

# Can You GUARANTEE SAFE Products?

14 industry companies say they can — and form a new alliance to prove it

BY DEBRAH ROSEN

**It's** not often that suppliers put their competitive instincts aside to work together, share supply-chain information or discuss business objectives. But when a group of industry members sat down to consider a common need to distinguish themselves as safe and responsible, they decided it was time to give it a try.

"It's taken a year to get to this point," says Jay Deutsch, CEO of large Woodinville, Wash.-based distributor BDA. He sits at a table with representatives from Broder Bros., Sweda, Logomark, Gemline and Leed's. As some of the founding members of a new organization called the Quality Certification Alliance (QCA), these competitors seem awfully comfortable around each other.

Deutsch, who helped spearhead QCA, explains that the idea came after long discussions with end buyers. Through their conversations, he says it was clear that the promotional products industry needed a way to guarantee its customers that they're purchasing safe products from responsible suppliers.

The result is an independent, non-governmental organization that seeks to certify industry companies that offer safe, environmentally friendly and socially responsible practices and products. According to the organization, the internal practices of all suppliers bearing the QCA Seal of Approval have been evaluated in five areas: product safety, quality assurance,

social compliance, supply-chain security and environmental stewardship. Evaluations are conducted by independent, third-party auditors using regulations and standards set by the United Nations, European Union, U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and other regulatory bodies. In the end, they aim to ensure that all manufactured, imported and imported merchandise from QCA-certified companies meets these established guidelines and to keep unsafe products from reaching the marketplace.

Members say the QCA Seal of Approval provides an answer when end buyers request proof of product quality, social accountability and environmental responsibility. And, they say, it's necessary as end buyers are increasingly wary of giving away products that may affect their own reputations. "There should be no delineation between the products they make and the products they give away with their name on it," Deutsch says. "The word 'ignorance' is not a good defense anymore."

## How it Began, Where it's Going

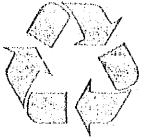
About a year ago, 20 companies met for preliminary discussions about an industry product-safety alliance. Of that group, 14 decided to pursue earnestly their shared goal. "It's not a club," asserts Andrea Engel, vice president of merchandising for Trevoze, Pa.-based Broder Bros., noting that they take



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Quality and Safety. Delivered.

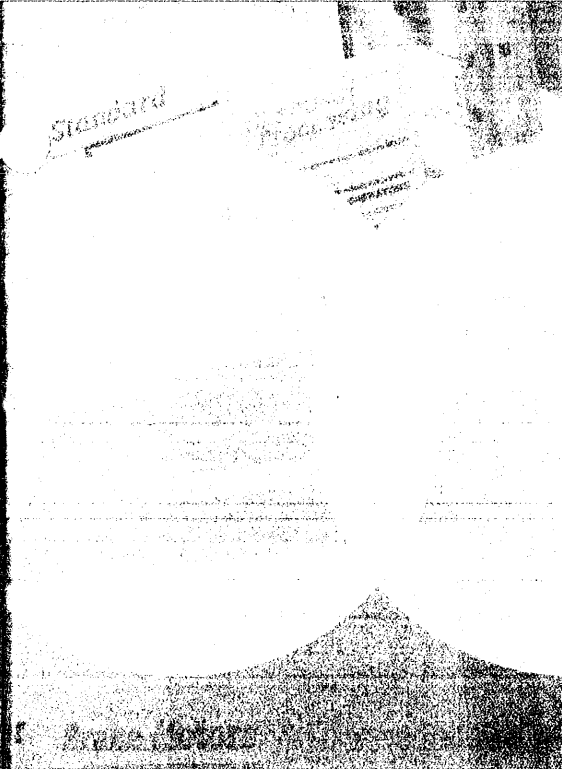
a timetable for admitting new members. Accreditation costs are not fixed and will vary with the amount of auditing needed. Companies that do not pass are allowed time to take corrective actions and be re-audited.

Alliance members hope to raise awareness of this group among suppliers and distributors. They acknowledge that they've invested heavily in both time and money, but that wasn't a deterrent. As Hagan puts it, "I look at it as a cost of doing business."



QCA's 14 founding members are: Avaline, Barton Nelson Inc., BDA Inc., Broder Bros. Co., Dard, Fanda, Gordon Industries Ltd., Leed's, Litehouse Custom Printing, Logomark, MMI, Prime Line, Sweda Co. LLC, and Williams Industries/Next Products LLC. Gemline has since joined the group.

"I hope that this time next year, 12 months or 18 months from now," Deutsch says, "people look back and say, 'These guys did it.'"



this initiative very seriously. "It's been a lot of passion and a lot of commitment."

With some sharing of proprietary information — virtually unheard of in any business — the initial members began laying the framework for this first-of-its-kind organization. "We've come together out of mutual respect," explains Jim Hagan, president and CEO of Sweda in City of Industry, Calif.

During several meetings across the country, they began to hammer out the details for how the alliance would work. They chose third-party testers, established governing rules and agreed on standards. They also hired an executive director, putting their venture in the hands of Denise Fenton, who oversaw the design and implementation of Wal-Mart's factory-compliance system.

Fenton explains that all QCA members will first self-certify that their processes and facilities are compliant with all applicable regulations. Once they've done as much as they can on their own, third-party auditors will evaluate to verify compliance or mandate improvements. Companies that achieve full accreditation will be certified for two years with spot auditing throughout, but members are still working out much of the organization's systems. "We're the guinea pigs for this project," Engel admits.

Each of the original member companies is currently going through the same procedure, and they hope to all be QCA-accredited by June 30, 2009. The QCA is accepting applications of interest, but does not yet have

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