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The Book Industry Systems Advisory Committee Looks at the Standards Future

D. Jeffrey Blumenthal
Follett Corporation

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BISAC: Looking at the Standards Future

by D. Jeffrey Blumenthal (Corporate Director — Strategic Planning Follett Corporation)

BISAC — the Book Industry Systems Advisory Committee — began over twenty years ago as a group concerned with electronic ordering standards in the book industry. So successful were those early efforts, that when ASC X12 started to gain acceptance in general retailing, few within the book industry were eager to make the switch. However, as X12 grew in popularity and moved beyond purchase orders, it became clear that the best interests of the industry would be served by such a change. The development and acceptance of a wide range of electronic

transactions in the X12 format have characterized BISAC and its membership over the past few years. The circle of participants has moved from publisher / distributor / retailer to also include manufacturers. The number of different electronic transactions now numbers over a dozen, and the committee itself is organized into numerous operating subcommittees. We meet regularly throughout the year. With all this in mind, one might conclude that the future role

of BISAC and EDI standards are entering into a Golden Age.

There are, however, a few persistent problems and new issues looming over the horizon that might give one cause for concern. Foremost among these are:

1. A widening gap between adopters and non-adopters, and
2. Fear of system changes, principally EDIFACT.

There are a number of reasons for these concerns. Let me offer a few of my opinions along with comments and suggestions. Unless one has been asleep these last few years, the number of consolidations of publishers and growth of super store retailers surely has not gone unnoticed. Yet in spite of this move toward large scale operations, it is still easy (relatively speaking) to enter some areas of the book industry, e.g. intellectual property creation and retailing. At the same time the big have been getting bigger, new entrants have been populating the lower end of the spectrum. Other than sheer size, one parameter that often differentiates the big from the small is the use of standards-based EDI. It is a gap that does not seem to be narrowing.

At BISAC we have long recognized this phenomenon and have developed some strategies to meet the challenge. We are one of the few X12 based organizations that publish our own standards. We do this to keep the cost as low as possible — our manual is roughly one-third the cost of comparable publications. In addition, we have implemented a dues structure to attract members from smaller

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The SAN Helps Pave the Way for Successful Electronic Commerce in the Christian Marketplace

by Sheri Toomb (Manager of Membership Services, Evangelical Christian Publishers Association)

The Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) recently announced the electronic data interchange (EDI) network for the Christian publishing and retail communities, called X^onet. X^onet allows trading partners within the Christian marketplace to exchange standard business documents electronically, computer-to-computer, through the value-added network supplied by GE Information Services.

Vital to this effort is that each trading partner in the Christian publishing and retailing community acquire a SAN (Standard Address Number) in order to uniquely identify themselves on X^onet. The SAN is an ANSI standard seven-digit identifier for each address of organizations in (or served by) the publishing industry. It is administered by the ISBN Agency at R.R. Bowker, as its Maintenance Agency. SAN has been the identification standard used by the Book Industry Systems Advisory Committee (BISAC) since its inception to identify the location to which books should be shipped and/or billed. Once BISAC adopted the ANSI X12 formats for EDI, the SAN became the address to which the EDI transaction is sent as well.

Since X^onet utilizes the BISAC X12 electronic data interchange

document standards, which require the use of a SAN for location identification, there is no reason why librarians with systems programmed to create the BISAC X12 Book Purchase Order (and the other BISAC X12 formats for book transactions) should not participate as well. In fact, librarians may be ahead of the Christian publishers, retailers, and wholesalers, since they were assigned SANs in the original implementation of this standard, based on their listings in Bowker's *American Library Directory*.

ECPA is running an awareness campaign among publishers, vendors, and retailers in the Christian trading community to educate and inform them on the necessity of the SAN for trading on X^onet. We believe that most libraries have been assigned a SAN. If you don't know yours, contact Bowker at the address/phone number below. If you haven't been assigned one, you will be. AND THEY ARE FREE OF CHARGE!!

Inquiries concerning X^onet should be directed to Sheri Toomb, Manager of Membership Services at ECPA, by phone 602/966-3998 or via email at <stoomb@ecpa.org>. Inquiries about obtaining a SAN should be directed to Diana Fumando, Manager of SANs, at R.R. Bowker at 908/771-7755.

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companies. While it requires a time commitment to participate in BISAC, it does not involve a large monetary one.

One of the stated benefits of standards-based EDI is cost savings. It is my belief, and one that is shared by many of my colleagues at BISAC, that the real benefit lies within the information content, not in the process of moving it from one computer to another. The industry's preoccupation with cost in the past decade will yield to segmentation marketing strategies in the coming years. We need to look beyond the purchase order to really see the value of the information. EDI offers the best way to capture, share, and analyze that data and turn it into information. To have the implementations of transactions for this purpose requires BISAC to have the broadest possible participation across all facets of the industry, not just one or two segments. Again, we must appeal to smaller firms, libraries, and schools to complement the publishers, wholesale distributors, and retailers currently represented.

One final comment on the gap between the adopters and non-adopters of X12 standards deals with topic of software. Some of us are in the position of working for firms with sizable programming departments. The majority of us, however, must rely upon third party system vendors for computer services and support. A few of the early adopters of EDI technology were tempted to write their own EDI translation software. Translation software is the link between our in-house applications and the world of X12 EDI. We learned the painful lesson of expensive, inflexible implementations of EDI translation. Some of us are still living with these legacy decisions. Today most firms electing to enter the world of EDI, select a professional translation software package written by a firm specializing in that particular field. It is important that we all learn from these experiences.

After so many years I am still saddened to see third party software vendors offering systems lacking in full standards-based EDI capability. Many have implemented proprietary order entry systems. They may be efficient, but who wants to be forced into a business relationship? Others are programming a minimal X12 capability and are not incorporating a "translator engine" like the more experienced users. This limits the ability to use all of the

advanced transactions that go beyond POs. My advice to anyone contemplating a systems investment, is to get a commitment to support standards-based EDI with a professional package. If someone offers you a fantastic deal without the EDI capability, don't walk away — RUN! Use your leverage as a consumer, or the gap will grow.

My last comment involves the international EDI standard known as EDIFACT. Coming from the book industry, we had a similar experience when an international standard expanded upon one developed in the United States. The 12-digit UPC symbol on consumer goods was an innovative approach to a common problem. The rest of the world broadened the UPC and developed the EAN-13 symbol. The implementation within our industry is known as the Bookland EAN. It is the fundamental product marking system that makes many of the electronic commerce benefits practicable. At one time it was virtually impossible to find a POS system capable of supporting this "foreign" symbology. You could find a system for a liquor store easier than one for a bookstore. It is still difficult today to sell certain items in some distribution channels because of the product marking dilemma. For some reason we often fail to see beyond our borders.

With EDIFACT, the international EDI standard, beginning to play a widening role, it is my concern that one may consider this an entirely new standard that is incompatible with X12. In reality, EDIFACT is an expanded implementation that incorporates a slightly different syntax, i.e., message structure. If we make the same inflexible design decisions for systems today that we did when we debated UPC and EAN, then we could be in for some rough times. Hopefully we have learned not to fear and reject international standards.

In summary, we have come a long way since BISAC's beginning vision to expedite the ordering and sales of books. At any moment in history, one could have looked toward the future and pointed out the great changes and challenges ahead. Our moment in time today is no different from those of the past. The challenges facing us, while intimidating, can easily be met. BISAC offers one of the best forums for achieving a vision of improved marketing and service in the book industry. Best of all, you can be a part of that vision — you can be a part of BISAC.