

Speech: Gold standard: The Touchstone Award

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In our current multichannel retail world, where consumers have direct access to global markets, it is essential that hallmarking continues to be enforced. Jewellery represents a particular opportunity for deceit because the person buying the article has no way of knowing whether their 18ct bangle is gold to the core, the fashionstatus trademark on their bracelet is genuine, or their prized cufflinks are merely plated with a thin layer of gold that will soon wear away, to expose base metal below.

High precious-metal prices, the popularity of more expensive brands, and the difficulty in identifying whether an item is what it purports to be, are all driving criminal activity. This can range from a slightly maverick workshop using under-carat components for repairs, to serious organised crime, funded by the mass sale of counterfeited products such as Tiffany, Pandora and Links of London.

Spotting non-compliance

The situation is exacerbated by the lack of consumer understanding of hallmarking legislation. A survey conducted in April 2017, with a Department for Business, Energy and Industry Strategy consumer panel, found “spontaneous awareness of hallmarks was initially extremely low”. When prompted, many people claimed to understand it, but the survey showed their knowledge to be poor and largely inaccurate. So, the consumer is relying on the jeweller to be trustworthy. As a result, enforcement of the legislation depends upon continual trade vigilance and trading standards enforcement.

High street non-compliance is relatively easy to spot. Many Touchstone applications chronicle proactive campaigns that have started by checking that dealers: are displaying notices explaining hallmarks; have correctly calibrated weighing scales; and stock hallmarked items in store. Pursuing non-compliance with these basic requirements regularly reveals significant long-term offences, leading to prosecutions for trademark infringements, among others.

Online sales are far more difficult to monitor. There is undoubtedly a significant lack of compliance online, with goods without a hallmark or incorrectly described being offered by businesses and private individuals on their websites, as well as on specialised jewellery marketplaces and resale platforms, such as eBay. Policing and enforcing compliance within the increasingly significant global, online market is a universal problem across all sectors. Within this market, there is little control over quality, or the reassurance and legal verification of a hallmark.

Consumer detriment

With local resources overstretched, there is a worry that trading standards officers will focus on more obviously life-threatening or sinister sectors, such as counterfeit drugs, loan sharks or faulty electrical goods. However, every hallmarking investigation reveals evidence that the centuries' old law is not being observed and, frequently, there are other illegal activities related to such infringements. These could be apparently minor, such as illegal weighing scales, but the level of cheating that can be achieved by this practice is significant.

At the other extreme, trading in counterfeit luxury jewellery items could be part of serious organised crime. There is always significant detriment to the consumer and, in many cases, it is the most vulnerable in our society who are being cheated.

Last year's Touchstone applications, from across the UK, reflected complaint intervention, proactive enforcement projects and information operations. There was also evidence of positive longterm activity in hallmarking operations from all applicants. This is encouraging news, but much more is required if effective enforcement is to be exercised over the ever-expanding online offer of jewellery from around the world now accessible in the UK.

Celebrating success

The winning Touchstone application for 2017 came from the London Borough of Ealing. Its success was down to a well-planned and executed series of inspections, after information that jewellery without a hallmark was on sale in the area.

A range of activities in various high-street premises was headed up by team leader Peter Clark, assisted by enforcement officers Mohammed Tariq and Brian Gohery. Their investigations revealed major noncompliance with the [Hallmarking Act 1973](#) by the jewellers inspected.

A carefully staged approach started with visits to advise all jewellers of their legal requirements. Subsequent visits led to jewellery without a hallmark being seized from several of the 24 premises visited. Inspection by the London Assay Office revealed that 82% of seized items were not hallmarked, and 22% were fraudulently described as 22ct, when they could only have been hallmarked as 18ct or – in one case – 9ct because of under-carated solder. Successful prosecutions followed, with non-compliant traders receiving more than £11,000 in fines. A hallmarking project is now embedded within the Ealing TS annual service plan and priorities.

As ever, the [winning team](#) was well rewarded for its efforts. The Touchstone Award was announced at the 2017 CTSI Conference dinner in Harrogate, and presented to Ealing by chair of the British Hallmarking Council Noel Hunter.

To engage the rest of the council and raise the profile of trading standards within the authority, the award was presented again at an event in Ealing in

November. Finally, the team enjoyed its prestigious training day and excellent lunch with the London Assay Office team at Goldsmiths' Hall.

The 2017 Touchstone applications demonstrated the importance of hallmarking enforcement. It is vital that our trading standards authorities continue to deliver this.

We look forward to receiving your applications for the 2018 Touchstone Award and recognising the hard work of trading standards teams in this area.

Author

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