Ethics in standards

How CPIN plays a vital role in ensuring ethical behaviour is built into standards

BSI Consumer & Public Interest Network (CPIN)

CPIN is an independent network of volunteers trained to represent the UK consumer voice in standards. Consumer representation is essential to build consumer trust and ensure that standards that address consumer issues are robust, fit-for-purpose and future proof.

CPIN focuses its work in five priority areas:

- Consumer safety
- Consumer vulnerability
- Digital
- Services
- Sustainability

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Ethical practice by organizations encompasses a broad range of social, economic justice and sustainability issues - whether that's manufacturers and retailers having a policy requiring fair pay for labour throughout their supply chains, service providers taking account of the needs of vulnerable consumers, or food producers not using pesticides or chemicals that may damage the environment. Research from Ethical Consumer shows that an organization's ethics are increasingly important to consumers when choosing who to do business with[1].

Unethical behaviour erodes consumer trust; conversely, if companies clearly demonstrate their ethical credentials, consumers may be more likely to use them. Yet information about ethical practices is not always easy to find and, when companies make ethical claims, consumers may not know if they are credible

Global markets and supply chains mean that robust regulatory oversight of ethical claims can be difficult. International voluntary standards can be applied across borders and help address challenges by providing organizations with a multi-stakeholder, consensus document that details 'what good looks like'.

This can facilitate organizations in the development and communication of their ethical practices.

[1] Ethical Consumer Markets Report 2018
[2] Ethics and Artificial Intelligence: What does good look like to consumers? BSI Consumer Forum Conference Summary Report, 26th June 2019 – for a copy of this report, email consumer@bsigroup.com

Building ethics into standards

Standards can play a vital role in improving consumer outcomes, by detailing good practice for organizations such as government, public authorities, manufacturers, retailers and service providers, to follow. They can help providers build ethical behaviour into all aspects of their business to secure consumer trust and avoid reputational damage through poor practice.

BSI's Consumer and Public Interest Network (CPIN) works with other consumer groups at a national, regional and international level to make sure that consumers' ethical concerns and priorities are considered in the development of relevant standards.

Consumer organizations have played an important role by representing the consumer voice in the development of several ethically-focused standards, such as ISO 26000 (iso.org/iso-26000-social-responsibility.html). This international standard provides guidance on social responsibility to support organizations in the development of sustainable and ethical businesses, whether operating in developed or developing countries.

Another standard aims to address consumer confusion around ethical claims made about products, processes, services and organizations. ISO/TS 17033:2019, Ethical claims and supporting information – principles and requirements, facilitates organizations in communicating information that is credible, accurate and verifiable (iso.org/standard/29356.html).

Ethics and CPIN's priority areas

Encouraging organizations to adopt ethical policies and practices underpins much of CPIN's work to prevent consumer harm across its five priority areas.
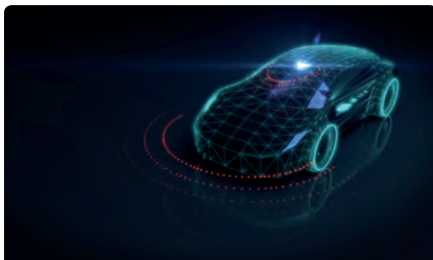
Ethical considerations for autonomous vehicles

Ethical considerations have a huge part to play in the development of driverless cars. If they're to place their safety in the hands of robotic 'drivers', consumers need to trust that due thought has been given to how autonomous systems make certain decisions – such as whether to prioritise the safety of the car's occupants or a pedestrian in the event of a likely collision. ISO 39003, Guidance on ethical considerations for autonomous vehicles, will support car manufacturers in how to take such issues into account.

Consumer safety

Unethical practices can risk physical harm to workers in supply chains, for example through inadequate policies on child labour, working hours or safe working practices. Few consumers would wish to support organizations or buy products that compromise human rights. Poor practice – such as the pollution of local water supplies by textile factories not applying environmental standards to control toxic waste from dyes – can impact the safety of local communities.

