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Weights & Dimensions Best Practice in Metadata

This BIC Bite is relevant for publishers, suppliers, wholesalers and retailers as well as data aggregators.

Introduction

While it's generally agreed that accurate bibliographic metadata are vitally important in ensuring an efficient functioning supply chain for physical books, Weights & Dimensions (W&D) data – not being specifically available pre-production – have often been overlooked as part of the preparations for getting a book into the hands of a paying customer. Whereas ISBN, Author, Title etc. are decided once and don't change through the process, the W&D of a physical book – while normally calculated pre-publication – are harder to pin down and having to ensure their accuracy across the supply chain builds cost and inefficiency into processes (particularly for distributors, wholesalers and retailers), customer service issues and duplication of workload generally.

BIC has now produced a best practice document laying out some suggested ways of closing the loophole on W&D.

The Loophole

W&D information by necessity starts out as expected rather than actual. A publisher will determine in advance the specific format a book will take, the paper stock, layout etc. All of these go to determine how the finished product will appear and therefore allow the publisher to provide expected W&D data in advance of production. This is normally provided to data aggregators in the standard ONIX feed. The loophole occurs where this data does not get retrospectively updated following production, as a finished book makes its way into a distributor's warehouse.

Supply Chain Issues

These are just some of the issues caused across the physical supply chain by sharing inaccurate W&D data:

- Increase in damages as parcels and totes are potentially overfilled.
- Risk of contravening Health and Safety guidelines where weights are understated.
- Incorrect calculation of shipping costs for online customer purchases, which can be significant where items are sent overseas.
- Increased transport costs (and carbon footprint) for distributors and retailers where boxes aren't filled optimally.
- Inefficient storage in distributor and retailer warehouses, leading to unused space in pick faces and causing potential delays in despatching items and unnecessary stock movements in the warehouse.
- Additional costs for retailers of duplicating the measurement of items received for the first time.

BIC Guidelines

The published BIC guidelines on W&D are designed to look at options to close the loop and, where applicable, to allow for actual data to circulate more freely across the supply chain, as well as providing an opportunity for future updates (as a title is reprinted, perhaps using a different paper stock for example).

BIC's working group made the following recommendations:

- Publisher provides expected data in ONIX feed (NB: all data should be in metric measurements as per the ONIX standards – see link to EDITEUR website, below).
- Distributor provides actual data on first receipt back to publisher.
- Publisher updates the expected fields with actuals in ONIX.
- The cycle is then repeated with any subsequent reprint.
- Data aggregators may wish to consolidate feeds from distributors of actual W&D data for wider circulation.
- Retailers and other third parties can then use the existing data feeds they receive confident that the data are based on physical products as opposed to expected W&Ds.



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Conclusion

Where data feeds in the physical supply chain are 'trusted', all users of that data should be confident that the feeds they receive don't need rechecking and should lead to a reduction of duplicated workload for all parties involved. Following the recommendations of the BIC W&D Task & Finish Working Group would go a long way to ensuring that this becomes a reality.

Further information

BIC Guidelines on Weights and Dimensions: <https://www.bic.org.uk/206/Weights-and-Dimensions/>

ONIX standards for sharing metadata on W&D:

<https://www.editeur.org/files/ONIX%203/APPNOTE%20Weights%20and%20dimensions%20in%20ONIX.pdf>

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Last updated 13th December 2019



the book industry's supply chain organisation