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VINATRONICS TECHNICAL BRIEF: Why Made in the USA Matters

“If that Price is too good to be true.....” – Compliance misrepresentation is a growing problem in Safety

We have all read the business stories about pirating of music and movies. We have all read about big ticket items like counterfeit women’s designer hand bags, designer watches, and name brand golf clubs coming in from overseas. Estimated business losses to counterfeiters now exceed 200 Billion dollars per year. We all shake our heads and know that this is wrong... but this does not have an impact on Safety Product Manufacturers, Safety Distributors, and Safety Professionals... or does it?

In the past few years, one of the hottest topics among suppliers has been safety compliance misrepresentation, usually combined with what many believe is a factor in this trend; price pressure. This issue has become a threat to all ethical businesses selling compliant safety products in the USA market. Our company, Vinatronics, a “Made in the USA” compliant manufacturer of High Visibility Apparel, has seen this trend first hand as well. Although High Visibility Apparel is very important to worker safety, our market is very specialized and compliance driven. Candidly, I always believed Vinatronics was not important enough to be copied, and adherence to the safety standards would maintain a level playing field. Unfortunately I was wrong.

At Industry Shows, I have listened with empathy as other suppliers told stories of Industrial Espionage; I heard stories, and saw for myself, instances of competitors taking multiple photos of booths, stealth use of cell phone cameras, disappearing samples, catalogues, and literature. I heard and saw examples of legitimate customers asking for information, only to turn the information over to overseas suppliers to see if they could “make the product more competitively”. Copies or counterfeits showed up a few months later.

Personal Protection Safety Products are designed to protect lives. Unfortunately, some High Visibility Apparel products in the marketplace have poor quality and are likely non-compliant with the requirements of OSHA, MUTCD, ANSI, NFPA, and ASTM. On two occasions in the past, Vinatronics was called on to prove our products meet or exceed National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) after an end user accident. Vinatronics “Made in the USA” products were, of course, compliant. But these requests beg the question, “Why is this type of misrepresentation occurring in Safety Products now?” And “Who is held accountable when misrepresented, non-compliant products are a factor in an injury?”

A part of it lies with Price Pressure: Noncompliant products would never obtain any traction in the market place, except they are cheap. Again I have heard other supplier’s stories of optical quality in Safety Eyewear so poor the user would have eyestrain in minutes, defective hardware that failed fall protection drop tests, and more. These stories ring true to me as I have seen first hand High Visibility Apparel with reflective that peels, fabric that fades or tears, broken snaps and zipper, and even a “Fire Resistant” vest that burned. These products simply cannot have passed the ANSI and NFPA required 3rd party tests from accredited USA labs. A simple request to ask for proof of compliance BEFORE asking the price would have identified this misrepresentation immediately. It’s fine to ask for the best price. We all understand and want to get the best value for the money. Vinatronics too negotiates the best price we can get on COMPLIANT reflective and COMPLIANT fabric. Then we make the products to Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) to make a quality product at the best price we can. But Vinatronics, nor any other USA manufacturer, can not be “competitive” on price when the competition is using NON-Compliant materials, and are making NON-Compliant products in 3rd world countries where OSHA work rules do not apply.

As a “Made in the USA” manufacturer, Vinatronics High Visibility Apparel is doing our part to promote quality and compliant products. We participate in Industry Associations and Trade Shows, actively educate our Distributor Partners and End User Customers on the latest regulations, and provide numerous “Technical Briefs” on the requirements for High Visibility Apparel. As an ethical Safety Products Manufacturer, we present our products as accurately as possible so visibility will not be a factor in the estimated 1000 people killed or injured in “Work Zone” accidents each year.

Yet safety product misrepresentation is a marketplace reality we must accept. We are all participants in this Market Misrepresentation, and all have a responsibility to at least attempt to slow or stop it. What can we all do? Well here are just a few ideas. Our elected representatives can insist on “Fair Trade” agreements, not “Free Trade” Agreements that result in counterfeiting. Government officials like OSHA can verify PPE equipment is not only in use on job sites, but is compliant with the requirements. Trade Show sponsors can be more vigilant in who is buying booth space and attending, and enforce policies on camera use and other rules designed to stop Industrial Espionage at these shows. Manufacturers with trademarked products and copy write product descriptions must be vigilant in protecting these proprietary materials and insist distributor partners and end users keep them confidential as well. Distributors must ask for proof of product compliance from overseas manufacturers; both to protect their Distributor Reputation and protect their Customer Lives. Ultimately, most OSHA laws are written to require the “Competent Person” at the end user job site to verify PPE products are compliant. It is the “Competent Person” and his or her company who will be fined, or held libel if they “knew or should have known” misrepresented products were in use and were a factor in an accident. Part of competence with all Safety Professionals is to insure we do not reduce cost by increasing exposure. So at every level of the supply chain, when we get the famous question “Is that the best you can do? We answer candidly, “Yes, this is the best we can do, and if that price quote you received from our competitors is too good to be true, it likely isn’t true”.