FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

26 August 2024

What is ONIX?

ONIX (ONline Information EXchange) is the international standard for representing and communicating book industry product information in electronic form.

ONIX for Books is a standard specification for communicating book, audiobook, e-book and digital audio metadata between publishers, various intermediaries like distributors, wholesalers and data service organisations, and retailers in the book supply chain.

EDItEUR provides an overview of ONIX here (https://www.EDItEUR.org/83/Overview/) and a 15-minute pre-recorded webinar-style briefing here (https://www.EDItEUR.org/files/videos/20230410%20ONIX%20briefing%20720p.html).

What is metadata?

Metadata is the vital details about a book that allow distributors and retailers to easily identify what it's about and successfully market it. These include 'bibliographic' data such as the ISBN and publication date, title, author or series. But it also includes marketing collateral – descriptive text or abstracts, images such as the cover of the product – and commercial information such as the distribution arrangements and pricing.

What are the benefits of adopting ONIX?

For publishers, experience has shown that ONIX brings two important business benefits.

1. It standardises the way publishers communicate about books to the wider industry, making it possible to deliver rich product information into the supply chain in a way that is understood by both the sender and the recipient. The standard enables much of the metadata exchange to be automated, an important consideration as the volume of new publications continues to rise.
2. A single set of metadata can be maintained and used for all downstream requirements, including the creation of advance information sheets, catalogues and other promotional material. In principle at least, the same metadata can be used without modification for many different uses and with many different data recipients.

For supply chain partners such as distributors and wholesalers, data intermediaries and retailers, ONIX offers these benefits:

1. A faster turnaround time for loading product information into business systems
2. Less (or no) need for manual intervention (e.g. copying information from AI sheets) and therefore a lower risk of error.
3. ONIX reduces the need to deal with multiple proprietary data formats, and thus reduces support costs.
4. Standardising the way the industry shares information allows third parties such as trade associations or data aggregators to develop metrics and benchmarking for data quality and timeliness.

This report from Nielsen also looks at the benefits of metadata: https://nielsenbook.co.uk/metadata-report/

As a publisher, how can I implement ONIX for Books?

Publishers who want to adopt ONIX could consider these options:

1. develop or commission bespoke software for managing product metadata, and build in support for ONIX for Books;
2. acquire a third-party application for product data management which supports ONIX; or
3. contract to use a web-based 'in the cloud' service which supports online data entry and delivery of ONIX output to designated recipients.

ONIX is not so complex that creating a bespoke system is beyond the capabilities of a small internal development team. There are also many application and service providers that would enable you to manage your metadata and deliver it to the industry via ONIX feeds. You'd need to assess the cost and practicality of creating your own bespoke system against what various service providers can offer you and decide what is best for your business. ***Most*** but not all publishers choose to work with a service provider.

Do I need to include all elements listed in ONIX for Books?

ONIX aims to cover the widest possible range of needs, and it therefore includes many elements which are specialised to particular forms of publishing or particular markets. Nobody uses all the elements available, and only a very small number are mandatory. The minimum set of data elements for a trade publisher is a little different from that of an academic publisher and depends on your business requirements and those of your supply chain partners. Some receivers may choose not to use certain data elements if their business does not require that data, or may ask for one option rather than another (though the latter is discouraged).

EDItEUR provides a comprehensive *Implementation and Best Practice Guide* that offers advice on the most commonly useful ONIX 3.0 or 3.1 data elements. See https://www.EDItEUR.org/93/Release-3.0-and-3.1-Downloads/#BestPractices

If you are buying a third-party system or service, you need to check that it complies with the EDItEUR guidelines. The PASA Metadata Committee has published their own guidelines for implementation and 'good practices', building on the global EDItEUR advice.

Is ONIX training available?

EDItEUR provides high-quality and authoritative face-to-face and online training programmes to its members (including PASA), and to non-member organisations, at a reasonable cost (members qualify for lower training fees). The PASA Metadata Committee provides implementation help, workshops and formal training.

How can you improve your metadata?

Don't make the metadata the responsibility of the one tech person who may be in charge of the system you use. Instead, make it something everyone is responsible for throughout the life cycle of the book. An editor, publicist, rights associate, and sales manager all have different material they can add and update in your metadata system.

Add information to your metadata as things happen, and keep updating it as things change. For example, if you are long-listed for an award, add this to your data, and keep the status updated throughout the award process. Continue this process throughout the lifecycle of the book – starting at inception of the publishing project and ending only after the product goes out of print.

If your system allows, set it up so that it automatically sends updates to your trading partners whenever metadata updates have been made.

Proofread your metadata. Even better, use your own ONIX metadata to feed your public-facing website – there's no better way to ensure errors are spotted and corrected.

Get it right first time wherever you can – mistakes are sometimes difficult to rectify once in the supply chain. However, accept that publishing plans change over time, so what's right now may not still be correct in three months' time.

Don't leave it too late. Many booksellers like to have (or even require) a full set of metadata for all new releases several months ahead of publication date.

Regularly review all of your metadata to ensure there are no missing metadata elements (particularly the "Required" metadata elements), including cover image. Housekeeping/data cleaning is important.

Ensure you are informed of and keep up to date with the latest Code Lists and ONIX releases and encourage your trading partners to do the same.

Can ONIX cope with books and metadata in any language?

Yes. ONIX is not built around the needs of any one country, or any one supply chain.

Although the Reference XML tag names are in English, this is just a convenience, and the data carried within most data elements is language-independent. Whether a book is known as a hardback (English), a hardcover (American English), eine gebundene ausgabe (German) or 精装书 (Mandarin), the ONIX data is the same (<ProductForm>BB</ProductForm>).

Where the data is text in a particular language – for example, the text of a contributor's biography – the text can be provided in any one language – or in several languages in parallel.

To facilitate text in multiple languages, ONIX can use Unicode: whether your metadata is in Latin script (for English and most European languages), Cyrillic (for Russian), Arabic script, Hanzi or Kanji (for Chinese and Japanese) or Hangul (for Korean), Unicode covers what you need. Codelists are available in some of these languages too.

What is Thema?

Many South African publishers are familiar with BIC Codes – a classification system that allows you to add codes to your title metadata so that they are categorised correctly by subject (e.g. Crime Fiction). BIC Codes have been withdrawn as of February 2024. Thema replaces the use of BIC Codes.

Thema is aimed at a global audience, with significantly more categories, more flexible use of 'qualifiers' and multilingual options that don't exist in BIC Codes. Thema is managed by EDItEUR and an international group of stakeholders, and is free to use. It aims to enhance the merchandising, discoverability and potential sales of books by simplifying the communication of accurate and detailed subject information across international markets and reducing the need to maintain numerous national subject schemes.'

For more information, EDItEUR has a longer FAQ at https://www.EDItEUR.org/74/FAQs

Compiled from Editeur, BISG and BIC sources with permission.

This document is licensed under a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC licence.