What Agencies Will and Will Not Do For You

Sean Costall, Sr. Certifications Engineer

Spark Institute, Calgary, AB, Canada

Updated: Originally written in 2016, this information remains as relevant as ever for 2025 and beyond.

Abstract

As the first and last port of call for certifications, designers naturally look to agencies for assistance on certification issues. This paper attempts to clarify what agencies can and cannot do for you, and why.

The Agency Trap

Believe it or not, agencies (usually) do want to help you out. Given past experience, many will have difficulty believing this, but it is nevertheless true.

Certification agents are in a difficult position. While they certainly have obligations to you, the customer, they are also obligated in many other ways.

Firstly, they have an obligation to their employer. They cannot simply do what they want, or their employer might end up being liable – fancy legal disclaimers notwithstanding. They also have an obligation to preserve their employer's reputation, market position and financial position.

They have an obligation to their accreditation body, which is usually a national safety council and/or government office. They are regularly audited, and anything they do might be called into question. If they have too many problems, they can get their licensing revoked.

They have an obligation to the public. Many organizations are present or former governmental or quasi-governmental agencies, charged with protecting public safety under professional ethical codes or even national law. Failure to do so can have extremely serious legal consequences.

They have obligations to their other customers, who routinely share confidential information with the agencies. The agencies cannot divulge this information to anyone, even if it will help solve your problem. They also have to treat all customers fairly and equally.

Finally, agencies have one essential drawback – their business is *not* design. They do not wish to take on responsibility for the design of any product, because it exposes them to liability, takes time, and nobody will pay them for it. Their job is to *test* – not design.

What They Can Do (In a Certifications Project)

With all of these restrictions, what are agencies actually allowed to do for you?

First and foremost, they can apply the relevant standards to your project, and let you know if you comply with the requirements or not. They can also do the tests and tell you if you passed or failed, and guide you through the certifications process as they conduct it.

They can also assist in identifying standards, estimating costs and timelines, and providing liaison to other agencies that can provide additional services.

None of this is trivial or unnecessary. It does, however, seem very mundane, and can appear rather unhelpful when design questions remain unanswered.

What They Can Do (In a Technical Project)

The bounds of a certifications project are obviously very narrow. To combat this, some agencies offer technical information services that can be contracted separately.

Technical information projects are usually separate and distinct from certifications projects. They may involve different staff, or even different physical locations. This is often to prevent any real or apparent conflicts of interest from affecting the results.

As a result of the separation, test results from the technical project might not carry over to a related certifications project. Again, the agency has to be careful that the testing is not only fair and unbiased, but *appears* fair and unbiased.

Still, the technical project has advantages. In such a project, an agent is no longer restricted to yes/no answers to your questions. They can actively participate in the design process and contribute their experience.

Unfortunately, the availability of such technical consulting services is – at best –very on-again / off-again. And many agencies don't really offer independent consulting at all, and never have.

What They Can't Do (In Any Project)

Despite the above, there are some things an agency cannot provide for you.

First and foremost, they cannot change the standards. Certification agencies are like sports referees – they do not write the rules of the game, but they do have to enforce them as fairly and consistently as possible.

Because of this, it is pointless to argue the validity of the standards with the approval agency. If the rule exists, it must be enforced. To do otherwise would change the rules of the game and invalidate the job of the referees.

(Just as with sports referees, there is a certain amount of interpretation, and some points might be won through logical and compelling arguments. However, no argument that devolves to "the standard is wrong, silly, stupid and/or doesn't apply to me" will ever persuade an agency.)

Secondly, they generally cannot change their timelines much, if at all. The time frames are based on their workload, which means they have other paying customers in line ahead of you. They obviously cannot ignore the demands of those customers to favor you.

Thirdly, they cannot ignore test results. If you do a test and fail, you cannot simply re-test the same product again. It failed once, and that is enough. You can, however, re-submit the product once meaningful design changes have been made, or after showing the original sample was defective.

Lastly, they cannot change the opinions of other agencies. Many national agencies have agreements in place with foreign agencies to provide services outside their scope – a North American agency will often have a European partner, for example.

Neither agency, however, has significant influence over the other. Should one partner take a position, the other partner is not necessarily going to try and persuade them otherwise. They may pass on your arguments, should you have any, but they might not have the power to intervene on your behalf with the foreign agency.

What You Can Do

With all of this, what can anyone do to influence certification agencies? The answer is: not much, in a direct sense. There is little that you can do to directly influence your agent.

Given this, here are some things you can do to help:

- Shop around before committing to an agency; compare rates and lead times.

- Start early. Don't wait until the end of your project to start your certifications. Get things moving as quickly as possible.

- Talk to your agent frankly and honestly. Often there are options to get around problems. They will need certain things from you, so be sure you know exactly what is required and ensure you provide it on time.

- With certification projects taking several months, illness and vacation time are not possibilities, they are certainties. Discuss what to do in case your agent becomes unavailable. Usually agents will delegate projects to other people, so be sure to know who the backup is ahead of time.

- If you think you are getting a raw deal, you can discuss it with your agent. You may, however, get more response by talking with their supervisor, who has (some) more power and discretion. Be diplomatic.

- If you plan on using the agency long-term, ensure you have high-level discussions to ensure you know what to expect and how to expect it. Sticking with an agency over the long term will help build a solid relationship which will pay off over time – not in a big way, necessarily, but in a lot of little ways.

Finally, you may wish to consult with someone who has prior experience, either with a specific agency or with more than one agency. Such up-front guidance can help you make the most informed decision possible when choosing your agency in the first place.

Summary

Agencies want to be helpful, but are stuck in a difficult position not of their making. This severely restricts what they may and may not do for you.

Still, working with them is a necessary evil, and it doesn't have to be a terrible experience. The right agency under the right circumstances can still be a big help to your project.

These suggestions will certainly not always make things smooth sailing. But they may help prevent you from ending up on the rocks.

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