

## Chapter 15

# Font Style & Food Safety

As the legendary basketball coach John Wooden once said, “*It’s the little details that are vital. Little things make bigger things happen.*” With this thought in mind, I would like to ask you to think about something you have probably never paid much attention to because you might have viewed it as insignificant or as a simple matter of preference.

Could the font style you use to communicate food safety information, whether it’s Times New Roman, Papyrus, Richard, Arial, *Freestyle Script*, or any other font you like to use, influence whether people understand your message and remember it?

While some of the flowery fonts that people like to use, like *Freestyle*, might frustrate you and be a little more difficult to read, does this concept of font-choice really matter for the more typical scripts used in the business world today, such as Arial?

Several behavioral psychologist, Gasser et al. (2005) wanted to know just that. In particular, they wanted to research whether the presence of serifs on a font and how the font was spaced affected reading comprehension. A serif is the little mark on the bottom of letters which make the letters seem like they are sitting on a line. Times New Roman, which is the font style used in this book, has serifs. Look at this “f”; do you see the little ‘wings’ or ‘flanges’ on the bottom which make it look like it’s sitting on a line? That’s a serif. This “f,” lacking the little ‘wings,’ is called sans-serif or without-serif. Additionally, fonts either have a uniform spacing between letters or the spacing differs depending on the size of the letter.

In the study conducted by Gasser et al., 149 research participants, all undergraduate psychology students, were randomly divided into four groups. Each group was given a one page, single-spaced memo from a local health clinic on tuberculosis, which was printed in one of four font styles (Courier, Palatino, Helvetica, or Monaco). Courier represented a mono-spaced serif. Palatino represented a proportionally spaced serif. Helvetica represented a proportional san serif, and Monaco represented a mono-spaced san serif.

In the research exercise, participants were given as much time as needed to read the memo, although most completed reading it within 8 min. Afterwards, they were

given a series of unrelated questions, which were intentionally planned as a distractive task. In order to test their knowledge and retention of information regarding tuberculosis, each participant was asked six open-ended questions about the important portions of the memo they had read on tuberculosis.

Analysis of the study results revealed that letter spacing did not have a significant effect on the ability of participants to recall or remember the information they had read. However, participants who read the memos in serif fonts (Courier and Palatino) had a significantly higher ability (9 %) to recall and remember critical or important portions of information in the memo they had read than those who read the memos in sans serif.

Why is that? The researchers theorize that the presence of serifs increases the perception that text progresses on a line. Therefore, the reader can put less effort into reading the text and more effort into understanding it. In other words, they concluded that ease of reading is likely to result in enhanced understanding and memory retention.

## **Ease of Readability Matters**

Numerous studies have previously shown that even small increases in readability matters. For example, Murphy (1947) demonstrated that he could increase the readability of an article from 43 % to 60 % by simply reducing the level of difficulty required to read it from a 9th grade reading level to a 6th grade level.

Other studies have also shown that ease of reading can be used to predict how much of an article is actually read, which is referred to as reading depth, persistence, or perseverance. In other words, if an article requires too much effort to read or is too difficult, the reader is unlikely to finish reading it in its entirety and will instead skim read it.

## **What Does This Mean to Food Safety?**

The findings from this research are clearly of interest. It suggests that by merely being a little more intentional in font style selection, requiring little effort and no additional expense, one can significantly improve the likelihood that critical food safety information communicated in writing will be completely read, understood, and retained.

Think about these findings and what they mean to food safety. For example, stop to consider for a moment all of the communication on food safety that is delivered in writing. Examples of important food safety instructions and messages that are communicated in writing include:

- Standard operating procedures
- Food safety checklists

- Laws and regulations
- Training & education curriculums
- Consumer food safety recall messages

Have you ever given a second thought to what font style you were using to communicate these instructions and messages? If you did, it was probably due to personal preference – not because you thought it would be more effective. However, this research suggests that we better stop and think about our selection of font styles in more detail.

Fonts matter. And they could make a significant difference in retention and comprehension.