, mounted on every wall, even suspended from the ceiling.

With all the visual clutter, thousand-dollar bills would have had to be attached to the credit card signs before they'd have caught my attention.

But wait. I didn't mention everything the cashier said. After proclaiming that signs were displayed throughout the store, he added, “including right here on the counter.”

What? The only thing on the counter was my groceries. Unless . . . I moved aside the groceries, and there, underneath my container of orange juice, was a sign.

Well, not a sign, exactly. Taped to the counter was a sheet of wrinkled blue paper, and on the paper was some tiny ugly handwriting. After several seconds of deciphering, I



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realized that the tiny ugly writing on the wrinkled blue paper was a list of credit cards accepted by the store.

The cashier was correct. There *was* a “sign” right there on the counter — where most people wouldn’t think to look, and in a form they might not recognize even if they did.

This cashier knew about the signs, but assumed that because they were posted (somewhere), customers could see them. However, information is worthless if those for whom it’s intended can’t locate it when they need it and can’t make sense of it even if they do.

Do you ever give customers essential information that’s masked by clutter and then wonder why they didn’t see it? Do you ever put important advice where they’re unlikely to look for it, or in a format they’ll miss even if they look right at it? Do you ever make it hard for customers to find *what* they need to know *when* they need to know it? In many of the service documents I’ve reviewed for companies — documents intended to help customers, not confuse them — the answer has been a resounding Yes!

If your customers sometimes seem to ignore or misuse the information you’ve created for them, you might want to make sure they saw it and understood it.

Alternatively, you could simply attach some thousand-dollar bills. At least you’ll get their attention. 😊

*Naomi Karten*

