

A photograph of a yellow metal cabinet. A bright yellow sign with red text is affixed to the top left. The sign reads "FLAMMABLE" in large, bold, red capital letters, and "KEEP FIRE AWAY" in smaller, bold, red capital letters below it. The cabinet has a vertical seam and a metal handle at the bottom right.

FLAMMABLE
KEEP FIRE AWAY

Safety Color Codes

by Gary Weidner

Green, yellow, and red traffic signals are an example of the use of color to communicate information. If, instead of using colors, traffic signals displayed the words “go,” “caution,” and “stop,” each illuminated in black-and-white, we’d probably see a lot more accidents.

The usefulness of colors in communicating warnings and information has long been recognized. However, the choices of colors haven’t always been standardized. That began in the U.S. around 1945. Today, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) provide specifications for the use of a number of colors in the workplace.

Sometimes, it seems as though we are besieged by signs, labels, and markings; color is one clue that helps us to sort them out at a glance. That’s especially important in today’s diverse workplace. Imagine a plethora of multilingual signs, all printed in black-and-white text. Not good. Safety markings play a role in the pressure washer industry, so this article takes a look at how color is used to help matters.

Interestingly, OSHA has mandatory requirements for only two colors: red and yellow. Those requirements are found in a short standard, *Safety Color Code for Marking Physical Hazards*, in the Code of Federal Regulations at 29 CFR 1910.144. The standard is posted at www.osha.gov.

Keep in mind that safety colors perform two functions:

- Call attention;
- Indicate the general nature of a hazard.

Red

OSHA says that fire protection equipment and apparatus must be red. A second mandatory use of red is to indicate danger. For example, safety cans or other portable containers of flammable liquids must be red. OSHA’s third specified use for red is to identify a control used for emergency stop. For instance, a bar or button used to emergency-stop a hazardous piece of equipment must be red.

With a length of only a few paragraphs, OSHA’s color code standard provides only a minimal amount of information. In fact, it does not define what is meant by “red.” If you’ve worked with color, you know how subjective it can be—one person’s “red” can be another person’s “dark pink.”

The ANSI people have taken a much more comprehensive approach to the subject. The ANSI Z535 series of standards (see box) includes specifications for the appearance of safety colors as well as considerable information about where and how to use each color. For example, ANSI safety red is specified for the background color in the signal word panel of danger signs and tags.

Yellow

In its *Safety Color Guide*, The Sherwin-Williams Company says, “Yellow is the most visible of all colors. Its attention-compelling power is universally recognized.”

The entire OSHA requirement for yellow is, “Yellow shall be the basic color for designating caution and for marking physical hazards such as: Striking against, stumbling, falling, tripping, and ‘caught in between.’ ” As with red, OSHA does not specify what it considers “yellow,” whereas ANSI provides a color specification and detailed use information.

Safety yellow may also be used together with black stripes or checkers.

Here are some examples of where safety yellow is used:

- The background color in the signal word panel of caution signs and tags;
- Exposed, unguarded edges of platforms, pits, and walls;
- Handrails and guardrails;
- Storage cabinets for flammable materials and liquids;
- Material handling equipment such as forklifts;
- Coverings for guy wires.

Orange

Orange is the color for designating dangerous parts of machines or energized equipment. Here are some examples of where safety orange is used:

- The background color in the signal word panel of warning signs and tags;
- Dangerous parts of machines or energized equipment which may cut, crush, shock, or otherwise injure;
- On the insides of enclosure doors and guards to make it obvious that the door or guard is open.

Blue

Blue is for information. Here are some examples of where safety blue is used:

- To designate informational signs and such;
- To warn against operation of equipment that is undergoing repair, such as on lockout-tagout cards.

Green

Green signifies "safety" or "safety equipment." Here are some examples of where safety green is used:

- Location of first-aid supplies, respirators, and the like;
- Location of stretchers;
- Location of emergency eyewash and shower units;
- Safety bulletin boards and safety instructional signs.

Black and White

Black and white are used primarily for housekeeping and traffic.

Relevant ANSI Standards

The ANSI Z535 series of standards listed below thoroughly covers all aspects of hazard communication. The standards can be purchased in pdf form at the Web Store on www.ansi.org.

- Z535.1 Safety Color Code
- Z535.2 Environmental and Facility Safety Signs
- Z535.3 Criteria for Safety Symbols
- Z535.4 Product Safety Signs and Labels
- Z535.5 Accident Prevention Tags [safety tags, barricade tapes, etc.]
- Z535.6 Product Safety Information in Product Manuals, Instructions, and Other Collateral Materials (expected publication in late 2006).

The appearance may be solid white, solid black, single-color striping, alternating black and white stripes, or black and white checkers. Here are some examples of where safety black and white are used:

- Boundaries of traffic aisles;
- Directional signs;
- Drinking fountains and food dispensing equipment locations;
- Refuse container locations.

Purple

Purple or magenta (may be on yellow) indicates a radiation hazard.

The Bottom Line

Consistent use of safety colors is important in all segments of our industry. Manufacturing facilities come right to mind, but there are numerous applications in office areas, too. Distributors should be using safety colors as appropriate in their office, warehouse, and shop areas and, in some instances on service vehicles. It seems common sense that safety colors employed on contractor equipment and in contractor operations reduce the likelihood of accidents and also reduce contractor liability. *cr*

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The first National Convention and Trade Show will be May 4-7, 2006 in Fort Worth, Texas. The networking opportunities will also include meeting representatives from other trade associations including Association of United Window Cleaners, International Kitchen Exhaust Cleaning Association, Power Washers of North America, and more



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