

E-commerce for Publishers

It is important to recognise that the e4books project defines a publisher as an organisation which publishes books but does not distribute them. Publishers who handle their own distribution are for our purposes distributors but, if they use a third party distributor, they are defined as publishers.

The publisher's involvement with e-commerce is likely to be much more limited than that of the distributor. However, some aspects of e-commerce - notably where product information is concerned - are relevant to publishers; and it is important for publishers who subcontract their distribution to be aware of the potential benefits available to them from exploiting their distributor's e-commerce facilities. This may well result in lower distribution costs to publishers. Also, because this is a complicated industry it may be that a simple distinction as above does not quite work for everyone. There are some publishers, for example, who handle their own order processing but use pick and pack services available from distributors; or there will be publishers who use a third party distributor yet do some distribution themselves from their own offices, e.g. to foreign agents or for promotional purposes. It is unlikely that this limited form of distribution will be much helped by the application of e-commerce.

For further information about distributor e-commerce, there are pages on this site aimed specifically at distributors. So having decided that in e-commerce terms you are a publisher let's look at how e-commerce affects you.

For publishers, product information is the key message to communicate with your trading partners. This may sound obvious but unless your customers can find out about your product, its price and how to order it then you are going to miss out on a lot of sales.

The UK market has two main bibliographic aggregators:

Nielsen BookData

Owned by VNU and formed from the merger of Whitaker Information Services and Book Data Ltd, Nielsen BookData is the market leader in the supply of bibliographic information in the UK.

RR Bowker

Owned by CSA, Bowker also owns PubEasy and is the ISBN agency for the US. Bowker has only recently started to collect information from Publishers. This service may be especially welcome to any publishers who sell their books in the US and worldwide.

You supply your information to these two companies as efficiently as possible and they supply this information on to their retailer, wholesaler, librarian and other customers.

Level 1

At this basic level we can assume that you publish a small number of books each year and that you have a backlist of several more books. Many publishers still supply product information on paper but by moving to electronic delivery you can vastly speed up the time between your sending it and its arrival with your customers.

Sending information to Nielsen BookData

One way of doing this is to use an online service of Nielsen BookData's called PubWeb. This is a website into which you can key your product information. You should note that they still retain the right to edit and amend your information; and they will also allocate the necessary subject classification codes from the information you provide. This service is chargeable but the costs are kept low for smaller companies and are based on the number of titles published.

If you sign up to PubWeb you can search the database for your titles, add missing information or correct what's wrong. You may not be able to amend some details such as existing price and availability on PubWeb and if this is the case you simply email Nielsen BookData editorial department in Stevenage. (email: pubhelp@nielsenbookdata.co.uk).

You may well already hold information about your titles in electronic form, e.g. as Excel spreadsheets or Access databases. It may be possible to use these to provide data to data aggregators but this will be subject to individual negotiation. There is also a growing number of low-cost tools designed to store product information and supply data in the industry standard ONIX format.

For information about the many services offered by Nielsen BookData, look at www.nielsenbookdata.co.uk.

Sending information to Bowker

Sending data to Bowker can be done in the same way, either on paper or in an agreed electronic format or using the standard ONIX format, and they too have an online submission form under the name BowkerLink where you can also edit existing data on your titles. To access their website and see the services they offer click here: www.bowker.co.uk.

Other recipients of your product information who may be important are (in the US) Ingram, Baker & Taylor and Amazon.com. If you are publishing in the US or internationally, it would be worth checking that your titles are on their databases and, if not, make appropriate arrangements to supply data. In the UK, the same may apply to the databases operated by the major wholesalers though they – and Amazon.co.uk - will also be receiving data directly from Nielsen BookData. Some publishers are

supplying electronic cover image files direct to Amazon.co.uk and to Ottakar's as well as to Nielsen BookData.

Level 2

Large publishers with large backlists and ongoing publishing programs need a more systematised solution to information provision. Most have developed or bought in integrated product information databases which can output data to aggregators and others in the ONIX format. This is the international industry standard format for the electronic transmission of product data and, although only the very largest and most technically capable publishers have so far adopted ONIX, one or two off-the-shelf software tools which can output ONIX messages have appeared recently.

One that has already been adopted is Vista International's PIM (Product Information Manager); and this is now available as a bureau product to smaller publishers under the name PIM Express.

For more information about ONIX, visit www.editeur.org.