

The Difference Between Marks and Standards

Sean Costall, Sr. Certifications Engineer

Spark Institute, Calgary, AB, Canada

Abstract

The historical legacy of the certifications process has left many people confused about the current state of affairs: namely, what a certification mark represents.

In the Good Old Days...

Harkening back to a bygone era, each country had a single, national certification agency. The agency was responsible for all of the electrical safety for all of the products for all of the country.

These agencies are still with us today: UL in the USA and CSA in Canada, for starters. There are many, many other such agencies in various countries around the world.

The Certification Mark: What It Meant *Then*

Back then, the agency mark was everything. Simply put, you could not sell your product in that country without that country's mark on it.

Everything else was pretty much secondary. The agency itself was responsible for ensuring the safety of the product in question. The consumer did not need to know anything other than to look for the appropriate national mark. As might be expected, this was an easy lesson to learn.

What Happened?

Well, several things happened. But the most relevant factor was *competition*.

Many agencies were moved out from government control and became private entities. Later, intense lobbying (and some lawsuits) prompted changes that allowed open competition between appropriately qualified agencies.

This had the net effect of eliminating the government monopolies on electrical safety certifications. This allowed "new" agencies into the field to compete with the established agencies, and new firms did in fact appear.

Some of the newcomers even went so far as to begin developing their own standards. These were aimed largely at filling in perceived gaps in the existing standards, rather than replacing what was already there. As a result, these agencies rapidly gained market share and reputation in a few specialized fields.

Competition also inspired co-operation. The barrier to entry is still very, very high, and some agencies do not find it worthwhile to try and establish themselves in certain markets. To get around this, they would partner with an agency already established in that market, with each agency providing reciprocal services to the other. This allows both agencies entry into the opposite market while enhancing the product offering for both.

Finally, some markets began to consolidate. The creation of the European Union, for example, began a new era of co-operation between countries and competition between agencies. The EU harmonized all their national standards into a single set, which automatically changed the role of the agency from a *national* provider to an *international* provider.

The Certification Mark: What It Means *Now*

In one sense, the certification mark still means what it meant before. It indicates the agency that did the certification.

However, that agency may or may not be the traditional, ex-national agency for that country. With open competition, many agencies can (and do) provide cross-border services. This is a practical necessity in some markets where national differences have been eliminated.

As a result, the historical “look for the mark” lesson is no longer accurate. The product needs to have *a* mark, but not necessarily *the* mark. This distinction is sometimes lost on a generation of consumers who have been taught always to look for a specific mark on a product.

The Certification Standards

These changes have disconnected the *mark* that is on the product from the *safety evaluation* that was done on the product. In other words, a mark no longer equals a standard.

Things were easier way back when, because a mark equaled a standard. A UL mark meant the product was certified to USA standards, while a CSA mark meant Canadian standards. Each agency wrote standards appropriate for their country.

Things are different now. So long as the product is evaluated to the correct standards by an appropriately accredited agency, the exact mark does not matter. Further, national standards *per se* no longer exist for some markets. As a result, the mark no longer equals a standard.

What It Means For You

Competition is good for consumers. It promotes choice, lowers prices and speeds delivery. As companies are no longer ‘locked in’ to a government-held monopoly on certification services, they are free to choose the agency (or agencies) that provide the best value for them.

Unfortunately, the absence of familiar marks on products may be confusing for the user. “Look for the mark” is no longer the correct lesson.

“Look for the certification” is more accurate, but requires the user to have more knowledge about the required certifications. This is not such an easy lesson to learn. The fact that certification markings are cryptic (and potentially confusing) does not help.

Summary

The historical “one country, one mark” era is over. The new *status quo* is “one world, many marks”. There are now many agencies around the world that can provide certification services for multiple markets.

This new competition opens up new choices, and will spur innovation, change, and improvement in certification services worldwide. Slow though the improvements may be, it is improvement nevertheless, and should benefit us all.

The changes do place additional burdens on the OEMs: namely, that of end-user education. While many end users are knowledgeable, there will always be those who do not understand hazardous locations certifications. While they may have gotten away in the past with looking only for a mark, this is no longer adequate. It is up to the people selling the equipment to convince the user that the mark in use is correct and adequate.



About Spark Institute

Spark Institute is a full-service consultancy that specializes in intrinsically safe and hazardous locations design services. Our experience covers North American, ATEX, and IEC requirements.

Design Consulting

Know what you want, but don't know how? Put our years of experience to work for you. We can design hazardous locations products to your specifications.

Design Evaluation

Have an existing product, design, or concept? Spark Institute can help evaluate your design to the relevant standards to help ensure compliance. Take advantage of our experience to reduce your risks before making costly mistakes.

Training Services

Good designers aren't born - they're trained. Our training courses will drastically shorten the learning curve for both new and experienced designers. Courses can be tailored to your product lines on request.

Contact us today at: www.sparkinstitute.ca

