

How to Buy Fire Extinguishers

For anyone with a business or organisation requiring fire extinguishers to ensure compliance with Fire Regulations the market can seem quite bewildering. Do I buy online, through a stationery catalogue or from a fire extinguisher maintenance company?

The starting point is to always buy extinguishers that comply to a third party accreditation, the most commonly recognised in the UK is the BSi kitemark, but there are others including Lloyds Register. Regrettably the CE Mark alone is no guarantee of product quality.

Let's look at the merits and drawbacks from the three different purchasing options.

The Internet and Catalogues

On the face of it these channels appear to offer good value for money and are great when you are buying a 'commodity product' e.g. books, DVD's, music, etc. that require no after sales service. In certain situations the internet and catalogues approach will be fine, but beware the pitfalls when buying a fire extinguisher – in particular the hidden costs and compliance issues.

An extinguisher does not need a high level of service support at the point of sale, but to ensure compliance with Fire Regulations you will need help and advice during installation and the ongoing servicing throughout it's life. As with any other product bought through these channels you are only buying box, and usually an arms length service!

Advantages;

- Cheaper – if you know what you are doing.
- Convenience – quick delivery directly to site.

Disadvantages;

- Likelihood of damage in transit (our suppliers will only ship extinguishers on pallets to reduce the risk of damage). You will have the inconvenience of packing and returning damaged extinguishers often at your own cost.
- Extinguishers are often supplied with a completed service label, but this does not constitute the 'Commissioning Service' recommended in BS5306 part:3: 2009 whereby the technician ensures that it is safe, fully functional, appropriately placed and appropriate for the fire risks at hand. Beware the suppliers who to attempt to get around this requirement by supply a self commissioning tick box label meaning you take responsibility for the Commissioning and the inherent risk if something goes wrong when you fill it in.
- The hidden cost of the 'Commissioning Service' by a COMPETENT PERSON as required by BS5306 part 3 when installing the equipment. This will need to be

arranged with a local extinguisher servicing company at extra cost.

- No survey, so the provider cannot be 100% certain that you have enough extinguishers that are appropriate to the fire risks you are facing.
- The warranty may only be for 12 months from date of purchase.
- It's expensive and time consuming to return extinguishers to the supplier if you order the wrong equipment!
- You need to have the knowledge to be sure that what you are buying complies with British and European standards
- The supplier usually cannot provide future extinguisher maintenance other than putting you in contact with one of their preferred suppliers who will inevitably charge you for a Commissioning Service negating any saving you originally made!

Extinguisher Servicing Company

Prices will vary from company to company – obviously the larger ones with sales teams and large offices will have greater overheads and will be more expensive than a small operator working from home. Unless you need nationwide coverage than this may be the only difference between them, but to be sure ask to see the following documentation before awarding them the work;

- **QUALIFICATIONS** - the Technicians needs to have a BAFE recognised examination certificate either BAFE, FETA, British Fire Consortium or IFEDA and if over 3 years old then this should be supplemented with a Technicians Refresher Certificate from a recognised body.
- **TRADE ASSOCIATION** – you have some come back if the firm that you are dealing with are bone-fide members of a genuine fire trade association which in the UK will be the UK Fire Association, FIA, IFEDA or BFC. These can sometimes be falsely added to service paperwork or membership may have lapsed - so if you are in any doubt call the trade association for verification.
- **INSURANCE** - employers, public liability and efficacy (failure to perform) – is the level of cover realistic for the risks they pose to your business?
- **REFERENCES** – similar organisation to yourselves in terms of size and industry sector and follow them up!
- **ESTIMATE** – the nature of extinguisher servicing makes it impossible to accurately quote for without doing a full survey first, this is rarely practicable. Do at least get a quote for attendance and basic extinguisher servicing.

Advantages;

- It their duty to recommend adequate extinguisher cover to protect you from fire and keep you compliant with fire legislation. Hence they take on the liability should things go wrong!
- Convenience – supply, installation, commissioning and ongoing servicing all taken care of.
- Normally a warranty on new fire extinguisher of 5 years - subject to unbroken servicing during the 5 years by the original provider.
- Fast response when you need refills or other work.
- Extinguisher servicing companies can often provide a comprehensive range of fire protection services as you need them, e.g. fire awareness and wardens training, fire alarm servicing, fire risk assessment, sprinklers/hydrants/risers testing, etc.

Disadvantages;

- Perceived higher cost – often not the case when you include all the hidden costs.
- It is quite easy to set up in business and sell extinguishers from the boot of a car so every area seems to have it's own 'rogue trader' using high pressure or underhand sales/servicing techniques. If you use common sense and follow our guidance notes above you should be fairly secure.

There is no right or wrong way of sourcing fire extinguishers and the guidance we have provided should help you decide which route is best for you avoiding the unexpected pitfalls and potential extra costs along the way.

By buying equipment from a UK Fire Association Member you are assured of receiving quality service by a committed company who's first interest is looking after your best interests. Members work to an agreed Code of Practice details of which can be found elsewhere on this website which sets out what you the customer can expect from using a UKFA Member.

If you need further information contact Alan Palmer Secretary at the UKFA on 01932 252306 or email admin@uk-fa.org.

Reproduced courtesy of Alan Palmer F.I.R.E LTD