

Care Labelling

Care labels are for consumer use whether the consumer cares for the garment directly or indirectly through an agent such as a drycleaner or launderer. Initially, it helps the consumer to make his/her choice of what to buy as it gives guidance on how to care for that garment after and during use. Quite simply, a care label is a label which provides instructions on how to cleanse and finish a garment or textile product. It may be in the form of simple text such as 'Dryclean in Perchloroethylene, remove all buttons and finish with cool iron' or it may involve the use of a number of symbols such as a wash tub  or a drycleaning symbol advising cleaning in a hydrocarbon solvent process .

So do we need them?

50 years or more ago, the answer was probably that they were desirable but not essential. The design of clothing and the materials used were much simpler. Most garments were made of natural fibres such as wool or cotton and were relatively plain without trimmings and other adornments. There was no such thing as fusible interlinings and whilst leather and suede garments were around, rarely were garments made from a combination of textiles and skins. Within the Industry, there was a simple choice of processes – you either washed it or you cleaned it in a petroleum solvent.

That situation has changed considerably. Garments come in a wide range of materials sometimes with several different fibres in the same garment – wool mixed with polyester and elastane maybe with a leather trim on the edges and possibly with a metal thread running through the weave and, of course, those very ornate buttons which if the wrong solvent is used might just dissolve or may actually shatter with the mechanical action of the process.

Whilst some of the possible dangers will be readily noticed by the experienced well trained professional cleaner, some are impossible to determine without undertaking some destruction of the garment – maybe a burn test to determine the fibre content or a rub test to determine colour fastness. But should a cleaner have to go to such extensive lengths to determine how to take care of a manufacturers garment or should the garment manufacturers be like the car industry and provide the customer with a warranty period? Cleaners and, to be fair, many garment manufacturers believe that they should and that is what a proper care labelling system will provide – for rest assured, in order to support written instructions in whatever form so as to ensure no liability on the manufacturer it is necessary to have the garments type tested.

Assuming that appropriate testing has been carried out successfully, then applying a care label is in effect providing a form of warranty or guarantee – a guarantee that if the cleaner or consumer processes the garment in accordance with the instructions and advised care treatment that it will not suffer irreversible damage.

It is thus of benefit to both the professional textile care industry and the garment manufacturers to have a robust care labelling system that will provide consumers i.e. the owners of the garments with the confidence that the life of their garments will not be shortened by an inappropriate treatment. It would also be desirable if the care label listed all appropriate methods of care. If all

methods of care are listed it would allow the consumer to select the best method of cleaning based on the type of soils on the garment. However, the sting is very much in the words 'a robust care labelling system' and whether we have one at the moment.

We currently have garments out in the market place that might have written instructions on them but often in different languages and this has become a greater problem in recent years as people are much more likely to be world travellers and often purchase garments and other textile items whilst visiting foreign countries.

Even if they are in a language that is understood, the instructions can often be quite meaningless, particularly as there can be different interpretations in different countries. For example, the most common one is 'Dryclean Only' – in those countries covered by the International Standard on Care labelling, this means very little other than the manufacturer is concerned that the garment may be damaged if it is washed. To successfully dryclean the garment, the cleaner needs to know what solvent to use, whether it is heat sensitive which will have an effect on drying temperatures as well as the finishing process and whether it will withstand the normal mechanical action from a standard process or whether a reduced process is required. 'Dryclean Only' has a different meaning under the FTC rules - the garment can be cleaned in any solvent in common usage in the USA.

One recently introduced symbol in the International system has been the Circle W for wetcleaning. This can also cause some confusion as in some countries 'wetcleaning' refers to a non-machine hand wash process whereas in the ISO system, wetcleaning refers to the specific processes developed in the early 1990s to clean those garments that traditionally would need to be drycleaned – it is an aqueous process with low mechanical action, low heat and low water using special detergents.

Conclusion

For consumer satisfaction, the textile industry, the professional textile care industry and the consumer need a care labelling system. However, the current situation is somewhat confused particularly as there is more transferability of garments from one country to another with many differences in the care labelling systems used. The International Standards Organisation is currently revising its requirements for ISO3758 Care labelling of Textiles to try to ensure world-wide acceptance and compatibility. The FTC rules should remain but should take these areas into consideration to ensure that any confusion is eliminated. Wetcleaning as defined in ISO 3758 and supported by a test method in ISO3175 should be included under professional systems as there has been considerable usage of this process in recent years.

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