What Goes Around Comes Around

For years, DOE has been beating the drum about accuracy in SSL performance claims – which we test through CALiPER and encourage through LED Lighting Facts ®. The good news is that much progress has been made on that front, as CALiPER testing clearly shows. The accuracy of performance claims for LED lighting products overall is significantly better than it was a few years back, when the marketplace was likened to the Wild West because of its "anything goes" atmosphere. For example, whereas more than half of the products tested in CALiPER Round 8 (whose report was published in 2009) had inaccurate or misleading product literature claims, a CALiPER Application Report released in February of this year, which looked at LED lamps sold through retailers in 2013, found that 80 percent of those products performed in accordance with the manufacturers' claims.

But the bad news is that, despite the progress, we still see far too many SSL performance claims that are, shall we say, overly optimistic. Take the recent CALiPER Application Report just cited, for example. Flip the figures around, and you see that a full 20 percent of the LED lamps tested were found to have different performance than claimed in at least one area – a substantial amount by any reckoning. What's more, 43 percent made an equivalency claim that wasn't entirely accurate. Those figures are all the more disturbing because the products were on sale in retail stores and thus were available to millions of consumers.

These kinds of discrepancies aren't always intentional on the part of the manufacturer, but whether intentional exaggeration or honest oversight, the potential for consumer disappointment is the same. And enough consumer disappointment can hamper adoption. That's why we applaud the recent court decision in a lawsuit brought by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) against an LED lighting manufacturer whose product claims – on packaging and in brochures – significantly overstated the actual performance. That manufacturer was ordered to pay a substantial penalty – to the tune of more than $21 million, equal to the total amount consumers paid for the underperforming LED bulbs. You may have heard about the case in the news. The specifics aren't important. What is important is for consumers, buyers, and specifiers to keep in mind that the performance of LED lighting products doesn't always match the claims – and for
manufacturers to realize that such claims can have very serious consequences, beyond leaving a bad taste in the mouths of consumers.

As an FTC blog about the case puts it:

"The message for marketers: If you make objective product claims, you must have appropriate scientific or technical evidence in hand before you start selling. Yes, well-designed and properly manufactured LED bulbs can offer an energy-saving and longer-lasting alternative to incandescents or CFLs. But companies selling LED bulbs – like any other advertiser – need appropriate proof to back up their claims."

The Wild West may be a lot tamer than it once was, but it's still good to know that there's a sheriff in Dodge – and that he's got the will, and the power, to enforce the law when necessary.

As always, if you have questions or comments, you can reach us at postings@akoyaonline.com.