

Request for Proposals: ISBN for e-books

Business requirements study

1 Summary

The International ISBN Agency, working with EDItEUR (the global standards organisation for the book and serials supply chains), is seeking to commission an extremely rapid international study to examine and identify potential supply chain stakeholder requirements for better mechanisms to support the allocation and registration of ISBNs to e-books.

2 Background

There has been divergence in the trade over the application of ISBN to e-books, particularly in the United States, where a significant number of influential publishers have chosen to disregard ISBN allocation and granularity rules (one ISBN per product) and have instead been associating an ISBN with an entity at an altogether different level of abstraction (something that at least approximates to a “release”). These practices challenge the integrity of the ISBN system and its various functional roles in cataloguing, trading, discoverability, sales reporting etc. .

While there is some recent evidence from within national ISBN agencies that this problem is to some extent abating, the reality remains that there are some publishing companies – particularly but not exclusively in the US – which are continuing to be resistant to the idea of assigning multiple ISBNs to what they conceive of as being a single entity.

However, there is growing evidence of problems in the supply chain, particularly where there is any degree of aggregation. Intermediaries and aggregators are creating and applying proprietary identifiers – a return to the pre-ISBN world at a time when certainty of identification is attainable. Some publishers are already becoming familiar with the challenges of managing sales data without product-level identification. The challenge of managing e-book metadata is real enough, particularly with the limited support of currently implemented systems; but simply failing to identify distinct products does not in itself simplify an increasingly complex market place. Proprietary identifiers are a particular menace when they resemble or, in some cases, even duplicate legitimately assigned ISBNs.

The International ISBN Agency has proposed a number of possible solutions to the challenge of identity in the supply chain, specifically

- Proposing the potential development of an e-book “release identifier” – however this has so far received little support from publishers and others in the supply chain.
- Allowing third parties to assign ISBNs to e-books – a number of intermediaries have now been given their own ISBN prefixes, but have faced resistance from publishers in applying these ISBNs to their books – and there are obvious challenges in linking different technical expressions of “the same e-book” with different ISBNs and different metadata sources.

The challenge therefore appears to be how to make it more straightforward and feasible to follow ISBN rules on the application of publishers' ISBNs to all variant products.

3 The specific tasks

Although there are a number of reasons that publishers provide for resisting the “one product, one ISBN” model, one of the most significant difficulties relates to managing the workflow and metadata management implications of creating identifiers for products when these are created by third party intermediaries and not directly under the publisher's control. Either the publisher must create ISBNs and metadata records speculatively; or some mechanism has to be devised through which an intermediary can request an ISBN from the publisher, or assign an ISBN on a “synchronous” basis from the intermediary's own range of numbers – and provide the publisher with an appropriate metadata record for each newly identified product.

The purpose of this study is to explore whether there are any steps that ISBN agencies might take – at either national or international level – to alleviate this workflow challenge. The task of the consultant is:

- To identify and document the key issues
- To understand in detail and to document the impact of this problem on all stakeholders in the e-book supply chain: publishers, retailers, technical services suppliers, digital intermediaries, aggregators, wholesalers, library suppliers/jobbers, metadata aggregators, ISBN registration agencies – and end users (including libraries)
- To record the business requirements of each of the different stakeholder groups for any solution that we might propose
- To define (at a very high level) different possible procedural and technical solutions, and to explore how these meet the business requirements of different stakeholder groups

4 Process

- **Research:** primarily through interviewing, either face-to-face or by telephone, the primary decisions makers and influencers in each stakeholder group
- **Geographic scope:** the particular focus should be on North America and the UK (where the issues are most acute) but interviews should include certain specified key players in Germany, Italy, France and Hispanic countries
- **Timetable:** a draft report must be delivered no later than the end of August 2010

Members of the IIA and EDItEUR secretariats will be available to help in identifying potential interviewees and in making introductions where these may be required. The IIA and EDItEUR will be required to approve the final list of interviewees.

5 The consultant

The successful consultant will be able to demonstrate the following characteristics:

- Current practical understanding of the issues concerned

- Excellent contacts on both sides of the Atlantic, with access to the target group of interviewees
- Clear and succinct communication skills, both face to face and in writing
- The respect of stakeholders, and particularly of the IIA Board

We recognise that the task may be better undertaken by two (or more) different individuals (for example on different sides of the Atlantic; we would welcome proposals based on collaborations of this kind, but the proposal must be a joint one, and one individual or business must take overall responsibility for the project.

6 Proposals

Proposals must be delivered by email to Brian Green, Executive Director of the International ISBN Agency (brian@isbn-international.org) no later than 5:00pm UK time on 28 June 2010. The form of the proposal is the responsibility of the Consultant, but should not exceed 6 pages and should include:

- A clear description of the work plan
- A project time table including process assumptions and key milestones.
- An analysis of the primary risks to successful completion of the project on schedule, and steps to be taken in mitigation
- Short biographies of all those who will be involved in the work

7 Budget

The maximum budget for the completion of this project is €20,000 (plus VAT if applicable).