

Representing The Wiping Materials, Recycled Clothing, New Textile By Products and Fiber Industries

In My Opinion



SMART, ISO Standards: The World Aligns

By Bill Schapiro, Whitehouse & Schapiro, Baltimore, MD

SMART Immediate Past President

In the past few weeks, convention chair Eric Warshaw of Erexcorp has worked with SMART's board and government relations committee to point out a potentially serious threat that many of us may not be aware of as we go about our day to day business: "ISO Certification for Second Hand Goods".

Below is Eric's history of the issue:

HISTORY OF ISO

By Eric Warshaw

"The issue of ISO certification for second hand goods arose about 1-1/2 years ago when SMART was advised by the Commerce Department that this matter was an outgrowth of demands by Kenya that international standards be developed in order to protect Kenya from bad quality used clothing.

This interest on the part of Kenya was not inconsistent with their past attempts to restrict the import of used clothing into the East African country. About 7 years ago, Kenya's Bureau of Standards developed a set of "quality" standards which they themselves implemented on the pretext of protecting the health and safety of its citizens. Our experience shows that these standards were fairly arbitrarily applied. While they didn't really disrupt the trade in used clothing initially, they became a serious irritant to used clothing importers in Kenya.

Then about 5 years ago, the Government of Kenya took aggressive steps to ban the import of used clothing. This resulted in huge demonstrations for several weeks in Kenya and extreme anti-government speeches. In the meantime, SMART through the Commerce Department added diplomatic pressure to resolve the matter and used clothing was imported again into Kenya on a semi-normal basis. Evidently, poverty in Kenya and political necessity to import used clothing clashed with the traditional policy of the Kenyan Government to ban used clothing.

Having failed to ban the merchandise outright, I sense that Kenya is now resorting to other methods to impede the trade. I consider this strange since I always believed that ISO was more of a matter of "process" than a matter of outright quality. Nonetheless developing country diplomats might easily conflate the two goals.

Concerns Regarding China

It's my understanding that the development of ISO standards is being chaired by China and co-chaired by Canada.

My concern relating to China has been its traditional animosity to the trade in used clothing. About 10 years ago, I attended a technical working group meeting of the Basel Convention on behalf of SMART held in Dakar Senegal.

Industry members were invited to give input and as a result, used clothing was exempted from being classified as "hazardous waste" as defined by the Basel Convention. I was struck during this meeting, however, by the degree of hostility demonstrated by delegates from China against any trade in used clothing.

I sense that this is part of a long range and traditional policy of China and will always be an underlying political motivation in how China handles this ISO matter. I also believe that China's animosity to the cross border trade in used clothing explains why the current working group for ISO suggests that cross border trade in "as is" used clothing is inappropriate.

We need to approach and motivate our natural allies.

Our closest natural allies in these negotiations would be the Canadians and the EU. While I've mentioned this matter to active members of the BIR, they have not yet become motivated enough to do something. Yet, we shall need to keep nudging them and inform them of the risks and expenses of doing nothing on this matter.

Since Canada is co-chairing the development of ISO standards it would naturally be in our interests to motivate SMART's Canadian members to start a campaign to communicate with their own government officials. Finally, there are several developing countries where the grading of used clothing is taking place these days including but not limited to Chile, India, and Pakistan. These are the forces at play in this ISO matter as I see it."

In line with Eric Warshaw's suggestion that we pursue alliances with our natural worldwide industry allies on this serious potential threat to our industry, SMART Vice President Larry Groipen and Sort President Eric Stubin visited Amsterdam on October 26 and 27 to attend a BIR meeting. BIR is the European Union association of Textile Recyclers and the ISO standards issue was one of key areas that our members discussed as an area where a unified approach would be highly effective.

All of this points out how important it is that we have a strong Association like SMART that represents this "global industry for the little guy", and that we have an active and committed membership and Board of Directors that not only publicizes these issues but finds creative means to meet these challenges as well.