



# Raising the Bar

The newly formed Quality Certification Alliance takes a strong stance on safety

**B**ENJAMIN FRANKLIN SAID it best when he stated, “Certainty? In this world, nothing is certain but death and taxes.” So in a changing industry full of uncertainty—one begging for someone to take an ethical stand on how to conduct business, and facing a barrage of new product safety laws—where does the industry look for guidance, a solid knowledge base and products that offer peace of mind? Where can distributors find that certainty?

Perhaps the Quality Certification Alliance (QCA), a nonprofit group founded by industry leaders, can provide that assurance. With a solid mission statement, “to raise the bar in providing consistently safe, high-quality, socially compliant and environmentally conscientious merchandise to clients and their constituents,” the organization is attempting to offer

as much certainty as possible without a calculator and Schedule C or one foot in the grave.

At the PPAI Expo in January, *Promo Marketing* sat down with three of the organization’s founding members, Jay Deutsch, CEO of Bensussen Deutsch & Associates (BDA), Woodinville, Wash.; Trevor Gnesin, president of Logomark, Tustin, Calif.; and Andrea Engel, vice president of merchandising for BroderBros., Trevese, Pa., in order to learn more.

**Promo Marketing:** What is the QCA? ... What was the catalyst behind forming the QCA?

**Jay Deutsch:** ... We are really excited about this venture. The QCA is really a group of 14 founding members coming together and saying we are going to put together a quality program, a safety program, surrounding products and social compliance inside of the marketplace. The great thing about this organization is that you’ve got suppliers who are in different categories ... [and distributors who] really care about doing the right thing for the industry. And doing the right thing for the industry is really [just] doing the right thing. It’s the law now, [the] Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act

(CPSIA) is a federal law, in conjunction with Prop 65 and with a lot of the other state regulations. At the end of the day, the right thing is to put out the best and most reliable product every time.

**Andrea Engel:** We found, especially with our customer base, there was a lot of confusion. ... We felt it was really important to help our customers have a comfort level. There are so many laws, so many things that are procedures that really aren’t standardized, we thought it was important to do this as a service to our customer base, so they would feel comfortable knowing that no matter what product they bought from this group, they could be sure it met all the requirements, it was safe and there were no worries.

**Trevor Gnesin:** It is a really fragmented industry. Everybody was trying to do their own thing, but choosing nothing. It’s so broad, and the frame of it we have to work with is so confusing, that to try to do it as individual [companies] was very difficult. So, we got together as a group to try to work it out, and [with] the knowledge that everybody had, we pooled our sources together to come up with an organization that can make a difference to the industry. »

**PM:** So Jay, then, what are your goals? What are you trying to accomplish?

**JD:** I think the great thing about the QCA is that it's not just a one-person show. It really has been [a group effort]. We've been doing this for a year ... working on what those standards are, how to test the different product lines, how to test different materials, understanding what CPSIA is and formulating what those accreditations and standards are. Now, our goal collectively is to get every member audited, accredited and certified by June 30 of 2009. I think you gotta walk the talk. The members are united in the fact that ... our job now is to get our best practices documented, audited and in action [to be] certified under the QCA label.

**PM:** Are you finding that, for the end-users, this is an issue with them at this point? Are they calling you and saying, "How do I know that these products are safe?"

**JD:** First of all, we've been having conversations with our clients over the past five years. We have an office in China, we're on factory audits and safety testing programs with many of our clients directly. What we have been doing is working very closely with certain supplier partners that have been very well-versed and very good at what they do. So now what we are doing is coming together to set

those standards. I think it's going to help every client, and I can tell you right now, there are clients of BDA who are extremely excited about the possibility of having QCA accredit every supplier in this industry. I don't think that will happen. Quite frankly, it's going to be tough for suppliers ... to get certified under QCA.

**TG:** Jay said this is a tough audit. And the reason why is because we want to set the bar at a [high] level. We want ... to look back at the levels we set and say these levels exceed what is required. We don't want to lower our standard to the lowest common denominator, we want to raise it.

**AE:** They are all achievable though. They are very achievable. We spent a lot of time going through the compliance aspect of this with a lot of people [who have] a good, solid knowledge base. We really looked at all the different types of programs out there, and really looked at best practices across the board. So this is modeled after many programs that were [already] in place. We wanted to be sure that it was achievable, but in order for this to have value it has to be something that differentiates us from just anybody who can set up a table and sell products in the industry.

It used to be [as easy as a] social compliance statement. You could type up a piece of paper and say this is what our ... statement is. ... But now you can't just type up a piece of paper and put it up on your Web site. You really have to ... walk the talk.

**TG:** You know, it's no different than after 9/11. Before, we'd all just get on a plane and fly. After 9/11 you had to change the way you travel. At first people were upset about it. But they've adjusted to it—you go to the airport early. Today, there are less incidents and hopefully it will stay that way. People adjust and companies adjust. It wasn't easy, it's taken how many years to make those changes? Only now is it becoming seamless, going through airports where they are organized. It's the same thing that's going to happen with our organization.

**AE:** And it's a continuous improvement. This isn't like a [single] point in time you get accredited [and its done]. We are always going to look for continuous improvement in everyone's methods and standards.

**PM:** If I was ... a supplier and I picked up the phone and said »



**“How do I get certified?,” can you take me through that process?**

**JD:** What we are really focused on is getting our founding members ... accredited. We are taking applications of interest for people who'd like to be considered for the second round. ... It is not a walk in the park. ... Consumers want safe product and that's not too much to ask. In fact, that should be the standard of this industry. ... What's truly amazing, you've got competitors standing side by side. You've got the Swedas, the Logomarks, the Leed's who are standing side by side and putting down their competitive nature and they are working together. It's pretty refreshing and it also tells you the right people are taking the right amount of resources and giving it the right amount of attention.

