Protecting intellectual property by design

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Industrial intellectual property (IP) offers a powerful tool to communicate and reinforce expectations associated with product quality, consistency, and performance. In all forms (whether brand names, patents, trademarks, design markings, or others), IP additionally can help point the way to reputable “tried-and-true” product solutions and draw clear distinctions in an increasingly complex global marketplace.

For the design engineer, IP especially can help guide decision-making during the specification process and instill confidence along the way. When a competitor treads on the safeguards afforded by IP rights, the impact can have far-reaching consequences. Customers may unwittingly purchase “off-brand” products, which may under-perform, prove defective, or even cause damage in service. In turn, the perceived integrity of branded products may suffer over time and the legitimate manufacturer’s name and reputation ultimately can become tarnished.

As a foundation of marketing, branding, trademarks, and other forms of IP create value. For customer audiences, including engineers, their value resides in the promise that the product or component will deliver; the owner’s value lies in the security of higher future earnings.

The existence of brands and trademarks especially reaches into the design engineering community, most notably turning on the issues of reliability and alternative “off-brand equivalents.” Simply expressed, design engineers want, need, and deserve to know what they’re getting.

In the case of self-clinching fasteners, holding true with other components, engineers need to satisfy particular parameters and a time-proven product brand can help make the choice much easier and bolster reassurance in selection. For example, very tight and precise tolerances are required to maximize self-clinching fastener performance (a variation of only .0020/0.051 mm in a part specified with a dimension of .0100/0.254 mm can make a 20 percent difference); thread fit is crucial, often to meet one or more government specifications (and equivalents may not meet the criteria); improper heat treatment can cause fastener failure after installation; and poorly plated parts can diminish the performance and appearance of the final product.

Brands and trademarks provide ready-made “shortcuts” as signposts for designers to arrive at solutions that will make specification a success and an application sound.

Playing their necessary part, suppliers should make every effort to support the levels of confidence historically invested in and carried by their brands. Related resources on Web sites, brand and trademark denotations in print and online product literature, and references in sales and marketing materials can make a big difference in taking a leadership role.

Ongoing IP enforcement seems to be one of the costs of doing business today. Much is at stake. Our firsthand experience is that companies would do well to take up the cause for their own overall good. In doing so, they will both cultivate and retain the trust placed in their products and experience by the design engineering community and by customers throughout industry.

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