

Question Mark



Graham McKay, Global Head of Gas and Electrical Products at BSI offers some expert guidance which helps to simplify the sometimes daunting subject of product certification.

We are all accustomed to seeing products that we use littered with “approval” marks, such those on the laptop power supply pictured opposite – but what do these marks actually mean and how much reliance can be placed on them?

Broadly speaking, these marks will fall into two distinct categories: those which “declare” that the product complies with a particular region’s regulatory requirements; and those that state that the product has been evaluated by a specific organisation (usually called a “Certification Body” or CB).

So, in the case of the former, we have things like the European “CE Mark” which, despite what many people believe, remains as simply a visible declaration from the supplier that a product meets the minimum legal requirements for its supply within the European economic area. CE Marking is is, contrary to popular belief, not a quality mark. To know the details of how a supplier reached that conclusion for a particular product would require a lot more delving into their documentation, especially when many of the regulations have such complex scopes. Another example of this genre in the photo above, is the “NOM” mark, which states compliance with the Mexican regulations. Again, it is a mark which conveys that the product has met the minimum requirement for being sold in a particular geography,

For the latter types of mark, these are intended to provide some visible reassurance to consumers and users of the product and, for this to work, it’s important to know which body issues the mark and what type of certification scheme they are operating. This is because it often comes as a surprise to people that there are many different types of scheme (defined in **ISO/IEC Guide 67**) which provide different levels of assurance.

So, at the simplest end of the scale, we have a “level 1” certification; often described as a “type test”. To achieve this, the manufacturer may simply have a have single sample of their product tested to show that it meets the defined specification (a BS or EN standard, for example). These schemes are useful for determining that a product’s design is capable of meeting a specification, but provide little assurance that commercially supplied product will be compliant or that the most up to date version of a standard has been applied.



For more rigorous certification brands, such as the BSI Kitemark, for example, which is one popular and trusted choice amongst the UK gas industry specifiers, the procedure is a much higher level (typically 4 or 5), and provides a much higher level of assurance. For a manufacturers to achieve the BSI Kitemark, they typically need to undergo the following steps:

- Initial laboratory type testing of the product design;
- Initial assessment of the manufacturing site and associated quality plan (usually to a recognised standard such as ISO 9001)
- Ongoing factory assessments (usually annual) to ensure that the quality plan remains in place and agreed manufacturing procedures are being followed
- Regular audit testing of sample products taken from production (or taken from the supply chain).

Whilst any commercially realistic certification scheme will only ever involve a relatively small sample of product, this "closed loop" approach of the best certification schemes gives users real assurance that the products supplied to them will be compliant with the latest and most relevant standards.

In addition to giving users ongoing assurance, manufacturers gaining the BSI Kitemark are citing other benefits from this robust certification scheme. These include stronger revenue growth, improved market access, an enhanced reputation, and a stronger competitive edge. In fact a recent BSI survey shows that 86% of Kitemark clients* recognise that the scheme reduces operational risk.

So in a world littered with a confusing array of "approval" marks BSI can help demystify this subject in order to help your business grow. Graham and his colleagues can help you identify which kinds of approvals you need and provide you with clear and simple guidance from start to finish on your journey to certification.

* Source BSI Kitemark client survey October 2012