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Caught in the Middle: The Vendor’s Perspective on ISBN-13

by Wendell Lotz (Vice President, Product Database Development, Ingram Book Group) <wendell.lotz@ingrambook.com>

Inevitably, materials vendors bridge the gap between content creators (publishers) and end users (retailers, libraries and library systems). Accurate communication is the key, and during the transition to ISBN-13, the material vendor must accommodate every possible combination/variation on either side. Some have suggested that the transition to ISBN-13 is similar in scope to the Y2K projects we all endured several years ago. At Ingram we believe the project is just that extensive, touching virtually every process that is product oriented, but that it is eminently achievable with careful and detailed planning. Also, thankfully, the industry’s computers will not blow up on December 31, 2006 nor will the world come grinding to a halt. However, inadequate preparation will result in trading partners sending or receiving the wrong product causing service resolution efforts to ripple throughout the organization.

In order to avoid such costs, Ingram began its preparations by convening a team of all the computer applications managers in the early spring of 2004. Because we distribute music, video, and other products which are governed by UPC codes, rather than ISBNs, an early decision made at these planning meetings was to split the project into two phases. The 2004 phase was designed to prepare the organization for Sunrise 2005, the seminal event in retailing whereby the general retailers of the North American continent were instructed by the Uniform Code Council to be prepared to handle 13-digit identifiers (in the form of EANs) as well as the historical 12-digit UPC.

The process at Ingram was eased somewhat by the use of a surrogate key (a non-ISBN control number) in most systems. As a result of the surrogate key the preparation for EAN, and subsequently ISBN-13, required the addition of a column for a 13-digit entry in the primary database. Cross-reference tables between the values in the 13-digit column (called “Preferred EAN” in Ingram nomenclature), then allow any 13-digit identifier to be mapped to its surrogate key and legacy processes to take over processing with that identifier in hand.

For vendors that do not use a surrogate key in place of the ISBN, the transition has been or will be more complex.

All the above was accomplished before the fall selling season and, at this writing, we patiently await the first EAN representing a non-book product. Ordering systems, purchase order acknowledgements, electronic invoices and other standard EDI documents can now “talk 13” in all the standard formats such as X.12, EDIFACT, Feedback, TRADACOMS, etc.

The second phase of the Ingram plan will focus on documents that might best be described as communication documents (as opposed to order processing documents). In this phase the focus will be on communicating in both
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ISBN-10 and ISBN-13, wherever possible; we are targeting completion at various points throughout 2005. The communication phase of the project includes:

- The ability to receive publisher records and bibliographic records from third parties, with either the 13-digit identifier, or both ISBN formats as keys.
- Outputting MARC records, paper invoices and packing slips, new title alerts, status reports, (i.e., virtually any paper document), using the identifier that the customer or supplier sent.

While the first phase of the project was relatively simple from a technical viewpoint, there is significantly more difficulty in the second phase. Some of the most significant difficulties for Ingram have included:

- Managing the real estate on internal screens, Web pages, and paper documents.
- File exchanges based on the ISBN as key. Although the surrogate key solved many problems and made the project simpler in the mainstream ordering processes, many ancillary or smaller processes use the ISBN-10 as their key.
- Managing the cut-off date for internal associates, i.e., how do you keep an organization with hundreds of customers and supplier contacts synchronized in conveying the details of our state-of-readiness message to trading partners.
- Converting the rich metadata assets, which use the ISBN to link to content records. Ingram manages an archive of over one million electronic book cover images. The image files are named with a nomenclature featuring their ISBN-10.

All of these issues can be conquered with technical expertise and careful planning.

As the “executive sponsor” and focal point at Ingram for “things 13,” the issues we can’t control cause the most concern and occupy the inevitable drive-time musings. Among these are:

- Worries about publishers abandoning ISBN-10 before it is time. We have already seen multiple publishers issuing books without the ISBN-10 on

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people profile

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J. Wendell Lotz

BORN & LIVED: Born in Yonkers, NY; spent the formative years including first professional library job in various parts of Ohio.

