

Web-based Marketing of Alternative-sized PPE for a Diverse Workforce

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Abstract

Women's and unisex PPE is now widely available on the market, but it is still not reaching all of the workers who need it. One theory proposes that alternative-sized PPE is not well marketed to the people with purchasing authority. A web-based review of eight national brand-name PPE distributors investigated how alternative-sized PPE was advertised on websites and online product catalogues. The criteria used to evaluate the websites included 1) if alternative-sized PPE was offered by the distributor, 2) if the products were clearly labeled as unisex or women's, and 3) if models pictured on the website represented a diverse array of people. Results found that women's and unisex products were offered by most distributors, but rarely featured prominently or displayed on a model. Many items were not labeled as a women's product, but were simply marked "W" or labeled with ambiguous taglines such as "ideal for smaller faces." In order to increase the use of alternative-sized PPE for women workers and workers of small stature, it is recommended that PPE distributors feature these products more prominently in their catalogs and websites, label them clearly, and use models that represent a diverse workforce.



Background

Over the last few decades, traditionally male-dominated "blue collar" occupations such as construction, fire-fighting, manufacturing, agriculture, waste management, etc. have seen women participating in increasing numbers across the United States (BLS, 2010). These occupations require multiple pieces of personal protective equipment (PPE) for worker safety, but until recently, PPE for workers has been sized to fit only a variety of average US-born male physiques. As women are entering male-dominated industries which require PPE, they have encountered PPE that not only fits poorly, but also becomes a hindrance and possibly a safety liability (IAPA, 2006). Blue collar industries in the US have also seen a large influx of immigrant workers in recent years. A large portion of these workers are of Latino or Asian background, and often of smaller average stature than US born males. In many cases, unisex PPE would fit these workers better than products sized to fit the average US male. Women's and unisex PPE (hereafter referred to as alternative-sized PPE) has come a long way in recent years. Hard hats, safety glasses, coveralls, foot protection, safety harnesses, and even power tools have all been redesigned with women in mind. The sizes are smaller, the design is shaped to women's bodies, and the products are available in attractive feminine colors. Numerous companies specialize in selling PPE for women and nearly all major PPE manufacturers offer unisex products or products designed especially for women. These products are also widely available online, as well as in department stores and home improvement stores. However, while more options are available than ever before, there are still problems getting it from the manufacturer into the hands of workers (Walker, 2010).

Study Design

One of the problems that may prevent workers from accessing alternative sized PPE is that manufacturers put little or no resources into promoting their alternative-sized PPE products (Walker, 2010). The products are either not featured on websites or catalogs, or the product is included but not clearly marketed as a women's product. This may be a barrier for employers who would be potential consumers of these products for their diverse workforce, because workers and purchasers may not be aware that these products exist. The purpose of this study is to investigate several major distributors of PPE in order to determine 1) whether or not they offer products for women, 2) if these products are clearly labeled as women's products on their websites or in their print catalogs, and 3) if models used to display PPE on the websites or in print catalogs are representative of a diverse workforce.

Eight major distributors of PPE (who will not be named) were selected for review because they are well-known across industries as national distributors of brand-name PPE. The online product offerings of each distributor were reviewed to determine what types of products are sold, how they are modeled, and if women's or unisex products are included in the selections. If these products are included, it was noted whether or not the items were clearly labeled as "women's." The data were recorded in the table below.

Table: Results from review of PPE distributors' web offerings

| Distributor | Product type(s) | Women's or unisex products offered? | Marketed on website? | Product(s) labeled as women's or unisex? | How are products modeled? |
|-------------|---|-------------------------------------|----------------------|--|---|
| A | Hardhats, accessories, face shields, welding helmets, welder's caps, | Unclear | No | No | Male models only, no women or people of color. |
| B | Eye protection, goggles, hard hats and accessories, welding helmets, welding goggles, harnesses/fall protection | No | NA | No | Mostly male models. One woman model for hearing protection, but it is not labeled as a women's product. No people of color. |
| C | Self contained Respirators, air-purifying respirators, hardhats, protective glasses, goggles, fall protection, welding helmets | Unclear | No | No | Models on home page are diverse, including women and people of color, but the only product with a female model is an air-purifying respirator. |
| D | Hard hats, eye protection, face shields, respiratory protection, fire and rescue helmets | Yes | No | No | Air purifying and supplied air respirators included pictures of both men and women. A picture of a woman wearing a hazmat hood and using a stethoscope is featured at the top of the website. All categories of fire and rescue included male models and men's products only. |
| E | Fall protection | Yes | No | No | Male models only, no women or people of color. |
| F | Welding helmets, goggles, glasses, hard hats, safety vests, hearing protection, gloves, respirators | Unclear | No | No | Male models only, no women or people of color. |
| G | Respirators, head protection, hearing protection, hand protection and gloves, protective footwear, eye and face protection, fall protection | Yes | Yes | Yes | Models include women and people of color on home page and throughout in all of the catalogs. |
| H | Eye protection, hearing protection, respirators, hand and arm protection, fall protection. | Yes | No | Yes, eyewear only | Women and people of color featured in catalog and in fit diagrams. 2010 catalog features three varieties of eye protection specifically labeled for women. |

