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EDITORIAL

THE POWER OF CERTIFICATION

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The practice of certifying compliance with standards is almost as old as the creation of standards themselves. This should come as no surprise, because the vast majority of standards are created for the benefit of multiple stakeholders, rather than as pure design tools for vendors. Human nature (on both sides of a transaction) being what it is, there is no reason for a vendor to expect a customer to believe an uncorroborated assertion of compliance. But third party certification can provide a means to fill this gap in trust.

In consequence, the testing and certification of compliance with all manner of requirements, both mandatory under laws and voluntary under many thousands of consensus-based standards, has been an ever-expanding and adaptable practice since the nineteenth century. The result is that we enjoy a world today that is more commercially trustworthy than that which existed only a short time ago.

It is interesting to note in this regard that an increasing number of the certifications that benefit us today fall into the voluntary rather than the mandatory category. True, compliance with thousands upon thousands of health and safety-related standards has been incorporated into governmental regulations. And those regulations continue to be policed by armies of local building inspectors and federal employees of agencies such as the U.S. FDA and OSHA. But there are even more thousands of standards that vendors, service providers and professionals voluntarily comply with in order to increase the commercial attractiveness of their goods and services.

Why should vendors and service providers not only constrain their design freedom and professional conduct to standards, but also pay others to confirm such compliance? The exact reasons vary, but most come down to assuring consumers that their purchasing expectations will be met, and/or that those expectations may be justifiably higher with respect to certified than non-certified alternatives. In practice, these expectations can relate to interoperability (yes, this will plug and play with that), safety (I see the Underwriters Laboratory seal), training, professionalism and trustworthiness (professional certifications of all types) and compliance with ethical, environmental or other societal values (this vendor engages in fair practices, both at home and abroad).

The mere existence of certification programs arguably raises the bar even for those that do not choose to participate. The reason is that consumer expectations can rise in response to the promotional campaigns that are often launched to support a certification program. If the consumer comes to associate value with certified product or service, all competitors are put to the challenge of justifying the value proposition of their own offerings, either through lower prices, providing superior service, or simply by committing to a larger marketing budget. Ultimately, it may become a less expensive and more certain alternative for a non-participating vendor to simply meet the same tests that those who certify have met, rather than to seek to persuade the buying public that an unknown quantity provides a superior alternative – especially if the certified product is now commanding a premium price.

Such market-based self-regulation can provide a very attractive alternative to government regulation, avoiding the greater bureaucracy, waste, and expense that might otherwise be brought to bear to address the same issues. Even assuming parity of process and efficiency in public and private endeavors, it is difficult to imagine the degree to which government payrolls would need to expand, were the public sector

to assume responsibility for assuring compliance with the hundreds of thousands of voluntary consensus standards in existence today.

Recently, broad awareness of the threats presented by global warming and dependency on foreign energy sources has risen dramatically in many countries (including, finally, even the United States). But the political will to address these challenges effectively is still often weak (especially in the United States), despite the fact that public opinion is swinging in favor of responsible action.

In the face of growing consumer interest in environmentally and ethically responsible conduct by industry, a variety of private sector organizations have been launched. Such private sector initiatives can be more nimble and responsive, and less likely to be subverted by special interests, than efforts to achieve the same ends through the legislative process. This has proven to be true not only in the case of initiatives launched by "green" advocates, but also by major companies in some extractive industries that have (in the words of the author Jared Diamond) grown concerned that their "social license" to operate may be revoked if they do not (literally) clean up their acts.

Some of the efforts that are in process now have adapted traditional standard setting and certification concepts to address important new global needs. A splendid example (and there are others) is the Forest Stewardship Council, which is headquartered in Germany, and has offices in over 40 nations. This organization has created rigorous standards for sustainable harvesting of timberland, and certifies independent inspection companies that forest owners can hire to assess their compliance in the field to FSC standards. Only after compliance with these standards has been confirmed can the FSC certification mark be applied to raw lumber, and to those finished goods created from materials that can be tracked back through the supply chain to a certified source. Certified timberlands remain subject to annual, unannounced inspections to assure continuing compliance – all at the cost of those for profit, not for profit, and governmental forest owners that seek certification.

The validity, value and extensibility of the concept of standards are amply demonstrated by such new and innovative efforts. Today, we are faced with ever more daunting challenges, such as global warming, dwindling natural resources and an increasingly ravaged environment. If there is any reason to hope that we will be able to cope with these crises, it may lie in our ability to create such new kinds of voluntary consensus standards – and in the deployment of effective certification programs to back them up.

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