



Fire Industry Association

Third Party Certification:

What does it mean for businesses?

Introduction

If you work in any part of the fire safety industry you will at least have heard of Third Party Certification (TPC) but you may not be too sure what it is. Even if you work for a certificated company, you might not be sure what the benefit is to you or your company. If this sounds like you, read on...

What is TPC?

It is, in essence, a consumer protection scheme. It enables you, the supplier and certificated company, to provide proof that your company is competent.

TPC means that an independent expert, the third party, has assessed your business and found that it has met certain standards. These standards usually relate to technical aspects of the business activities, but may also relate to other aspects of the business such as ethical and environmental qualities. This white paper addresses TPC specifically in relation to the fire safety services industry, looking at how it affects areas such as the provision of professional services and the installation and maintenance of products and systems and why businesses should choose to attain it.



How does getting certificated benefit your business?

Many customers know little about how fire threatens their people and their business or what their legal obligations are. Many are unaware that they have a duty to employ 'competent persons' and just how easy it is to set up a business in the fire safety industry. As every good salesperson knows, educating the client as to their problems and the solutions you can offer is a major step towards closing a deal. If you are a certificated company, you can clearly prove your competence and differentiate yourself from much of the competition.

Those customers who are aware of fire safety and the legal issues, as well as the value of TPC, will seek out those suppliers who are certificated, often via the scheme operator or certification body's website. Newly certificated companies are often surprised when they get enquiries from customers they were not pursuing or even aware of. Additional sales at very little cost are always welcome.

Customers who appreciate the value of TPC will generally be aware that doing the job right may cost more and should be prepared to pay a premium for it. By the same token, eliminating cut price competition means profit margins are likely to be protected.

Many certificated companies claim that the discipline of TPC actually improves the company because it forces you to examine your company more closely. This results in finding better ways to do things and identifying potential problems and averting catastrophes before they can happen. The end result is a reduction of costs and a more pleasant working environment.

How does TPC work?

A Third Party Certification Body (or CB for short) assesses the qualities of your company by comparing it with the requirements of a particular scheme. If your business meets these standards then it is issued with a certificate detailing the scope of your certification. This process is called an Audit and is carried out when your organisation is first certificated and then periodically (typically every six months) to maintain the certificate.

Your company (the Certificated Organisation) is permitted to claim compliance with the scheme, display copies of your certificate and, in most cases, display the logos of the scheme and the CB.

In the UK, anyone can write a scheme document and anyone can set up a CB. For TPC to have value to both you and to the end user, the CB and the scheme must have a high degree of credibility.

In the UK, the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) validates the authority of the CB. It is an internationally recognised organisation appointed by the government to accredit certification bodies and the schemes they deliver. Anyone can set up a CB. Therefore, only those accredited by UKAS have proven credibility.

The schemes are written and administered by recognised authorities. These include standard setting bodies such as British Standards Institution (BSI), CBs such as the Loss Prevention Certification Board (LPCB), or independent organisations such as British Approvals for Fire Equipment (BAFE). UKAS will only accredit a CB to deliver a scheme where UKAS is satisfied the schemes comply with international quality standards.

What schemes are available?

There is a wide range of TPC schemes covering such diverse areas as the installation and maintenance of fire alarms, extinguishers, sprinklers, emergency lighting, fire risk assessments, fire doors and passive fire protection.

The majority of fire safety related schemes are produced and owned by the CBs. The exceptions are those produced by national and international standard setting bodies such as BS EN ISO 9001 and those produced by independent bodies such as BAFE.

BAFE is a third party registration body (not a CB) for the fire protection industry, developing schemes for UKAS accredited CBs to assess and certificate to. BAFE was originally created by the industry to regulate and raise the standard of fire extinguisher manufacture. It has gone on to develop schemes covering fire alarms, extinguisher maintenance, extinguishing systems, emergency lighting and fire risk assessment.

LPCB, by contrast, evolved out of the Fire Officers Committee (FOC) which was principally concerned with sprinklers and fire alarms to satisfy the needs of the insurance industry. It too has gone on to develop schemes for various products and services. Exova (formerly Warrington) and IFC are other CBs with their own schemes for products and service, principally related to construction products, who have expanded into other areas.

At first view, some schemes may look very similar. LPCB LPS1014 and BAFE SP203-1 both cover fire alarm systems. However, on close examination they are very different schemes. LPS1014 requires the certificated organisation to provide design, installation, commissioning and maintenance. It also requires the organization to be ISO 9001 certificated, either independently or through LPCB. The BAFE SP203-1 scheme is often referred to as the modular scheme as the supplier can be certificated for design, installation, commissioning, maintenance or any combination of these. While it does require the certificated organisation to have a quality management system (as detailed in the scheme) it does not require it to have ISO 9001.

Both schemes have a provision for the supplier to issue a certificate of conformity for each new system. The certificate of conformity is a mandatory requirement of the LPS1014 and SP203-1 schemes. It is that certificate of conformity that the end user should be looking for. The certificate of conformity should provide convincing evidence to building control, fire and rescue service and insurance that the system is of good quality and fit for purpose.

There are a couple of schemes that are worth a closer look because of the peculiarities of the scheme or its popularity; BAFE SP101 and BAFE SP205.

SP101 covers the maintenance of extinguishers. Like most TPC schemes, it places great emphasis on the competency of individuals involved, but this scheme takes it a step further. The industry recognised that with extinguisher maintenance, the competency of the technician was paramount. SP101 is, essentially, a company scheme that encompasses the competency of the service technician.

For many years it was known that there was a problem with the quality of fire risk assessments carried out by commercial organisations for compliance with fire safety regulations. Now several schemes have been set up, but most of these are concerned with the competency of the individual and not the organisation as a whole. The FIA drafted a scheme which subsequently became BAFE SP205. Up until recently this was the only UKAS accreditation scheme for fire risk assessors. In parallel with this, the fire risk assessors competency council developed a set of competency criteria for the fire risk assessors and subsequently produced a user guide to selecting competent organisations to carry out assessments. This guide indicates, among other schemes, SP205. IFC Certification Ltd has also now received UKAS accreditation for their IFCC0099 scheme for companies providing fire risk assessment services.



How can the FIA help?

The FIA can provide information on all of the TPC schemes and give advice on which schemes would be most appropriate to cover your areas of work. The FIA is also able to provide consultancy services to businesses looking to achieve TPC, principally through BAFE, to assist them in working towards scheme requirements. By meeting the requirements of a scheme relevant to your work in the industry, you will meet the necessary criteria to become a member of the FIA.

The FIA also has its own Route to Certification schemes that can assist companies in achieving TPC. These are available for SP203 (Fire Detection and Alarm systems), SP101 (Portable Fire Extinguishers) and SP205 (Fire Risk Assessment).

These are available to both members and non-members. Benefits of enrolling on one of the schemes include shorter timescales, the FIA's help in attaining TPC, a set payment plan and the first year of FIA membership in a competitively priced package.

Conclusion

Gaining TPC enables you to differentiate your company from others. It also allows you to attract a better quality of client, be involved in a better quality of work, win extra business and run your business better.