How manufacturers will meet demands for supply chain transparency. By Catherine Cormier

As we enter 2026, global manufacturers are facing a pivotal shift in their compliance and sustainability requirements. Between new legislation and reporting mandates, rapidly shifting geopolitical risks, and growing customer expectations around product transparency, there's a lot to keep track of. But supply chain sustainability is not just a box to check off. It's key to maintaining market access, avoiding fines and penalties, and gaining a competitive advantage.

Here's a look at how global manufacturers are expected to evolve by 2026 as they respond to this new transparency-driven marketplace.

Compliance and sustainability expectations mean deeper supplier data requests

Since 2020, the World Trade Organization has steadily received more notifications of technical trade barriers. It's expected that in 2026, the scope and volume of supply chain data requests will reach unprecedented levels.

To keep up, manufacturers must shift from occasional, customer-driven requests toward continuous, proactive data collection. Three accelerating trends will drive this shift:

Looking ahead to 2026

Growing granularity

Customers won't just ask what materials a product contains. They will want to know:

- Where did each material originate
- How it was processed
- Environmental and social risks associated with each tier of the supply chain
- Emissions tied to specific components or activities

This level of detail will require ongoing supplier engagement, robust supplier training, and structured workflows for data verification.

Increasing urgency

Procurement cycles are tightening. Manufacturers will need to have supplier data on hand before customer requests arise, not weeks after the fact. This means:

- Continuously maintaining supplier profiles
- Providing real-time visibility into compliance and sustainability information
- Scheduling automated alerts for emerging regulators or market risks

Emphasis on proof

Self-declarations will no longer be enough. Customers will expect evidence such as certifications, corporate policies, audit reports, and third-party documentation to be embedded in compliance submissions.

In 2026, manufacturers that do not provide this transparency may damage customer trust and lose out to competitors with the necessary data ready.

The role of AI: efficient, scalable data models

Most manufacturers already struggle to keep up with demand, managing unstructured documents, inconsistent supplier inputs, and time-consuming workflows. In 2026, leading companies will use AI to help them:

- Extract compliance data from certifications, SDSs, audit reports, and supplier documents
- Identify missing data fields or inconsistencies
- Automatically categorize evidence and assign risk scores
- Guide supplier submission processes
- Simplify document preparation
- Provide real-time feedback

A hybrid approach, where AI handles volume and people handle nuance, will dramatically improve response times and data quality.

Resilient and agile supply chain systems

Transparency demands won't decline after 2026. Instead, they'll continue to increase in complexity. To keep up, manufacturers must invest in systems that enhance visibility, flexibility and responsiveness.

The most competitive manufacturers will map their supply chains far beyond the first tier, capturing data from upstream suppliers and raw materials providers for complete transparency. This enables early detection of compliance risks and documented transparency across the entire supply chain.

Manufacturers will also shift toward unified, intelligent platforms that centralize:

- Supplier profiles
- Compliance documents
- Sustainability data
- Risk scores and remediation workflows
- Audit trails and customer reporting outputs

These platforms will create a single source of truth, replacing disconnected spreadsheets, reducing errors and improving traceability.

Predictions for 2026: what manufacturers must do now

Looking ahead, global manufacturers that want to succeed in a transparency-driven market need to take decisive action. In 2026, the most advanced companies will:

- Invest in AI-native infrastructure that automates repetitive tasks and boosts accuracy
- Empower procurement, compliance, and sustainability teams with tools to interpret data insights and manage supplier relationships
- Strengthen supplier education programs to ensure data is complete, timely, and verifiable
- Adopt integrated platforms to manage compliance, supply chain sustainability, and risk reduction in one ecosystem
- Design workflows for continuous, proactive data collection, not just in response to periodic requests

Manufacturers that act now will be best positioned to meet the transparency demands of customers, regulators, and investors alike.

The path to 2026: a future built on trust and intelligence

As the global manufacturing landscape evolves, the organizations that thrive will be those that embrace AI responsibly, empower their teams, and build resilient systems. Transparency is no longer optional; it will be the foundation of competitive advantage. It's the most straightforward path toward stronger supplier relationships, reduced risk, and long-term sustainable growth. ∎

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