Counterfeiters: Turn in or turn away?

Consumer product counterfeiting is a serious, worldwide problem. Everyday products, such as clothing, jewelry, cosmetics, and even cigarettes can be suspect. If it’s a successful brand, you can bet it will eventually be counterfeited. In most cases, buyers are unaware that they are purchasing a counterfeit and will generally become dissatisfied with the product’s performance. Some buyers find the discounted price of a counterfeit so enticing they forget the general rule that you get what you pay for. A counterfeit wristwatch, for example, will most likely soon stop keeping accurate time or quit working altogether.

At the very least, counterfeits have an adverse effect on a brand’s integrity, reputation, and revenue, but the consequences can also be more serious. Often, counterfeits are produced in unsanitary and rogue environments, with the profits used to support criminal or even terrorist activity.

Counterfeiting is a huge problem in the pharmaceutical industry, where a fake product can not only cause dissatisfaction related to performance but may also cause injury and, in extreme cases, death. When we purchase a pharmaceutical product, we have a high expectation that it is safe, but with counterfeits, this isn’t always the case. Our sense of security is weakened each time a new counterfeit drug product is discovered.

A counterfeit tablet may appear to be identical to the name-brand tablet, even to an experienced eye, but unless the counterfeiter obtained privileged and confidential data about the product’s details, there will always be a difference. It is not uncommon for counterfeiters to contact a tooling company and pose as a contract manufacturer doing business with the brand or as a new affiliate connected to the brand. Tooling companies and other pharmaceutical vendors need to be aware that counterfeiters are active and will do whatever it takes to replicate a branded product.

Knowing your customers, their products, and where and how your equipment will be used is of utmost importance. If a new client, or even a current client, seems suspicious, it is the vendor’s responsibility to properly vet the company and/or individual before proceeding.

So, what should you look for? Most counterfeiters will not know or understand common industry terminology, which can be a sign. While the proper format of typical documents, such as business cards, purchase requisitions, and purchase orders, are easy to falsify, company logos and letterheads that have been “cut and pasted” will often lack clarity or will be positioned incorrectly on the document. Missing or incorrect contact information is a sure indication that something isn’t right. Requests for an expedited order can also be a sign, as counterfeiters do not like to stay in one place for very long.

Vendors should train customer service and sales staff to identify these signs and provide clear guidance on what to do if they see them. If an order or individual is suspicious, the vendor has three options: 1) accept the order as is and do nothing; 2) decline the order and turn the suspect away; or 3) contact the brand owner and turn in the suspect to local authorities. Option 1 may not be the easiest or safest option for vendors, but it is the only way to remove the counterfeiter from the street and reduce counterfeiting.

As pharmaceutical industry suppliers, our responsibility reaches much further than protecting a brand. Preventing counterfeiting protects the health and well-being of our families, friends, and society at large. With collaborative effort we can reduce the number of counterfeiting events, but only if we make the right choice when faced with the option to turn in or turn away.

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