

A Plaintiff Lawyer's Worst Nightmare

— by Katie Karpinski

"WARNING!"

--we see this term everywhere. Whether it's on a bus door, stuck to your computer monitor, or printed on your coffee maker, it's hard to escape that little red triangle. In a society where even the smallest of injuries can result in a lawsuit, companies are forced to protect themselves from such liabilities, even when they are laughable at best. The cemetery industry is no exception to this rule, as countless claims are made due to injuries sustained on cemetery grounds.



Proper signage is really the only way to be proactive in mitigating liability. The Catholic Cemeteries Association of the Diocese of Cleveland has developed a signage system specifically suited to address and reject these claims. To learn more, I sat down with Andrej Lah, President/CEO of the Catholic Cemeteries Association, Diocese of Cleveland. Here's what he had to say about cemetery signage.

When did you realize that the cemeteries were not properly protected against legal claims?

Andrej: At first I never really realized the logical connection of having warning signs at a cemetery. Being in the industry, I thought that anyone walking around a cemetery would be aware that cemeteries include potential dangers. It's a field that contains open graves, flush markers, as well as common tripping hazards that you find in any outdoor area such as uneven ground, twigs, and roots.

For me, I didn't realize the importance of proper safety signage until I was sitting in on a court case of a woman who was claiming liability for injuries she sustained while visiting one of our Catholic cemeteries. She went out in dangerous, muddy conditions to place flowers on her mother's grave and as a result fell into a partially settled grave. As her lawyer made his case, he emphasized one thing: that the only warning sign displayed said "ground uneven walk carefully." We ended up settling, and that was when I realized that we needed to have large and carefully planned warning signs throughout the cemetery in order to mitigate future liability.

Did you seek professional assistance in creating your signs? If so, why?

Andrej: Originally we tried to produce the signs without any outside help. We put up three large paragraphs with a lot of legal language and hoped that

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would do the trick in preventing future lawsuits. Over time, these signs were worn down by normal wear and tear, and they had to be maintained on an ongoing basis. Not only that, but we came to realize that our signs did not meet the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) criteria. It became clear that we needed to come to a new solution. We decided to seek professional help. We reached out to Nutron OSM and found their help to be invaluable.

What was the process of creating a new signage system like?

Andrej: The whole process was pretty seamless. Nutron helped us take the language from the signage we had and pair it with the proper symbols. We also took our signs to a personal defense attorney for further input. Having the ANSI approved graphic symbols paired with the proper legal verbiage enabled us to present a message that transcends literacy and language borders.

This was really beneficial to us, and we were able to make signage specific to our needs. After the signs were finalized, it was as simple as placing them at all entrances of our cemeteries, as well as other places of gathering and hazardous areas. Due to the success of these signs, we've since expanded our efforts and now use similar signage for our maps and cemetery directional signs.

Can you speak more to the importance of having quality signage?

Andrej: While it may seem trivial, having well-maintained signs enhances the integrity of your cemetery. If someone pulls into the entrance of your cemetery and sees a dilapidated sign, they might start to question how you maintain the rest of the cemetery as well. People notice the small details. Even if the rest of your cemetery is pristine, poor sign age can cause people to question your competency. If you can't take care of a simple sign, why should people trust you to take care of their loved ones' remains?

What value has having proper signs brought to your organization?

Andrej: I'd say the biggest value is simply peace of mind. Knowing, should a claim occur, I can send them pictures of our ANSI-qualified, high quality, easily understandable signs is quite a comforting feeling. In today's world, it's important to protect yourself. Time in court is costly and time-consuming, so the value we've received can be quantified by the amount of court cases we've avoided. By investing in proper signage, we have peace of mind knowing that we are protected against potential liability and can continue to use our time and resources for what matters most: serving our families and maintaining our sacred grounds. ■

SAFETY SIGNAGE

- Promote visitor safety
- Prevent operational liability
- Notify about safe conditions



ENTRANCE SIGNAGE

- Unique professional appearance
- Attractive, colorful location and directional maps



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