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@BIC1UK
www.bic.org.uk
info@bic.org.uk

Introduction to BIC Basic Metadata

The book industry uses the term *metadata* to describe all the information related to your product – not just the title and author name, price and publication date, but also a range of other information that helps you work effectively with your supply chain partners to promote and sell your book. This BIC Bite examines metadata, the basic data fields needed to describe a book, how that data is communicated, and touches on the business benefits of ensuring the *quality* of that metadata.

Background

Until the 1990s, most book metadata was on paper, in catalogues, stocklists, advance information sheets and so on. But increasing e-commerce, and in particular the growth of online bookselling, raised the importance of metadata and the need to make it widely available in digital form. Nowadays, metadata is critical, as the majority of book discovery and purchase takes place online, and of course online is the only place to find eBooks. Publishers and retailers use metadata to market books to people making their purchasing decisions on PCs, tablets and phones – even if many of the books themselves are still on paper.

Developing metadata standards

The book publishing industry has long recognised the need for standards in metadata. This is exemplified by the ISBN, an identifier originating in the UK book trade in the late 1960s. Today, the ISBN is recognised globally as the identifier of record used by all participants in the trade. Most retailers and libraries will not stock a book without an ISBN. And in the 1990s, organisations including Book Industry Communication (BIC) in the UK, Book Industry Study Group (BISG) in North America and EDItEUR, an international group coordinating development of book industry standards including ONIX and *Thema*, recognised the need for a range of standards and best practices for communicating metadata.

BIC's *BIC Basic* standard provides a *minimum* benchmark for a publisher communicating product metadata to intermediaries and booksellers of all kinds, be they independent bookshops, chain retailers, wholesalers, data aggregators or online stores. Meeting this minimum standard makes a publisher's print, eBook and audiobook products discoverable and increases their sales.

List of data elements BIC Basic metadata

BIC Basic metadata falls into two groups: the first group of eleven data elements are **mandatory** and the second group are **required if certain dependencies are met**.

Mandatory	Required if dependencies met
ISBN or GTIN-13	Author name(s) (<i>unless there is no author</i>)
Title	Subtitle (<i>if there is a subtitle on the book</i>)
Whole product form (hardback, paperback etc)	Series title (<i>if part of a series or set</i>)
Main BIC Subject category	Edition number (<i>if 2nd edition, 3rd edition etc</i>)
Imprint (brand) name and/or Publisher name	Product properties (<i>extent, physical size etc</i>)
Date of publication or of availability in UK	Non-trade supplier name (<i>if not distributed to trade</i>)
Jacket/cover image (as a high-quality JPEG)	Availability date (<i>if not available immediately</i>)
At least one distributor/wholesaler name or GLN	VAT detail (<i>% tax rate, ex-VAT amount etc</i>)
Availability status (awaited, in stock, out of stock etc)	Price effective from date (<i>if changing price</i>)
GBP retail price including VAT	Price effective until date (<i>if changing price</i>)
Sales rights relating to the UK (for sale or not for sale)	

BIC provides guidelines to publishers for a wide range of possible metadata fields, but the mandatory data fields listed above are the *absolute minimum* needed to communicate a book product to your trade partners. Most of the remaining data fields listed under 'required if dependencies met' will also frequently be required, and are strongly recommended in any case.

There are many important elements that you will *not* find on either list, such as 'short description', 'author biography' or prices and sales rights for other countries, and these are sometimes referred to as *enhanced metadata*. This richer data can be immensely valuable to improved discoverability and higher sales – but BIC Basic is a *minimum* set of requirements. A publisher should always check with their trading partners for particular extra requirements they may have for their own systems and processes, above and beyond BIC Basic.

How to communicate to the book trade

There are a number of methods for communicating your metadata to your trade partners and the broader book industry: web portals, spreadsheets and ONIX are the primary options. Note that a publisher should always confer with their trade partners to ascertain their preferred method for receiving metadata.

Web portals are online sites for recording an individual title's information, one metadata field at a time. The portal will guide a publisher towards creating an acceptable metadata record. Web portals are available for publishers to use at both Nielsen Book Data, home of the UK ISBN Agency, and Bowker, home to the US ISBN Agency. But portals require manual re-keying of data, are error-prone, and are very inefficient when dealing with more than a handful of products.

Excel spreadsheets can be used in a variety of ways to send title information. You may be able to send an Excel file based on your own template. However, it's more likely that your trade partners will have templates of their own, with a pre-set layout and instructions for organising the product records. This ensures that the metadata they wish to prioritise is delivered and processed correctly for all of the publishers involved – but as a result, every template is different, and it can again become highly labour-intensive if you're sending the same data several times on several slightly different templates. Spreadsheets can also become prone to errors when more than a couple of dozen products and data columns are involved.

ONIX is a standard XML-based format used for communicating metadata in bulk. ONIX allows for the richest and most flexible metadata delivery in the book trade; there is a separate BIC Bite describing ONIX on BIC's website. Note that even if you do not use ONIX yourself, it is still important to familiarise yourself as your metadata is likely to be exchanged between your trading partners and other parts of the publishing supply chain in ONIX format.

Benefits of quality metadata

Comprehensive, accurate and timely metadata delivers benefits across the entire spectrum of the book trade, from authors to readers. By following good metadata practices, publishers can provide information about their products to improve discoverability and sales, and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the supply chain.

Further information

You can find detailed information available about BIC Basic at www.bic.org.uk/17/bic-basic/ and see the EDItEUR site for an overview of ONIX www.editeur.org/83/Overview/. BIC members can participate in discussions about metadata with the BIC Metadata Sub-Committee, and information is available on our website at www.bic.org.uk. BIC also runs a range of metadata training.

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