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## Why You Should Care About the Difference Between Standards and Specifications

Let's start out by agreeing that standards and industry specifications are not the same; and that it is important to understand the difference between the two. There are similarities, of course, but these often get misconstrued, creating confusion in the marketplace.

This issue is very important to standards bodies, such as SMPTE, because if the industry does not understand or appreciate the importance of standards, we quickly become irrelevant. Promoting standards work is almost as important as the work itself.

So, what's the difference? Standards are designed to assist an industry in defining and establishing the size, shape, or capacity of a product, process or system. They serve as a guide to ensuring that products are functional. With the presence of standards, consumers can rely on light bulbs fitting in sockets, ATM machines dispensing cash, and the safety of products on our grocery store shelves. Standards allow industries to advance and grow as companies develop added-value features on existing standards platforms, resulting in a plethora of options in the products that we use and consume on a daily basis.

In the media industry sector in which SMPTE operates, our standards help provide system interoperability, enabling companies to design features to products that rely on these underlying standards. This allows customers the option to choose from various providers knowing that the systems will "talk" to one another. Standards also help in reducing costs since customers have a choice of vendors.

Having standards that support full system interoperability, requires that all parts of the ecosystem work together and reach a consensus by which no vendor has an advantage. A due process must be followed in order to achieve this undertaking, allowing open collaboration and the opportunity for the industry to evaluate, analyze, and refute proposed solutions if needed, all in an effort to develop a solid standard that meets the industry needs. Of course, this is

easy to say in theory, however, it's a lot more complex in reality, because of legitimate disagreements in approach. Sometimes these disagreements can be reconciled quickly as the industry converges on a single approach, however, there are often situations in which it takes time to reach a solution. Unfortunately, these necessary discussions sometimes contribute to the notion that "standards developers are slow." Regardless of when a consensus is reached, in the end, standards must be defined by a transparent, unbiased process, which is expected from our users.

The standards development process also serves to ensure that standards development organizations are curating the standard for the long term, ensuring the industry that the standards are sustainable, with necessary updates.

This leads me back to the major difference between standards and industry specifications. Industry specifications are important, too. They solve the need for expediency. Technology is complex today, requiring time to sort through the issues that result in a quality standard. Often, the industry cannot wait for that to happen and so players come together to form industry associations to address problems. While these groups may follow a particular process, it is not the same as a standards process and certainly does not lead to long-term reliability.

So why is this so important to understand? When organizations use the term "standard" to define an industry specification, it creates confusion as users rightfully assume that specification follows the same process as standards. SMPTE and its many volunteers spend a great deal of time, money, and effort to follow rigorous processes that result in standards on which the industry can rely. It is important that industry specifications, while playing a vital role, are not misconstrued as standards. Let's do what we can to ensure appropriate use of terminology.