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CHAOS — “It Takes More Than a Village” to Develop a Standard

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Ann-Marie Breaux and her team of authors have done a superb job of explaining what you need to know about the ISBN transitions from its 10-digit format to its 13-digit transformation. I hope that you will take in each article, save it in your clipping file, and share it with your colleagues and staff. It is seldom that a change as significant as this occurs in the standards domain. Consider this: this is a change that will go on globally and have an impact on every organization and company that touches information.

The ISBN standard, known in the standards world as ISO 2108, is our community’s most recognizable and ubiquitous standard. When I introduce what NISO does to someone who is unfamiliar with standards I always use the ISBN as my prime example of a standard we care about. The ISBN makes the usefulness and value of standards real and understandable. The ISBN also illustrates the need for people, organizations, and a worldwide network to support standardization.

The expansion of the ISBN from 10-digits to 13 although it appears to be a simple change — almost a “no-brainer,” some would say — was done deliberately and required coordination at both the national and international levels. One of my colleagues in the standards world has observed that standards like fine foods and wine are the product of careful and often laborious processes. How true! The ISBN is a good example of this “careful and laborious process.”

The formal part of the revision process began in 2001. But before the first “New Work Item” form was filed with the ISO there were years of informal discussion to lay the groundwork for the revision process. Through those discussions and meetings the key players were brought together.

The process was officially launched with a formal vote taken by the members of Technical Committee 46 (the equivalent of NISO at the international level), Subcommittee 9 on Identification and Description. “Members” in this case refers to countries (not individuals). Each member (country) of Subcommittee 9 was required to review the scope of the work to be undertaken in the revision of the ISBN standard and to nominate national representatives to serve on an international working group.

In the U.S. NISO is responsible for selecting the delegations of national experts that will represent our needs and viewpoints. The delegation of experts that NISO engaged included representatives from the book and publishing industry as well as the library community. Participants in the U.S. delegation included Richard Stark and Doug Cheney (from Barnes and Noble); Laurie Stark, Ed Ramsey, Lisa McCloy-Kelley from Random House; Wendell Lotz, Ingram; and Albert Simmonds. Leading the delegation of experts was Michael Cairns the President of R. R. Bowker, the maintenance agency for the ISBN standard in the U.S.

Over the course of four years the ISO’s ISBN working group held a series of multi-day meetings. Michael Healey (with Nielsen Book Data in the U.K.) chaired the working group, assisted by Stella Griffiths and Jane Thacker the secretariat of Subcommittee 9. Although the group met in wonderful locations, such as Milan, Rome, Berlin, and Paris I can assure you that there was no time for sightseeing. International standards meetings are drill-down events, that require preparation, full-attention while in progress (often fighting jet-lag), and a lot of follow-through afterward.

The proposed revised standard went through two-levels of balloting in the ISO as a Committee Draft and a Draft International Standard. Through the ballot cycles hundreds of questions and comments were submitted by the members. As the document progressed from a Committee Draft to a bona fide Draft International Standard the text was examined and re-examined and further refined. Concurrent with the preparation of the text of the revised standard the group drafted an implementers’ manual to flesh-out all of the details associated with implementing the ISBN standard.

The final ballot on the revised ISBN standard was conducted in 2004. The result was unanimous: all twenty-three members of the Subcommittee supported the DIS. However, the working group was not able to “rest on its laurels” as accompanying the approval votes were 59 comments that required a response.

The newest edition of the ISBN standard, ISO 2108, will be published in 2005. The fact is that no one requires a copy of the standard to use the ISBN. What you do need is the firm understanding and global commitment that this international standard signifies. That is the significance of standards development at the international level. And that is why ISO standards must be the product of a careful and, at times, laborious process.