

SMART, ISO STANDARDS: THE WORLD ALIGNS

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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.