QCA is a very serious organization run by a very serious lady, Dee (Denise) Fenton. She is the executive director [and] we were fortunate to have her join and run QCA. She is extremely knowledgeable in this business. She is extremely knowledgeable in all the different aspects of manufacturing. Her career is highlighted by authoring, setting up and running Wal-Mart's product and social compliance program out in the Far East. So we've got a great leader, she understands the mission and she's taken it as a personal goal that this is going to work.

**TG:** And she's tough. She's rejected two of our SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) already and made ... my staff rewrite them. So, even though we are the founding members, she's not just saying, “That's acceptable,” we had to go rewrite them.

**PM:** What are the actual steps in getting certification so you can have that seal?

**JD:** First, you have to [answer] prequalification questionnaires. You have to map the whole organization. You have to map your whole manufacturing base. You have to map your SOPs. And then you go in for a review. [But] before anything ever happens, you have to get your full set of what you should be [doing], then comes the auditing and the certification. The auditing process: Dee with third-party testing companies [goes] into your facilities, both here stateside—any domestic decorating, any overseas factories, and to a representation of your factories to ensure that your SOPs are alive and breathing.

**PM:** So what is it that they are looking for? Product safety, social responsibility? ...

**AE:** It's five parts. Product quality, product safety, social compliance, environmental stewardship and supply-chain safety. The overall basis of the self-assessment is [to ask the questions] “Do you have policies in place?” and “Do you have ways to enforce those policies?” It's very intensive.

**TG:** ... It's not just about having a policy in place and saying, “Well, now we have a policy in place.” It is such an intricate and expensive structure that has to be put in place, it actually forces you as a company to live by this structure and this certification. It forces you as a company to change the way you are bringing product in. It's not just about saying “We're certified now.” It's about having the structures in place—you have to have the checks

and balances. That's what is being audited, that you adhere to those checks and balances and not allow [bad] product to come in.

**AE:** All of this is process-oriented. The mission of the alliance is not to outline what is a good quality bag, or what is a good quality T-shirt. The mission is to make sure the processes and procedures are in place. So whether you're making a bag and I'm making a T-shirt, do we both have processes in place to make sure the quality we set in [manufacturing is being met]? Does the product comply

It's taken us a year to get to this point, a lot of effort; energy; passion; blood, sweat and tears; and a lot of money to get to this point. Hopefully 12 months from now, the industry will see that this was something very real, it means something. The consumer will see it, the end-user will see it and the industry will be better for it. That's the angle that is our goal. - Jay Deutsch, BDA

with federal safety regulations? That's what is great about this, it isn't product-specific, it's process- and procedural-specific.

**JD:** Absolutely, if you have the right process—you can detect and deter any mistakes from taking place. If you have been in this business a long time and you have been doing the right amount of testing—you'll find mistake opportunities in the manufacturing process. That's why we set up the right processes, and the right testing, and the right compliances, and the right auditing, in order to ... try to detect and deter any mistakes from hitting the market place.

**PM:** You mention [within your press release] that the highest level of certification requires self-evaluation and you've got outside auditing companies coming in. ... Where are these auditor companies coming from?

**JD:** Veritas and Intertech—the main testing companies that are used worldwide.

**AE:** And these are companies that test all different products ... worldwide, world-acclaimed and completely independent.

**PM:** So when [auditors] come into the facilities, how does that process work?

**AE:** We have a standard set up so they understand what to look for. They are experienced—so they know they can go into a factory, know immediately if the quality practices that factory has set up will yield the results that [we are looking for.]

**PM:** It seems like a massive undertaking, with all the testing, audits, certifications. What is the cost associated?

**JD:** I'd say most of the members already are doing these types of tests and that's why these companies are on the QCA today. They are taking the testing very seriously. ... It could be upwards of six figures to get certified. And it's going to cost you, potentially, to change your internal process.

**TG:** And to maintain it. This is like long-term medication. You've got to keep on taking it, so you're not dead.

**JD:** However, if you do this and you comply with this, I think the return on investment is within 12 months because you will lower the amount of mistakes and the issues you have. It allows companies to do what they do best, instead of worrying about every single order coming in, because they have the processes in place in order to detect any problem before it ever even comes out.

**TG:** The laws are changing all the time. And no one can tell you they are 100 percent safe, but what they can tell you is that they have systems in place to make it as safe as possible to try to deter as much as possible.

**AE:** No one can test every single piece of every single consumer product sold or given away ... it's impossible. But you want to align yourself with companies that are dedicated to making sure that the products they manufacture have processes in place and that they work.

**JD:** I think Trevor said it ... audit, validate, verify.

**TG:** Absolutely. ... This is the cost of doing business today. In the olden days, one could start a business, you could bring in product and you could sell it. [Today,] consumers/distributors are going to have to make a decision about whether they want to buy from [noncertified] companies, because it puts them at risk as well.

**PM:** So after all the members have gotten certified, what will you do to get other suppliers to join and jump in?

**JD:** Hopefully, there is going to be a natural attraction for people who take product safety and social compliance seriously. This organization is not to service the entire industry and certify every company. It is here to certify those who are taking product safety very seriously and are able to get certified. ... The QCA seal should be like the *Good Housekeeping* Seal. It should mean something. It's taken us a year to get to this point, a lot of effort; energy; passion; blood, sweat and tears; and a lot of money to get to this point. Hopefully 12 months from now, the industry will see that this was something very real, it means something. The consumer will see it, the end-user will see it and the industry will be better for it. That's the angle that is our goal.

*This interview was edited for space and clarity. See the video at [www.promomarketing.com](http://www.promomarketing.com).*