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Safety agencies. Can't live with them, can't live without them. UL, CSA, VDE, TUV, Nemco, Semco, Demco, CE, recognized, listed, licensed, certified, approved, etc., etc. Ugh! What does it all mean? One article alone can't answer every question, but let's start with the basics, and future articles will provide additional details.

So, what are safety agencies, and what purpose do they serve? Safety agencies, such as UL (Underwriters Laboratories) in the United States, CSA (Canadian Standards Association) in Canada, VDE & TUV in Germany, Nemco, Semco, Demco (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, respectively), and others in various countries around the world, were established to provide independent validation that products used by ordinary people are safe. Manufacturers submit their products to the safety agencies in the countries of the products' intended markets. The products are tested and inspected by the agencies for compliance to the appropriate safety standards established for that product. Products that comply with the standards are granted the privilege of displaying the agencies' logos as proof that they have been deemed "safe". Consumers should feel more confident using products displaying such logos than products that don't.

Historically, each safety agency had its own standards for the same product. So, in order to market a product in multiple countries it was necessary to submit to multiple safety agencies. It was difficult to design products that could comply with every agency's requirements. And the testing was slow, and expensive. In recent years there have been efforts made to harmonize the standards worldwide. Additionally, some agencies have signed reciprocal agreements whereby they accept each other's test results. UL has been particularly active in signing such agreements, especially with CSA and the Scandinavian agencies. In future articles we'll discuss the progress of the harmonization of standards, and the status and impact of the inter-agency agreements.