



Cheap LEDs: buyer beware

Lux 2015



Trading Standards officials intercepted 1,000 potentially hazardous LED lamps at the Port of Felixstowe recently

As the market for LED lighting continues to grow, suppliers are competing to cash in. And while competition is forcing prices down for consumers, the appearance of dodgy and dangerous products on the market means that those who go for cheap LEDs risk paying a much greater price.

LED lamps are promoted as long-term money-savers, using a fraction of the electricity of conventional bulbs, and lasting for years. But faulty and hazardous products have sullied LEDs reputation, and are triggering a reaction from authorities around the world.

In a case reported on the BBC's *Fake Britain*, a shipment of 1,000 LED lamps, imported from China, was identified at the Port of Felixstowe on the east coast of England. A number of samples were found to have insufficient insulation and exposed live elements. They were potentially lethal.



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In a demonstration of the danger posed, the *Fake Britain* team tested some of the lamps were tested in a laboratory, alongside a branded lamp. The unbranded domestic lamp recorded 179V and 91mA in a touch test – multiple times higher than the maximum 60V and 2mA permitted in European safety standards. A higher-powered lamp for commercial use recorded 203V and 98mA, making it a potentially lethal threat. The branded LED recorded no voltage or current output when touched, as it should be.

Causing further concern for alarm, the products in the Felixstowe consignment all carried the CE mark, which is supposed to show compliance with all applicable EU directives, indicating that the products are OK to sell in Europe. But clearly these products were not.

‘The shipment was identified through controls set up by the single point of contact for border controls,’ explains Carol Garrett, principal officer at Suffolk Trading Standards, who oversaw the Felixstowe border control interception. ‘We had identified, earlier in 2014, that a number of LED products intercepted at UK border points were failing product safety testing. We carried out some targeted controls on LED products during July to November 2014, as a result of the work we did across various UK border points.’

A number of alerts had been recorded through the EU’s rapid alert system for dangerous products, which gives the authorities in each member state a way to share information on products that pose a risk.

The initiative yielded strong results, with 64 per cent of the LED lamps tested and assessed found to be unsafe. The threat didn’t stop at lamps. ‘As the project was delivered, high levels of non-compliance were also identified in other LED products,’ Garrett continues: ‘Seventy-six per cent of LED lighting products tested and assessed were found to be unsafe or non-compliant.’

The Felixstowe consignment had been imported by a London-based supplier. ‘We believe the products were destined for sale via the internet,’ says Garrett. Not any more: they were destroyed at the border. But many more continue to exchange hands.

More reputable lighting manufacturers say that buyers must beware. Paul Davidson, technical and project manager at LED lighting specialist Aurora, says buyers should avoid LEDs in white boxes in favour of branded products. ‘Lighting designers know to steer clear of specifying unbranded LEDs in white boxes, which are an indication that their origin could be suspect or could be fake and, or, unsafe. By specifying branded products from a recognised manufacturer, the safety job’s done for you because each lamp has been tested before it leaves the factory.’



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Fredrik Grönkvist is co-founder of ChinaImportal.com – an online platform where European and American buyers can source from suppliers in China.

Is it common for Chinese manufacturers to export falsely CE marked products?

It's not the Chinese supplier's responsibility to ensure compliance. They're governed by Chinese regulations, not EU directives. It's the importers' responsibility to ensure that all imported items are both manufactured in compliance, and labelled accordingly. Most Chinese suppliers, I'd say around 90-95 per cent in most industries, are unable to manufacture items in compliance. Just because a company can assemble LED lights doesn't mean they actually know anything about the product. The suppliers that are able to ensure compliance are almost always the ones that are already focused on Western markets. Many suppliers focus on the domestic market in China or on South America and Africa - why should they bother to ensure compliance for a handful of EU buyers? Are they willing to print a CE mark just to make the sale? Most likely, yes. It's not their legal responsibility.

Should the CE marking be trusted on any China-manufactured products?

There are plenty of suppliers that make compliant items, but take a random selection and I'd say you run a 90 per cent chance of importing non-compliant items. The CE mark is just a signal but if the technical aspects are not compliant, it's worthless.

Is enforcement being stepped up?

Yes, all over the EU. In the last few months we've received reports from importers in the UK, Spain, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Sweden having their items confiscated due to non-compliance. I think the reason is that it's so much easier to source products internationally: go online to a B2B directory and send an enquiry. It really seems so simple, but it isn't. As a result, a lot of small businesses without product knowledge engage in enterprises they are not qualified to manage.