

Case Study: Quality Assurance Association of the Dry Cleaners in Hamburg, Germany

What is the Quality Assurance Association?

In the mid 1980s, the dry cleaners in Hamburg came under considerable public pressure concerning the use of halogenated solvents (PERC), which had turned out to penetrate through the walls into neighbouring apartments, workplaces, and food stores. The media reported negatively, citizens' action committees against dry cleaners emerged, and some supervising authorities formed a case against the dry cleaners with exorbitant claims.

Therefore, the Centre for Energy, Water and Environment Technology (ZEWU), founded in 1985 by the Hamburg Chamber of Crafts and Trade to promote cleaner production in small and medium sized companies, together with the dry cleaners guild of Hamburg initiated the foundation of a proactive self-help organisation. Aim of the association was to improve the environmental performance of the dry cleaners in Hamburg and to regain the trust of the community, customers, and authorities. In April 1988, the Registered Association for Environmental Protection in Dry Cleaning in Hamburg (Verein für Umweltschutz im Textilreiniger Handwerk e.V.), VUT, was formally founded and registered with a quality label.

How does the Quality Assurance Association work?

ZEWU had advised the guild to choose a pro-active strategy as a reaction to the sudden public pressure on the dry cleaners in Hamburg and guided the guild through the formal procedures. According to the Association's constitution, a quality label is now awarded annually to each member company that has successfully passed a test conducted by ZEWU. At first end-of-pipe technologies were developed as technical solution to reduce the halogenated solvent emissions from dry cleaners. While the label was introduced into the market, ZEWU kept on researching for better solutions and eventually integrated technologies were developed that reduce the amount of halogenated solvents used in dry cleaning. ZEWU as independent expert institute provides a range of services to the members in the name of the Association, including training, consultancy and technical analysis and support.

Since 1988, awareness regarding environmental issues has risen considerably within the guild of dry cleaners. This has led to a reduction of solvent consumption and emissions, and the demand for further consultancy, e.g. regarding new dry cleaning buildings and soil analysis, has increased. In the first year, about 80% of the dry cleaners in Hamburg became members of VUT. The label "Environment and Cleaning" is widely known and recognized in and around Hamburg and some large client companies only give orders to dry cleaners carrying the label.

In 2001, VUT decided to enlarge its marketing activities. This included a poster campaign on public busses and in other places and a competition. Thus, the dry cleaners turned the public strain into an offensive marketing strategy, including substantial service improvements and market communication.

This could only work with rigorous quality assurance and control. The board of VUT has expelled 13 dry cleaning companies from the membership because of repeated breaches against the constitution of VUT. About 30 dry cleaning companies left VUT due to high cost pressure (investments, member fees etc.) or bankruptcy.

Since VUT was founded, the number of dry cleaning companies in Hamburg has decreased by almost 30%. This is a much higher decrease than in other commercial branches in the German city state. At the same time, the number of VUT member companies increased from 60 to 73. This suggests a positive effect of higher environmental protection and occupational health standards on a company's viability.

Encouraged by this successful example, quality assurance associations within other crafts guilds have also been initiated. Examples include producers of cooling devices and the horticulture & landscaping sector.

Evaluating the Quality Assurance Association

Strengths

- Intensive research and development to reduce environmental impacts from dry cleaning was carried out and the knowledge of environmental impacts from dry cleaning has increased considerably.
- The environmental standards developed and applied by VUT have raised the state-of-the-art and have become legal standard in the entire dry cleaning sector in Germany. The QAA still continues for further improvement of the quality in the sector and implementation in the market. The environmental performance has considerably improved without government involvement or expenditure of public money.
- Other QAA systems have emerged in Hamburg after the work of VUT demonstrated the success of the approach.
- The credibility of the label is very high, as members are rigorously scrutinised and firms failing to meet the standards are not tolerated in the Association.
- Environmental and health awareness among dry cleaning companies has been enhanced and has changed behaviour in terms of chemical management, occupational health, and emission control.

Weaknesses

- Companies who could not afford membership and necessary investments into environmental precautions lost their competitiveness and some of them left the market. Government could potentially support such companies with soft loans, and the guild could provide business consultancy to minimise such dislocations.
- Without the enormous public pressure as consequence of increased public information on the hazards from dry cleaners the improvement of environmental performance initiated by the producers might not have taken place. This requires public information and education on environment and health issues. Therefore, NGOs should be supported in their work to promote public awareness on environmental issues and/or government could carry out similar related activities.

Further information on the Quality Assurance Association

<http://vut-hamburg.de>

<http://www.zewu.de>