Men's and Women's PPE

Products available on the market*



Women's welding mitts



Women's work gloves



Women's hard hat



Women's welding mask



Women's safety boots



Safety harness for women



Women's coveralls



Women's safety glasses



Women's welding jacket



Hard hats, size Small

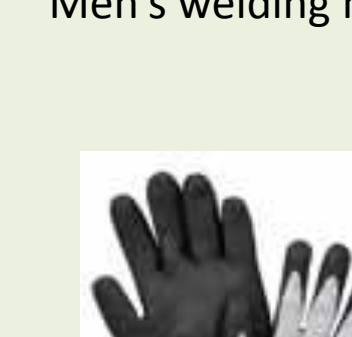


Women's safety boots

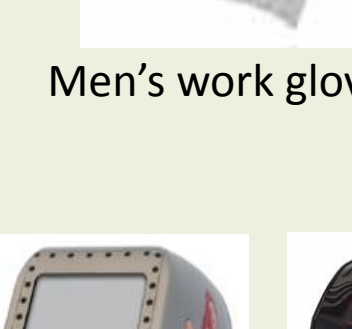
Products advertised online*



Men's welding mitts



Men's work gloves



Men's designer welding masks



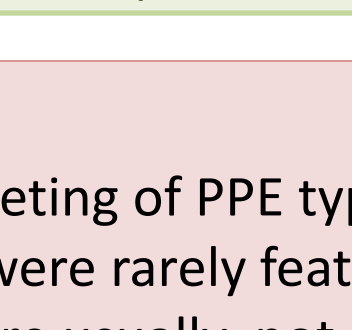
Men's safety boots



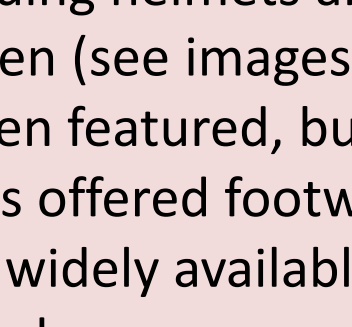
Men's safety harness



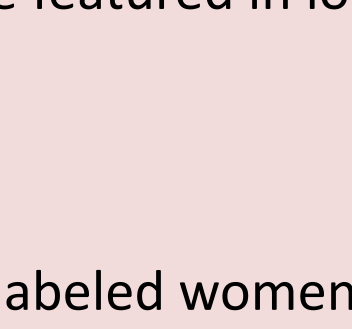
Men's hard hats



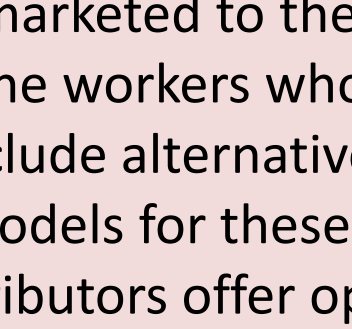
Men's safety boots



Men's welding jacket



Men's safety glasses



Men's welding jacket

Findings

Based on the findings of this study, web-based marketing of PPE typically does not include alternative size PPE. Women's and unisex products were rarely featured in catalogs or product offerings. When these products are available, they are usually not clearly labeled as "women's" products, but more likely marked with W in the series number or an ambiguous tagline, such as "ideal for smaller faces." Designer items such as welding helmets and hardhats are only featured in colors and custom graphics that seem targeted to men (see images above). Specialty sized items that accommodate XXL and XXXL men's sizes are often featured, but this is never the case for women's or XS men's products. None of the websites offered footwear or hand protection in women's sizes, despite the fact that these items are widely available on the market. Finally, the few websites that did offer alternative size PPE rarely used women or people of color to model the products. One distributor offered a wide range of unisex PPE and included a diversity of models in the catalog, but the majority of women models were featured in low-hazard work environments, such as laboratories and hospitals.

Conclusions

It is possible that distributors do not include clearly labeled women's and unisex PPE products because they are not top selling products (i.e. ordered in bulk). There may also be some stigma associated with these items that distributors feel is off-putting to their predominantly male customer base. However, if these products are not marketed to the decision-makers with purchasing authority, it is unlikely that it will reach the workers who need it. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that distributors include alternative-sized PPE products on their websites and in their catalogs, and consider using models for these products that represent a diverse workforce. It is also recommended that distributors offer options to buy these items individually rather than in bulk. If distributors followed these recommendations, future studies could track the sales of these products to determine if increased marketing results in an increase of sales of alternative size PPE.

Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) "Women at Work," Spotlight on Statistics, March 2010. <http://bls.gov/spotlight/2011/women/>. Accessed 3/6/2012.

Ontario Women's Directorate and Industrial Accident Prevention Association (2006) "Personal Protective Equipment for Women: Addressing the Need," Joint agency report, Ontario, Canada.

Walker, Joseph L. (2010) "PPE for Women: We've come a long way, Rosie, but we still have a ways to go" EHS Today, April issue. http://ehstoday.com/mag/ppe_women_weve/. Accessed 3/6/2012.