Independent conformity assessment ensures global trade

By Daniel Pflumm

At the beginning of the last century, it was often sufficient to rely on a good reputation in order to do business. However, marketplaces are no longer local, but mostly global - and moreover frequently virtual. This implies that clients and suppliers often do not know each other personally.

Cultural differences, as well as language barriers or even diverging climates can be taken as explanations why different markets have different expectations with view to characteristics of products and services. It is therefore very important that market players develop a common understanding of the requirements that have to be fulfilled. A common set of rules and regulations - often in the form of documented standards - is therefore necessary in order to describe the characteristics of a product or a service.

Harmonization of requirements and mutual recognition

Within the European Union, free movement of goods and services is possible because of a common understanding and common rules. More than 20 years ago, a new system for testing and certification of products, applying for various product categories, was inaugurated and since then developed further (New Approach and Global Approach). In addition, globally the mutual recognition principle applies, including in the field of services.

In order to ensure free movement of goods all over the world, corresponding agreements exist between the various economic areas, such as the EU, the USA, Japan and Canada on the basis of the WTO Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade. The prerequisite for these and also for a well-functioning EU internal market is reciprocal recognition of test results and certificates.

Products cannot be traded without a conformity assessment

Conformity assessments are procedures whereby manufacturers, their customers, regulatory authorities and independent third parties establish conformity with standards. The International Standard EN ISO/IEC 17000:2005 describes this as a "demonstration that specified requirements relating to a product, process, system, person or body are fulfilled". In this process, the relevant characteristics have to be selected, determined, evaluated and finally confirmed. Conformity assessment and standardisation are different activities, which are however closely linked to one another.

Completely clear and unambiguous standards are the basis for conformity assessment of products, processes and services. On the other hand, the value of standards is enhanced by conformity assessment, reassuring purchasers, users and public authorities that the respective product in fact corresponds to the standard and thus creating an atmosphere of confidence and trust. In a marketplace allowing free movement of goods, it is essential for public authorities and other market actors to be sure that products and services truly meet all (safety) requirements. Conformity assessment takes place both on a legally-regulated and also on a non-regulated basis.

Authors of statements regarding conformity have different levels of independence.

The credibility of the author of a conformity statement is of utmost importance for a smooth and well functioning exchange of goods and services.

Specialists in the field differentiate here between different types of authors:

1. First party: conformity assessment activity that is performed by the person or organisation that provides the object, e.g. by an in-house auditor.

2. Second party: conformity assessment activity that is performed by a person or organisation that has a user interest in the object, e.g. by a customer.

3. Third party: conformity assessment activity that is performed by a person or body that is independent of the person or organisation that provides the object, and of user interests in that object, e.g. by a laboratory or a certification body.

As a general rule, the more independent authors and the statements they make are, the greater the level of acceptance on a global marketplace will be, increasing the associated market value of the product. It is thus important to know if the statement of conformity has been verified by an independent third party, or if it represents a simple declaration issued by the manufacturer or service provider and addressed to the other market participants. In fact, manufacturers and service providers often turn to independent third-party conformity-assessment bodies to fulfil their clients' (retailers or end customers) explicit requests for a certificate issued by an independent third party. At the end of the process, marks such as the TÜV logo or the legally-regulated but voluntary GS mark – both of which testify to independent third-party inspection – are attached to the products themselves, and inspire additional confidence as regards conformity.

The same rules for all conformity assessment bodies

An extremely high degree of expert knowledge of conformity assessment bodies is a key prerequisite for global confidence and acceptance of conformity assessment.

Corresponding rules are laid down in the ISO/IEC 17000 series of standards, which specify technical requirements regarding the structure and expertise of conformity assessment bodies. These include accreditation bodies, certification bodies for products, management systems and persons, inspection bodies and also test laboratories.

The EN ISO/IEC 17000 series of standards are aimed at harmonisation of conformity assessment and therefore make a major contribution to the international comparability and recognition of conformity assessment results. The overall objective behind is to achieve a situation where the principle "inspected and certified once, recognised all over the world" applies. This is also desirable in order to prevent needless duplication, or even multiple tests and inspections.
Needless to say that it is vitally important that these requirements regarding conformity assessment are fulfilled on an ongoing basis. Accreditation, as the uppermost binding control level within the conformity assessment chain, is intended to ensure the necessary level of competence through assessment and surveillance of the conformity assessment bodies themselves.

Positive assessment results leading to accreditation certificates are necessary prerequisites for EU-wide and international recognition. In order to achieve this, the accreditation bodies must accept a strict and transparent system for evaluation amongst equals (peer evaluation) and must undergo such evaluation on a regular basis. The EA (European co-operation for Accreditation), ILAC (International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation) and IAF (International Accreditation Forum) are responsible for organising this peer evaluation system.

Standards are important parameters in the competitive market

In addition to cost-effectiveness within the manufacturing process, the safety and the quality of European products are the key to the global competitiveness of the European economy. As emphasised by the former EU Industry Commissioner, Günter Verheugen, a modern, efficient and successful standardisation system is decisive in this context. Creation of standards can make an important contribution to the competitiveness of the European economy. According to Verheugen, the battle for market share is also increasingly becoming a battle as to which standards should apply. The same is also true of conformity assessment. This is why VdTÜV - as the Association of Technical Inspection Agencies - and its individual members commit considerable manpower and financial resources to achieving a very high level when it comes to technical rules and regulations.

The long-term experience of the organisation in this area is considered at both national and European and international stage as a constructive and reliable contribution towards achieving global safety.

Daniel Pflumm
Director Brussels Office
Contact:
Telephone +32 2 5348277
daniel.pflumm@vdtuev.de