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Stopped at the Border: Why Product Testing Matters

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The global tide of protectionism has made crossing borders a hot topic. Concerns about the appropriate balance of trading between nations, consumer safety, protecting against terrorism—and, of course, generating revenue—are at the root of volumes of legal documentation. To ensure compliance on all levels, corps of government border agents all over the world are enforcing these regulations.

International trade is subject to various controls and regulations that must be met to ensure goods move legally without complications. However, goods of all kinds sometimes never get past checkpoints, causing massive delays and ripples across supply chains and hitting the bottom lines of businesses along the way. Many don't recognize the importance that appropriate product testing and documentation have on global imports and exports. Multiple government agencies are in play in this critical area of customs clearance—in the U.S., they include the Consumer Product Safety Commission, Food and Drug Administration, Customs and Border Protection, Fish and Wildlife, and others. Improper documentation, backed by incomplete testing and certification that needed to occur long before the goods are packed, can become a roadblock for global shippers long before those goods get into the hands of the consumer.

Whether importing tomatoes or wine, shipping plastic toy soldiers or metal nail clippers, or packing boxes of fashionable coats and shoes, many countries have stringent requirements when it comes to product testing and compliance when goods cross their borders. The EU has CE markings showing where a product was tested and the China Compulsory Certificate regulates items like toys. Dodgy goods that try to slip through the system without proper testing are often stopped thanks to vigilant government entities.

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As consumer protection issues become more prevalent, product safety and compliance will prevail. Companies will face an increase in global consumer product safety regulations, which means they need to fully understand the product safety regulatory environment and develop strong testing and compliance programs.

Early warnings

Product testing should be implemented at every stage along the supply chain but making that a reality is tough. To reduce costs, testing is often pushed back to the suppliers and producers, but that means a brand or retailer must rely on the due diligence of their partners to perform at the highest testing standards, which can't always be tightly controlled or managed. Ultimately, the importer of record is responsible.

The risks driven by product safety and compliance are complex, persistent and costly. If done early enough in the supply chain, brands can protect the end-consumer, their bottom line, and their reputation.

To properly address government requirements and regulations, companies need to use technology tools and best practices to create an efficient test program for all parties involved. With the right technology, companies can implement a supplier management program to monitor and control each of their suppliers alongside frequent and random testing — and regular audits — to ensure the safety of both raw material components and the end product.

A product testing management solution consolidates the tasks and information required for organizations to minimize product quality risks and costs. Real-time visibility, workflow and management by exception capabilities provide a simplified way to holistically manage product testing and safety. Integration to test labs, who provide the results of the regulatory tests, is key to ensuring compliance before generating a certificate of conformity to present to customs officials. Finally, providing downstream functionality for import and export compliance will create a digital platform to streamline the entire process.

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This type of solution can help companies in their efforts to re-evaluate business strategies, gain a better understanding of the critical interdependencies and supply chain risks along the way—from the sourcing of raw materials to delivery to the customer—and appropriately manage these risks before they happen.

by Gary M. Barraco, director, global product marketing with Amber Road