BIC Bites

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Introduction to ONIX

Many publishers, booksellers, intermediaries and systems and service providers have adopted ONIX as a key part of their business process. This BIC Bite explains what ONIX is, and why it is the ideal standard for communicating book product information with your trading partners.

Background

ONIX (ONline Information eXchange) is the book industry's primary metadata standard for the supply of information about books and e-books, and is developed and supported by EDItEUR, the trade standards body for the global book, e-book and serials supply chain. ONIX for Books is strongly supported in the UK by BIC and BIC's Metadata Sub-Committee. In addition, the UK ONIX national group hosted by BIC, provides input to the international development of the standard. ONIX 1.0 (released in 2000), ONIX 2.0 (2001) and ONIX 2.1 (2003) aimed to streamline the delivery of product metadata to book supply chain partners. Since then there have been some major changes in the book industry, most notably the global growth of internet retailing and digital products. ONIX 3.0 (released in 2009 and updated several times since) is the latest version of the standard which reflects these new products and sales channels. Organisations that still use ONIX 2.1 should, in liaison with their supply chain partners, migrate to ONIX 3.0. Those adopting ONIX for the first time should, where possible, specify version 3.0 from the outset, as after December 2014, version 2.1 is no longer fully supported by EDItEUR. ONIX is required for higher tiers of accreditation under BIC's Product Data Excellence Award (PDEA) scheme (bic.org.uk/90/Product-Data), and use of ONIX 3.0 is mandatory for Gold level from 2020.

Basics of ONIX

ONIX is designed to describe book publishers' products in all their formats and varieties and so it has to be both flexible and comprehensive. ONIX is an XML-based message format, and data about each book is carried within the message using tags which begin and end using the <> and </> notation (similar to HTML).

Each ONIX message contains a 'header' section containing information about the message itself, and then a series of 'product records' which hold all the information about each book. So an example message might look like this:

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
<ONIXMessage release="3.0" xmlns="http://ns.editeur.org/onix/3.0/reference">
     <Header>...............</Header>
     <Product>...............</Product>
     <Product>...............</Product>
     <Product>...............</Product>
</ONIXMessage>
```

Inside each product record, between the opening <Product> and closing </Product> tags, there are lots of additional tags for data elements such as title, author, format, price *etc*. Each data element has its own opening and closing tag and the actual data is located in between. Note that ONIX is a flexible standard: it can be used to describe one product with just a handful of basic tags, or hundreds of products with a very rich and comprehensive set of data – there are well over 400 tags, though some are highly specialised and a 'typical' record might use only a fraction of that number.

The Product Record

This is where the information about the products is located. The Product Record has to cope with a wide range of information: for example it can describe the tradeable item itself, the related marketing material, and information about how the product is traded through the supply chain. This means that the ONIX message can be complex, with many possible tags and the capability to carry a large amount of data.

There are some mandatory elements such as a record identifier, a product number such as an ISBN-13, and a title, plus a large number of optional elements – contributor names, cover images, physical dimensions, e-book file formats, imprint, publisher, distributor and pricing information. These are all carried in tags such as <IDValue>, <PersonName>, <ImprintName> and <PriceAmount>. Here's what an author name might look like:

BIC

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

```
<Contributor>
    <SequenceNumber>1</SequenceNumber>
    <ContributorRole>A01</ContributorRole>
    <PersonNameInverted>Sjöwall, Maj</PersonNameInverted>
    <BiographicalNote>Maj Sjöwall is a poet. She lives in Sweden.</BiographicalNote>
</Contributor>
```

Tags can carry numbers (like <SequenceNumber>), special ONIX codes (like 'A01' in <ContributorRole>), or textual data (like <BiographicalNote>). Other tags (e.g. <Contributor>) are purely structural, used to group other elements together logically. Some tags are repeatable (e.g. for multiple authors), and the order the tags occur in the ONIX message is vital. There are literally hundreds of tags for different types of data about each book, so the ONIX metadata can be an extremely 'rich' source of information – though any one data supplier or recipient will use only the subset of tags relevant to their business. There is a full *Specification*, the codelists, an *Implementation and Best Practice Guide*, and an XML definition of the allowed tags and the necessary order – all freely available from EDItEUR – but most ONIX users have a software application that deals with the exact technical details.

Why use ONIX?

ONIX is capable of describing almost any permutation of product metadata – and as future business developments necessitate changes, the standard will evolve to accommodate these requirements. This broad capability and the relative complexity of the requirements means that ONIX is a significant investment for both senders and receivers of ONIX messages. Yet it makes financial sense to use a single standard for all trading partners, rather than a customised solution for each different trading partner in the supply chain.

ONIX's ability to deliver rich, accurate and well-structured product metadata to supply chain partners is critical to maintaining an efficient supply chain and to maximising discoverability and thus sales revenues.

For many publishers, their use of ONIX may depend on what IT systems they use. If they use one of the market-leading product management systems, then ONIX 3.0 should be built in, and it will be the normal way to supply information. If a publisher has developed their own system in house, then it will depend on the number of titles and size of business as to whether ONIX is the right solution for that publisher. For very small organisations, there are ONIX-compliant, 'pay as you go' SAAS systems, and web-based data input forms from metadata aggregators such as Nielsen or Bowker. Even if publishers supply data to an aggregator in a format such as .CSV or Excel, BIC recommends the use of codes from ONIX codelists wherever possible, to promote interoperability across the industry.

Why is metadata important?

For newcomers to the book industry or to the issues of metadata, it is worth emphasising that online, books and e-books only get ordered if customers can find them. Research has proven that the more information is available to the potential reader, the more likely they are to buy the book. Search and discovery is crucial to building sales, and accurate and complete product metadata – including descriptions and a jacket image – has been shown to make a huge difference to sales performance. BIC's PDEA scheme lists the fields that comprise an *absolute minimum* of information to describe a book. But publishers should now look far beyond BIC Basic and describe all possible aspects of their product: ONIX 3.0 is the gold standard for describing book and e-book products, and BIC recommends that ONIX 3.0 should be widely implemented to optimise the product metadata supply chain.

There is a lot more information available about ONIX and how to implement ONIX 3.0. BIC members can raise questions about ONIX with the BIC Metadata Sub-Committee and information is available on our website at www.bic.org.uk. Alternatively you can contact EDItEUR via its website at www.editeur.org. BIC also runs a range of metadata training courses including *Essentials* and *Advanced* courses on ONIX, and *Metadata Primer* for beginners.

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