EARLY LIFE: Grew up in a small town of 1800, one of three children of a dentist and librarian. I loved sports, playing most of the backyard renditions of that era, and began attending collegiate football games at the age of six. But, most of all, my mother introduced me to books—every Christmas and birthday included a book as a gift, a tradition I have tried to maintain with my own children. I was valedictorian of my high school class and began my writing “career” as editor of the school newspaper, which came out every grading period on mimeographed paper.

FAMILY: Married to Rebecca James, an M.L.S. and former school and public librarian, as well as an executive at Baker & Taylor and Ingram. Three children—two grown daughters (CPA and Funeral Director, respectively) plus a 12-year-old boy at home; two grandsons.

EDUCATION: B.A. Heidelberg College, M.A. in History, University of Cincinnati; M.S. in Librarianship, Western Michigan University.

FIRST JOB: Social Sciences Bibliographer, the Ohio State University.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Ohio State Libraries Acquisition Department, 1968-1972; joined Baker & Taylor as Manager, Approval Program Services, 1972-1980; held various Marketing Dept positions, 1980-1995; my final B & T position was Vice President, Information Technology Group. I joined Ingram Book Company in 1995 to build the database department. Most of my career has focused on the management of bibliographic metadata. Currently the Chair, BISAC General Committee; Vice-Chair, Editor; and member of the ONIX international Steering Committee.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Golf, exercise, read books, spectator sports of all kinds.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Favorite author is Robert B. Parker. I’m a firm believer in the saying “so many books, so little time.” I try to split my reading between non-fiction history, religion, and business, and fiction—usually mystery. Currently reading a Nicholas Sparks novel and one of my history professor’s works, The Presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes, that I never had time to read when he wrote it in the 70’s.

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: People who talk so loudly on their cell phones that the whole world has to listen in.

PHILOSOPHY: “Just do it,” copyright Nike, but expresses my attitude about most things. A corollary attitude is one that was crystallized by a New York bus driver during one of my recent trips to the City and that is “one should not worry about tomorrow because no one has ever seen it. By the time tomorrow gets here it is today.” So analyze the issue or problem you are encountering, develop a plan, and execute it. Modify as circumstances dictate.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Led the building of the bibliographic database that underlies ipage and most of the major online book retailing Websites around the world. A close runner-up would be “led the development of Baker & Taylor’s B & T MARC system of services.”

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: The most important goal for the next five years is guiding my son’s development so that he becomes a happy, productive member of society.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Assuming that the “industry” is the library world specifically, I find myself somewhat distant from library issues of the early 21st century and reluctant to comment. What I will be interested to watch over the next five years is the impact of Google Print and the competitive efforts of other search engines to digitize the information resources of the world and index them with the latest search technologies. I believe these efforts could have significant impact on the skills and tasks required of librarians pushing them ever more towards being “information managers” and altering acquisition and collection development practices to a large degree.

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the exterior of the book. Others anticipate issuing catalogs and announcements this fall season featuring only the ISBN-13. Such practices will cause service difficulties until all, or most, parties in the supply chain are 13-compatible.

- Will retailers and ILS (Integrated Library System) vendors get it, and when will they be ready? At Ingram, and presumably most other wholesalers and distributors, most business transactions now take place electronically through the systems utilized by library and retail customers. Industry surveys indicate the system vendors, in both retail and libraries, will have versions capable of dealing with 13-digit identifiers by the January 1, 2007 implementation deadline. The significant question and concern is whether or not individual libraries and vendors will have upgraded to the version capable of "talking 13." If you are a library it behooves you to learn now when your system vendor will have an ISBN-13 compatible version and what you need to do to upgrade to it.

- Can we keep a very large organization talking with the same voice? How can we make sure everyone knows what the company is doing to become ISBN-13 compatible and when we are doing each step? While much of this can be controlled and managed through a detailed communication plan, the pervasiveness of the ISBN in the practices and processes of the industry dictate that this knowledge must be spread to nearly every staff member.

