



FIGURE 1— A Sign for an Ice Cream Shop Supports Mask Wearing in Public Spaces

Worth Slowing Down for: Road Signs and Messages About the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jennifer Mandelbaum, MPH

There has been much discussion about the messaging on COVID-19, much of it focused on how the public interprets federal and state guidance on protective measures such as vaccinations and mask wearing. One overlooked strategy is private businesses using their road signage to support (or negate) public health practices related to the pandemic (Figures 1–4). Large signs outside businesses have the potential to reach a broader, more diverse audience than paper signs on doors advising patrons to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. Whereas flyers about

vaccination status and mask wearing on store entrances reach only the customers entering that business (and therefore may be viewed more often by a particular demographic), road signs can be seen by anyone passing by, regardless of intent to enter.

Road signs raise several questions about the aim behind them. For example, what motivates businesses to shift their messaging away from weekly specials or new products and to public health? The economy and public health are inextricably linked; businesses, especially those that are service oriented, benefit from the general public

practicing recommended preventive measures. The US pandemic response centers on the idea that restrictions (e.g., on occupancy) can be eased as the community spread of COVID-19 declines. More than the economic benefits of curtailing the pandemic, though, these messages may speak to something about collective action and reflect the public nature of pandemics. They are a reminder that few, if any, people have been spared the impacts of COVID-19.

Road signage could also be a means of tackling misinformation and making inroads with people who have



FIGURE 2— The Marquee Above an Independent Theater Encourages People to “Vaccinate to end the wait!”



FIGURE 3— The Sign for an Auto Repair Shop Says, “Masks required. Capes optional.”



FIGURE 4— A Music Hall’s Animated Sign Tells Viewers to “Rock the shot. Be safe. Stay healthy. Get vaccinated.”

hesitations about the COVID-19 vaccines. Private businesses may carry a type of cultural capital with the general public that experts (e.g., physicians and researchers on television and social media) do not. This capital may be used to engender greater trust in public health practices, policies, and institutions. Signage democratizes messaging about the pandemic, giving private citizens a voice to express their feelings about public health. Importantly, that also means that the content of road signs can steer the public away from sound public health practices or direct malice toward health departments and professionals. Rather than promoting public health, road signs could be used to cut deeper partisan divides into COVID-19 messaging.

The profusion of road signs addressing public health practices may reflect the unique, wide-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accurate,

timely, and noticeable communication strategies are needed to combat challenges to effective health communication, including uncertainty, fear, and doubt. Private businesses, of their own volition, have used valuable advertising space to advocate (or contradict) practices that support public health. Road signs might be something to slow down for. *AJPH*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Mandelbaum is with the Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence should be sent to Jennifer Mandelbaum, Department of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior, Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina, 915 Greene St, Columbia, SC 29208 (e-mail: mandelbj@e-mail.sc.edu). Reprints can be ordered at <http://www.ajph.org> by clicking the “Reprints” link.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Full Citation: Mandelbaum J. Worth slowing down for: road signs and messages about the COVID-19 pandemic. *Am J Public Health*. 2022;112(3):391–392.

Acceptance Date: November 6, 2021.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306626>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the businesses promoting important public health practices.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Copyright of American Journal of Public Health is the property of American Public Health Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.