



FEATURE ARTICLE

ROGUE CABLES CAN DAMAGE YOUR HEALTH

The talk about poor quality cables is reaching a crescendo. But what is it all about? And why should it be of concern to everyone? Mark Froggatt of Draka explains.

When the former DTI [Department of Trade & Industry], now called the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, and BASEC [British Approvals Service for Cables] go public about their concerns regarding rogue cables being available on the UK market, it is most certainly time to sit up and take notice.

While some of the evidence is anecdotal, it is too plentiful to continue ignoring, particularly with the increasing prospect of legal action following in the aftermath of a fire. And the situation shows little sign of abating. Like many of the reputable cable manufacturers, Draka has a sin-box of sample rogue cables that is filling up fast.

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The message from BASEC could not be clearer. A press release issued by the organisation in July included unequivocal advice to everyone in the market: do not take a supplier's claim at face value, as faulty or non-compliant products are becoming a major industry issue. Its warning is that there is now a "severe danger" of cables being supplied and installed that lack independent third-party approval.

Dr Jeremy Hodge, chief executive of BASEC, is quoted as saying: "A common misunderstanding is thinking that a cable is compliant, or is even BASEC approved, just because the supplier claims that it has been produced to a certain standard. This is not the case. Cables marked with just a standard number should be treated with caution. It is possible that no-one has independently examined that cable."

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The problem seems to have its origin in the copper price rises. Reports soon circulated that some unscrupulous producers had fallen prey to the temptation to cut corners and use less copper in the manufacturing process. Reducing the diameter of the copper wire too much has the effect of reducing the current rating and increasing the resistivity of the cable. This could potentially result in overheating which could lead to fire or reduce the level of safety against electrical shock.

From there the situation worsened. Recently, there have been instances where materials other than pure copper, such as steel wire, copper-coated aluminium or badly recycled copper have been used in cables. These instances seem to be restricted to imported cable, and now also seem to include incorrect cable construction resulting in inferior fire performance. This can have a serious detrimental impact on the safety and reliability of fire detection and alarm systems, and emergency lighting installations.

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WHY WORRY?

Because surely, this is a problem for everyone, nobody can wash their hands of it.

Just consider the following scenario. A contractor buys cable specifying that it is to comply with a specific British or European standard. Cable is supplied that proudly bears the kite-mark. Thousands of metres of the cable are installed when fate steps in and fire breaks out. The cable is found to be defective. Welcome to the world of litigation, substantial costs, and a reputation that has taken time to build and grow, goes from well respected and into the dustbin in one quick step.

The specifier defends his actions by pointing out that he had clearly stated the standards to which the cable must apply. Attention then swings to the installer. In turn, they show the cable the wholesaler supplied, which probably has the standard printed on the outside. They will undoubtedly argue that they asked for compliant cable, and relied on the wholesaler's expert advice and care. Finally, the wholesaler will be asked to prove that the materials supplied were backed up by the required levels of certification and accreditation from their supplier.

Sound bad enough? Well, that could be just the beginning. How long do you think it would be before other installer customers are asking questions about the "kite-marked" cable supplied to them? It is this scenario which is causing concern and why there are certain manufacturers who are delivering this message to the whole of the supply chain.

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The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order has made the market far more conscious of the need to use only proven, third-party approved, top quality products. Relying on assertions that a cable is manufactured to a specific standard, simply will no longer do. The Fire Safety Order places responsibilities on all of us to take 'reasonable' steps to ensure fire safety and so it is reasonable for wholesalers to demand independent test certification by such organisations as BASEC, TUV or LPCB. These organisations are accredited by UKAS – United Kingdom Accreditation Service – to ensure that their credentials are of the highest international standards.

The importance of this third-party accreditation is that the wholesaler and the installer can be sure that the cable being supplied today is built to exactly – and the key word is “exactly” – the same standard and specification as the cable that was originally tested and approved. If the cable is from a producer that does not have this third-party accreditation there is, in reality, no guarantee whatsoever that it is manufactured to the standard being claimed for it.

This is important even when buying cable from a reputable manufacturer. Earlier cable from that supplier may have been up to standard, but re-sourcing materials and accepting a different specification, changing the formulation of the coating or sheathing, or modifying the design are just examples of changes that can affect the performance of a cable that still proudly – but now erroneously – bears the kite-mark.

NEVER MIND THE QUALITY, WHAT'S THE PRICE.

The fact that these-rogue cables and sharp practices have come to light actually

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increases the need to insist on selling only third-party accredited cable (and, of course, making sure that hard evidence of that accreditation is produced). This gives out very positive and powerful messages, for example, it can be used to illustrate the fact that the quality of the product is of paramount importance, whilst also demonstrating an understanding of the legislative environment in which the installers now operate, and of their need for compliance with the Fire Safety Order and the recent changes to the Building Regulations.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Buy cheap cable now Pay for it later



The consequences of buying cheap cable can be fatal. And yet, that's exactly what some people are doing. Yes, even in this day and age poor quality and often highly dangerous cable is available in the market, as these photographs show. Manufacturers of cable in this condition undermine the professional reputation of the industry. They put livelihoods and indeed lives at risk.

In our book, there's no place for products like this and yet it can, on occasions, be difficult to tell the difference. However, there's one sure way to be certain you are using the highest quality products, always specify Draka.



The world's most trusted cable brand

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