Ethics also need to be considered in the manufacture of safe products and services. An example is the use in cosmetics and toiletries of potentially harmful ingredients. Certain parabens, for example, have been banned by the European Commission from use in cosmetics in the EU, but are not banned in many other countries. A cosmetics firm operating in both the EU and elsewhere might appear unethical if it continued to sell products containing these parabens in countries without the same safety measures.

Consumer vulnerability

Ethical behaviour means considering the different needs and abilities of consumers. Without this, there is the risk of harm to vulnerable groups – directly, or through restricted access or choice. Hotels, for example, should think about ease of access for all, including people with visual impairments and wheelchair users. And, because not everyone has access to a computer or is connected to the internet, growing reliance by organizations on digital services and interactions can reduce choice and access to important information, such as safety instructions.

If companies offer online services for children, they must consider ethical issues such as privacy, bullying and screen time in their development. Speaking at the BSI Consumer Forum Conference 2019[2], Lego's Senior Manager, Government and Public Affairs, highlighted the ethical dilemmas of providing digital services to children: 'Children need to be protected, but it is also crucial to expose them to some element of risk, in a safe way, so that they can develop their abilities, learn new skills and express themselves.'

Robot ethics

Robotic devices and applications are increasingly coming into contact with consumers. BS 8611, Robots and robotic devices – guide to the ethical design and application of robots and robotic systems, looks to provide good practice to organizations working in this space. Consumer input is vital to ensure the needs of all consumers, including vulnerable groups, are considered.

Digital

Ethical issues in the digital space are complex and constantly evolving; few more so than the use of artificial intelligence (AI). It's not always obvious when technology is 'AI enabled' meaning that consumer awareness of risks can be low. Concerns raised by stakeholders at the BSI Consumer Forum Conference 2019 include:

- Increased monitoring and surveillance by technologies that can gather vast amounts of information about consumer behaviours and preferences.
- The use of this information to target marketing and change consumer behaviours in ways that may not be in their best interests.
- The potential for 'flawed' learning by AI systems that could lead to unintended consequences, such as through in-built biases relating to gender or race.

Looking to the future, the use of robots is increasingly cited as a potential solution to the UK's social care crisis. The ethical implications of replacing human carers with machines, no matter how sophisticated, are intricate and far-reaching.

Services

Consumers who wish to make an informed choice on ethical service providers must be able to do so confidently – such as tour operators with a track record of responsible tourism, or energy suppliers that use renewable sources. Service providers should not only adopt ethical working practices, but also supply clear and accessible information to consumers.

Some services may pose a direct risk of consumer harm if companies behave unethically. A consumer's excessive use of gambling services, for example, may result in significant financial and emotional detriment; providers should have processes in place to identify and appropriately manage the needs of problem gamblers.

Sustainability

Sustainability should be at the heart of an organization's ethical policies, minimising the impact of its operations on the environment and society. Companies should also think beyond the point of sale; for example by providing clear information to consumers on the energy-efficient use of appliances, and supporting the circular economy by making products that are easy to repair and facilitating reuse and recycling of products and packaging (visit bsigroup.com/en-GB/blog/corporate/sustainability-opportunity-and-the-circular-economy/ for more information).

What is the Consumer & Public Interest Network (CPIN)?

BSI's CPIN is an independent network of volunteers trained to represent the UK consumer voice in standards, funded by the British Standards Institution (BSI) with additional support from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

CPIN works closely with consumer and public interest organizations to achieve its goals, including through membership of BSI CPISAC and the BSI Consumer Forum, which comprise representatives from consumer and public interest organizations in the UK.

CPIN aims to:
- Ensure that standards address real issues that matter to real people
- Give a voice to all consumers, including children, older people and those with disabilities
- Add value to standards and help to build consumer confidence and trust in businesses that use them

CPIN focuses its work in five priority areas, where it believes there is high potential for consumer detriment, to improve outcomes for consumers, and minimize harm:
- Consumer safety
- Consumer vulnerability
- Digital
- Services
- Sustainability

For more information about CPIN, or to find out how to get involved, email consumer@bsigroup.com or visit bsigroup.com/consumers.

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