

A product is as worthwhile as it is useful. This can be practical, or for enjoyment:

- A lamp can brighten your room.
- A spice can sweeten your food.
- A shampoo can soften your hair.
- You can look at yourself in a mirror.

A label on a product tells us the usefulness we can expect:

- 900 lumens
- **Total Carbohydrates** 7g (3% DV)
- Deeply Replenishes Moisture
- Medicine Cabinet - 2 adjustable interior shelves

And, to temper our expectations, it shows the dangers we need to avoid:

- Use only on 120 volt 60Hz circuits.
- Made in a facility that processes Peanuts, Tree Nuts, Soy, Wheat and Sesame.
- Avoid contact with eyes.
- **WARNING:** This product can expose you to chemicals including formaldehyde which is known to the State of California to cause cancer and methanol, which is known to the State of California to cause birth defects or other reproductive harm.

This is the worth of a label.

People are different.

- They can't brighten your room; they can brighten your day.
- They can't sweeten your food; they can sweeten your life.
- They can't soften your hair; they can soften your anger.
- Looking through their eyes shows yourself in more detail than any mirror.

How do we know what to expect?

With people, there is no shortcut to know what to expect, and the only way to get to know them is to get to know them yourself.

Labels started off not so much different from humans. In years past, shops promoted themselves by displaying examples or symbols of their products outside. When people needed to know what was inside the shop, they could see an example or depiction of an item, and enter to purchase what they needed. This was helpful for a mostly illiterate population who could not read labels written in words. In this early time, products themselves did not have labels as we have them today: brands did not compete with each other on a global battlefield, and with the available transportation technologies, many customers only had their local vendors to choose from.

At this time, products and people were more similar: you had to get to know a product to form an opinion on it. The only reputation a product had was by word-of-mouth without ads or flashy branding to promote a predetermined vision of a product.

Over time, the ease of transporting products revolutionized the marketplace, leading to the culture shift that we still experience today. As a manufacturer's accessible marketplace expanded, they had more competition. Some products succeeded in expanding, and some retained their position, but many were wiped out. To compete, many products were improved. Better steel processes emerged. Textile processing was mechanized. Food preservation lengthened the shelf life of many agricultural products. However, there are other ways to improve a product's chance of survival aside from improving quality. This is the rise in advertising and branding.

By promoting messaging about your product, you can let its reputation precede it. By dressing up your product in a fancy design, or even just placing it on a shelf that is closer to an average shoppers height, your product gets more focus. In this new culture, products are different from how their human purchasers truly are. However, because we are culturally acclimated to making judgements about products based on these extraneous attributes provided by advertising and branding, we often succumb to doing the same for people too.

When we believe a rumor about someone, are we not believing an advertisement that someone else has promoted to us? When we prejudge someone based on their appearance or some other part of them, are we not making the same sort of assumptions that we make about flashy packaging?

Based on my observations of modern packaging and human culture, I have developed the following philosophies to guide my actions:

Products really are just as worthwhile as they are useful. I need to buy the things I need and I should not buy things that I don't need just because they are advertised to me. This helps save me money, as well as preventing environmental damage from extra packaging or letting things I have fall into disuse because I never really needed them in the first place. Seen from this perspective, a label for a package has the responsibility to really let me know what is in the package so I can evaluate seriously what it is. Although it can seem like a good move to put celebrity endorsements or unconventional packaging to stand out from other products, a professional and straightforward label really does the job best. I really do believe that changes in approaching packaging and advertising have changed human behaviors in not the best way, and by trying to support responsible packaging and branding, I hope that I can in some small way contribute to improving modern culture.

People can't be straightforwardly described by a label, even if that label is applied in good faith or even by the person themselves. In linguistics, there is the idea of an "idiolect", which is like a dialect, but even smaller, referring to the exact variation of language spoken by a singular individual. Just as people have different variations in the way they speak, they also have individual variations in their culture, their beliefs, their behaviors, etc. It can be tempting to

group people by broad similarities, and in truth it can be helpful sometimes. However, there is also a great risk of treating groups of people as monolithic, even though they are decidedly not so. In a society that is often very tribal and polarizing, so much of what is considered important to a person is tied to their identity. Yet, often, identity is conflated with group membership. In a true, interpersonal relationship, I think the best policy is to strive to know a person better than just a description of the attributes they share with large groups of people.

In conclusion, we have a responsibility to remember the true value and purpose of a label. On a product, which is as valuable as it is useful, a label should convey that value without being misleading. On a person, a label can never demonstrate the truly infinite value of that person, but still runs the great risk of being hurtful or misleading.

My label below is designed to look like an envelope, beckoning the viewer to open it to see the product that is inside. Since it's not actually a label for a real product, I kept the descriptions vague, but in line thematically with my essay. It draws on the deficiencies of a mere product in comparison to a human by listing warnings that are very vague, but do apply to all products, surrounded by some flashy looking "testimonials" that are really very hollow when you actually read them. I don't think this would be a successful label in real life, but it is more meant as a cautionary tale.

open here - it's so easy!

→ **This product** ←

- Is worthwhile purely for its functionality
- has some dangers that you know in advance
- will never change for the better or the worse
- Is not alive and doesn't love you

PLEASE BE
EXCITED!

I WANT TO GUARANTEE
TO YOU JUST HOW GOOD
THIS IS

I AM SELLING THIS TO
YOU

(This document contains 1163 words)