

# ***Certification as a Business-to-Business Manufacturing Brand Signal: The Case of SEESA***

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the role of third-party certification as a brand signal in international business-to-business (B2B) manufacturing. While certification is often regarded as a technical or legal necessity, this study argues that certification can also be used as a market-oriented signal of trust, legitimacy and supplier capability. SEESA, a Chinese sprayer manufacturer, is the focus of this paper, which adopts a qualitative single-case-study design. The analysis is based on company website materials, certification documents, testing and standards-related files, and evidence from a semi-structured interview with the firm's general manager. The findings reveal that SEESA uses certification in two related ways. Product compliance certifications, such as GS, CE, EMC, RoHS and CCC, support market-access claims and reduce buyer uncertainty in Europe and North America. Management-system and sustainability-related certifications, such as ISO 9001, ISO 14001, GRS and green-product certification, contribute to a more reliable image of the firm and responsible production. The case also illustrates how SEESA converts certificates into a "public brand language" associated with market readiness, industry leadership and trust. It is concluded that certification in Chinese manufacturing for export is not only a form of compliance, but also a strategic resource for branding and legitimacy.

**Keywords:** B2B branding, certification, market access, legitimacy, Chinese manufacturing

## **1. Introduction**

International business-to-business (B2B) markets are frequently contexts in which buyers assess suppliers before they can physically check product quality, regulatory compliance or supplier reliability. The issue is especially evident for buyers sourcing from overseas manufacturing companies. This means that information asymmetry can be significant, and the risks of non-compliance, product failure or reputational damage are high. External signals therefore play a significant role in allowing suppliers to convey competence and reduce buyer uncertainty.

One of the most familiar of these signals is certification. Certification is frequently discussed as a quality-management, technical or legal requirement. However, this understanding provides only an incomplete explanation of its role in the market. For export-oriented manufacturing companies, certification can also be part of corporate communication. It can be shown to buyers, incorporated

into public documentation and translated into claims of trust, quality, market access and industry leadership. B2B branding studies have emphasized that industrial brands help customers interpret supplier credibility and reduce perceived risk [1]. Recent international branding studies also suggest that more context-rich studies of B2B branding and implementation processes are required [2].

This paper examines the role of certification in brand building through the case of SEESA, a Chinese sprayer manufacturer. SEESA is a suitable case because its public documents emphasize product compliance certifications, management-system certifications and more recent sustainability-related certifications. The firm also presents certification in relation to Europe and North America, where buyers may have difficulty evaluating unfamiliar Chinese suppliers. The study asks how certification functions as a B2B manufacturing brand signal in the case of SEESA. The paper argues that certification operates at two levels. First, it communicates product compliance and market access. Second, it provides the company with broader credibility, leadership and authority. The paper continues with a review of the relevant literature, an explanation of the research method, a presentation of the SEESA case findings, and a discussion of the implications for B2B branding and international market legitimacy.

## 2. Literature review

B2B branding research indicates that industrial brands differ from consumer brands. They are less dependent on emotional symbolism and are more closely related to organizational competence, relationship initiation and the credibility of the supplier firm. Lin et al. reveal that small and medium-sized enterprises in China manage their brands in different ways depending on their communication capabilities and strategic orientation [3]. Ozdemir et al. also argue that, in B2B markets, corporate branding creates tangible and intangible value because it helps customers understand the culture, identity and reliability of the supplier [4].

This argument is reinforced by research on industrial brand equity. Castillo-Villar and Murillo state that trust, relational value, corporate reputation and contextual signals are important components of industrial brand equity, together with product performance [5]. This means that buyers do not only evaluate a supplier's product. They also assess the supplier as an organization. This is particularly important in international manufacturing, where buyers often evaluate suppliers from a distance and with limited information.

This literature can be linked to certification through signaling theory. Terlaak and King argue that quality certification can reduce information asymmetry and signal unobservable supplier quality [6]. Certification is valuable because it is more credible than simple self-promotion. It suggests that a product, process or system has been evaluated by a third party or a formal assessment process and has satisfied specified requirements. In B2B markets, where purchasing decisions involve risk and suppliers need to prove reliability before relationships are formed, certification becomes particularly important.

Certification also has an institutional and market-access dimension. CE marking has long been part of a market integration and conformity framework in Europe [7]. Technical regulations and conformity assessment procedures can affect exporters from developing countries by increasing export costs and influencing market participation [8]. External signals may also help emerging-market firms overcome legitimacy barriers in foreign markets [9]. This implies that certification serves two purposes. It helps formalize market entry and increases supplier legitimacy.

Recent studies on B2B digital brand building are also relevant to this study. According to Olivieri and Hu, brand building increasingly takes place through digital and documentary touchpoints [10]. Whelan and Linich also emphasize the importance of B2B suppliers backing their claims with

credible data and third-party certification [11]. Taken together, these studies indicate that certification is more effective when it is communicated as well as achieved. The issue examined in this paper is how a Chinese manufacturing company translates certification from a compliance document into a brand signal for B2B marketing.

### 3. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative single-case-study design. A case study is suitable for examining a contemporary phenomenon in detail and in its real-life context [12]. SEESA was chosen because it provides a useful illustration of a Chinese export-oriented manufacturing firm that actively highlights certification in its public communication. The objective is not statistical generalization, but analytical explanation of how certification acquires a branded dimension in practice.

