

All Marks May Not Be Created Equal

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Abstract

There are a number of certification marks now available for product manufacturers – more, in fact, than have ever been available before. But are all marks created equal?

Market Acceptance

From a technical point of view, all suitably accredited certification agencies are equivalent, because they all test to the same standards. It does not matter who does the testing, as long as it is done.

Despite this, certification is often affected by market acceptance. While there may be several agencies that could test to the standards you need, many times your customer expects a specific agency mark.

This is due to several reasons. The most prominent factor is the misconception between a mark and a standard. There is also the issue of agency differentiation, which can have a significant impact.

Historically, every country had a single, government-appointed national certification agency. This has led to the de facto establishment of specific agencies in specific countries. The “automatic” market expectation, therefore, was that all products would bear that agency mark.

In recent years, however, agencies from different countries have become able to test to the applicable standards for different countries. At the same time, various private certification agencies have begun offering certification services. These new agencies test to the same standards as the national governmental or quasi-governmental agencies.

These events have separated the agency mark (the symbol of a particular agency) from the standard (the criteria by which a product is deemed acceptable for use). A product tested to the same standards might have one of several different marks, depending on which agency did the testing.

The end user, however, may not recognize the difference between a mark and a standard. They may expect a particular mark, and distrust an unfamiliar mark. It is imperative to understand and manage these perceptions.

Furthermore, different agencies may interpret the same standard differently. Customers typically prefer agencies with a strict reputation. Selecting an agency that is perceived as too lenient may affect market acceptance of the product.

Finally, certain agencies may be preferred in a specific market. This may be due to historical acceptance, but recently some agencies have found success by specializing in particular markets and applications.

Summary

Although all marks are created equal, an understanding of customer perceptions is critical. Knowing the difference between a mark and a standard can help pave the way to success.



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