- What will be the impact of OCLC’s decision to store the ISBN-13 in the 024 tag until some time after the Oracle database is installed? This is a question that should concern all libraries and others in the supply chain of MARC record distribution. Its implications are not yet understood.

In conclusion, becoming ISBN-13 compatible is a critical necessity for all members of the book industry supply chain. Although the deadline is not hard coded into our systems as Y2K was, the lessons we learned then about reviewing each of our processes can be leveraged in this endeavor. At Ingram we are learning that (due to our architecture) the IT challenges, while widespread, are not difficult. Our challenges are in managing the transition period when both ISBN-10 and ISBN-13 are in play—a period that may last until the last book of the ISBN-10 era turns to dust. As noted, we are also learning that the IT challenges are only a part of those that must be conquered. If you have not begun your ISBN-13 compatible plan yet, finish this ATG issue and get started.


by Terry Willan (Standards Manager, Research Group, Talis Acquisitions EDI) <terry.willan@talis.com>


To enable a transition where trading partners can modify their systems independently and continue trading without disruption, the Book Industry Study Group (BISG) has published "EDI Strategies for the Book Industry and the 13-Digit ISBN" (http://www.bisg.org/docs/BISG_EDI_Roadmap.pdf). This recommends a dual-use approach, where both forms of ISBN are carried in all EDI messages so that the recipient system can switch from using the ISBN-10 to the ISBN-13 in its own time. This will work until publishers begin to assign 13-digit ISBNs beginning 979, some time after January 1st 2007.

The first step is to modify systems to send both forms of ISBN as soon as possible and to ensure that receiving them in EDI messages, even if they are not used in processing, does not cause a problem. The old BISAC format, which has fixed length fields, will not support ISBN-13, so systems that still use it will have to start using a more modern EDI format such as ASC X12, EDIFACT or the new XML-based format. In EDIFACT, the already defined EAN area will be used to carry the ISBN-13.

Libraries should be planning for their systems to be processing the ISBN-13 or EAN in stead of the ISBN-10 in all EDI messages received, by the end of 2006.

Libraries have Continuing 10-digit Needs

The publishing and bookselling parts of the book industry can and will move exclusively to using ISBN-13, even for publications that were originally assigned a 10-digit ISBN, which will gradually disappear. Books with 10-digit ISBNs will exist in libraries indefinitely. Librarians will continue to process them for various reasons (acquiring older books; interlibrary loans; and patrons will continue to need and look for them. Both librarians and patrons may start from information that only gives the 10-digit ISBN.

So library systems should allow users to be unaware of ISBN revision. For those ISBNs that can be translated uniquely between 10 and 13 digits (that is, all 10-digit ISBNs and those 13-digit ISBNs beginning 978), users should be able to retrieve records using either form. When entering data, libraries should be able to record the ISBN in the form(s) given in the item. This latter point means that ISBNs in existing bibliographic records do not need to be converted. Also, the MARC format does not need to be modified because the ISBN field (tag 020) can already accommodate ISBN-13.

Display and Printing

ISBNs are displayed in many places throughout library systems, in both front-of-house and back office modules. This may include displays of outputs from batch processes. Systems need to be able to display both 10-digit and 13-digit ISBNs, whichever occurs in the data. Does the system real estate allow for longer ISBNs? Printed outputs may be more likely to have real estate restrictions. These could cover a wide range from reports supporting staff activities such as cataloging, to overtures and other notices to patrons.

Validation of Data Entry

In some systems ISBNs may be validated when entered as data, such as in a MARC cataloging record, a purchase order or inter-library loan request form. If so, the ISBN-10 and ISBN-13 should be allowed as valid.


Indexing and Search

To fulfill the need to allow searching on dual forms of ISBN regardless of the form(s) of the ISBN in the bibliographic record, it is highly likely that changes will be required to indexes and search interface software. How this is achieved internally is up to each system vendor.

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