The study relies on two principal sources of evidence. The first source is documentary evidence. These materials include SEESA's website pages, company materials, product certification documents, testing documents, management-system certificates, green-product certification information and standards-related documents. The About/Quality Control page and Manual Sprayer page are the most important public-facing pages, as they explicitly link certification with quality, market access and industry leadership [13, 14]. The underlying certification and technical evidence was verified using company-provided files such as GS, CE, EMC, RoHS, CCC, ISO, GRS, green-product and standards documents.

The second source is a semi-structured interview with SEESA's general manager. The interview focused on the function of certification in market access, customer trust, brand image and long-term positioning. The interview indicated that buyers in Europe and North America often cannot verify the qualifications of a Chinese manufacturer in a short time or determine whether its products can enter their markets. Certification is therefore particularly important as an initial indication of supplier legitimacy. The interview also revealed that older certifications were more likely to help SEESA enter markets, while newer certifications were actively sought to improve market position and brand value in response to changing market expectations.

The analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis. The materials were coded according to four main categories: visibility, market-access framing, authority framing and trust framing. Visibility refers to the extent of certification's presence in external communication. Market-access framing refers to associations between certification and market entry. Authority framing refers to references to leadership, participation in standard setting and technical status. Trust framing refers to statements concerning reliability, safety, professionalism and credibility. Documentary evidence was used to support the interpretation, while interview evidence was used to increase the consistency of the analysis.

### 4. Findings and discussion

The first finding is that certification functions as a market-access signal for SEESA. The company does not hide certification in technical documents. Instead, certifications are used in outward-facing materials and are associated with customer-relevant benefits. This is particularly true of product certifications such as Geprüfte Sicherheit (GS), CE, EMC, RoHS and CCC. These certifications communicate that SEESA's products are more likely to meet regulatory and safety requirements in target markets.

This interpretation is confirmed by certification documents provided by the company. SEESA has several GS certificates from TÜV Rheinland for various sprayer models across multiple years. These

documents show that the products have been tested according to internationally relevant safety standards and that the product and manufacturing location met the relevant requirements of the German Product Safety Act. According to official guidance on the German GS mark, the GS mark is a voluntary tested-safety mark and is not the same as CE marking; rather, it is an independent product-safety mark [15]. SEESA also holds CE certification for an electric knapsack sprayer, together with EMC, RoHS and CCC-related files. Taken together, these documents provide evidence that SEESA has built product-level compliance capability.

The second finding is that SEESA uses certification as a corporate credibility signal. Management-system certifications, such as ISO 9001 and ISO 14001, are not model-specific. Rather, they represent a broader concept of organized quality management and environmental management. Global Recycled Standard (GRS) certification and green-product certification further reinforce the company's message that it is keeping pace with market demands. These certifications therefore communicate not only product readiness, but also organizational discipline and responsible manufacturing.

The third finding is that SEESA converts certification into brand language. Its Manual Sprayer page refers to the company as a "GS Pioneer in Asia" and relates certification to market access in Europe and the United States [14]. This is significant because it turns certification from a technical document into a customer value proposition. The interview also supports this interpretation. The general manager stated that GS certification was an important milestone because SEESA was the first brand in Asia in its field to receive the certificate, which was crucial for brand-building efforts and business performance. This statement helps position SEESA as an industry leader rather than merely a compliant producer in the sprayer market.

The fourth finding concerns authority. The general manager stated that SEESA had been involved in the development of Chinese national standards relevant to sprayer products. Furthermore, company materials reinforce the idea that SEESA has gained technical credibility through standards involvement, product testing, green certification and technology awards. This evidence takes certification beyond the level of minimum compliance. SEESA is not only aligning itself with external standards; it is also portraying itself as a technically strong company within the industry.

The fifth finding is that certification has a temporal dimension. Earlier certifications paved the way for SEESA to enter markets and build a base of customer acceptance. Newer certifications, by contrast, help maintain market leadership and brand image. This was clearly expressed during the interview. The general manager stated that new certifications were often pursued even when there was no direct pressure from customers. Newer and higher standards help the company demonstrate that it is still developing with the market and staying ahead of its rivals.

The findings show that certification in the SEESA case acts as a structured branding mechanism. Product compliance certifications communicate access and safety. Management and sustainability certifications communicate organizational reliability. Leadership claims and participation in standard setting communicate authority. More importantly, certification is made visible to the outside world. This visibility helps reduce buyer uncertainty, particularly for new buyers who have not yet built trust through repeated business with the company. The case therefore contributes to signaling theory by demonstrating that certification is useful not only because it exists, but also because it is made visible and translated into brand meaning for the market.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examined how certification can function as a B2B manufacturing brand signal through the case of SEESA. The analysis reveals that, in this case, certification has several functions. It helps

the company communicate product compliance, market-access eligibility, organizational reliability, industry authority and brand leadership. Certification should therefore not be seen only as technical compliance. It provides a tangible indicator linking internal capabilities with external market perception.

Three conclusions are most important. First, product compliance certifications such as GS, CE, EMC, RoHS and CCC enable SEESA to communicate eligibility for regulated international markets. Second, management-system and sustainability-related certifications help improve general corporate credibility and responsible manufacturing. Third, SEESA actively transforms certification into brand language by connecting it to leadership, customer trust and market readiness. The case indicates that, for Chinese export-oriented manufacturing firms, certification can be both a regulatory resource and a branding resource.

The study is limited because it focuses on a single firm and does not include direct buyer interviews. Future research could examine more than one manufacturing company in China or investigate how overseas buyers perceive different types of certifications. Nevertheless, the SEESA case shows that certification can provide a strong B2B signal when it is made visible, related to market needs and integrated into corporate branding.

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