

Exploring the challenges in selecting information management systems for product suppliers, with a view to defining the key criteria that should be applied to the selection process.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a proliferation of information and a sea change in the ways that information is shared between individuals and between businesses. Much of this has been driven by the growth of electronic media and the wider use of mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets for accessing and exchanging information.

Inevitably, this has altered the expectations of purchasers (for example, contractors and specifiers) in terms of how they access product information from their suppliers (merchants, distributors and manufacturers). Therefore these suppliers need to be able to respond to their customers' expectations in a manageable and cost-effective way.

In the very near future, Building Information Modelling (BIM) will become another significant influence on the ways information is managed throughout the construction life cycle. It will impact the supply chain just as it does design, tendering, construction, hand-over, etc.

To further complicate the issue, there is still a significant demand for information in printed format by those who have not embraced electronic information. To avoid losing contact with large sections of the customer base, product information needs to be available in different formats to meet the needs of different customers.

This White Paper will explore these challenges in more detail, with a view to defining the key criteria that should be applied to the selection of information management systems for product suppliers.

MAXIMUM INFORMATION WITH MINIMUM EFFORT

The growth of electronic information has led many merchants to develop online catalogues (eCatalogues) to augment their traditional sales channels. In doing so, many of these merchants developed a customised data format that is aligned to their own database.

In parallel, many house builders and contractors have introduced eCatalogues for their own procurement purposes. These provide tighter control of on-site purchasing and allow them to take full advantage of preferential discounts with approved suppliers. Very often, the data formats used in these eCatalogues are different from those used in merchants' and manufacturers' online catalogues.

The result is that, having invested considerable resource in developing their own database, merchants and manufacturers often need to spend additional time re-packaging information for use in other formats. There may also be further duplication of effort in using product information for marketing purposes.

There are clear benefits to using structured product information and automatic data feeds that can be used to support all potential sales and marketing channels. Typically, these might include:

- Merchants' and manufacturers' order processing systems
- Merchants' and manufacturers' eCatalogues
- House builders' and contractors' eCatalogues
- Online information portals
- Traditional websites
- RSS feeds
- Marketing collateral
- Social media

BUILDING INFORMATION MODELLING (BIM)

Building Information Modelling (BIM) is no longer a 'pie in the sky' aspiration; it is a credible technology that will soon become the de facto method for designing and constructing buildings and infrastructure, and managing them through their life cycle.

Many governments throughout the world are now placing great emphasis on the use of Building Information Modelling to reduce the costs of public sector construction. Private sector organisations are also evaluating the use of BIM to reduce their construction costs and improve the on-going management of their buildings.

BIM requirements will have a significant impact on the level of information that merchants and manufacturers are expected to make readily available to all parties. Indeed, BIM has already begun to put pressure on manufacturers to supply product related information in the required format.

Current BIM Level 2 requirements are relatively simple but additional information relating to energy modelling, sustainability, and thermal and acoustic performance will be introduced as the use of this technology evolves.

All of this additional information must be available alongside the more basic product information and be capable of export to other systems. Furthermore, BIM will necessitate more streamlined exchange of information between contractors, merchants and manufacturers – all in a standardised format.

Therefore, BIM adds a further layer of complexity to the management of product information and merchants and manufacturers need to be preparing for this now.

MANAGING INFORMATION THE SMART WAY

Finding and converting information: 90% of suppliers report that their product information is typically stored in a range of locations and in different formats. Yet communicating effectively with third parties requires consistency of format. This is, in itself, a time and resource intensive task.

Ensuring accuracy: Once the information has been converted to a standard format, its accuracy needs to be verified to validate the conversion process. Then, any subsequent changes/updates will need to be reflected in all of the places where that information can be accessed.

Meeting different requirements: The information also needs to be sufficiently flexible so that different levels of detail can be provided for different people. Some will only require a basic overview while others may want as much technical detail as possible.

Several tiers of information will be a key requirement for each product, as shown in the following table.

Supplier levels with amount of transaction detail

Information Tier	Explanation/Example
Product Identification	Product codes (possibly several per product)
Product Classification	Different types: e.g. Global, National, Industry
Transaction / Trading Attributes	Units of measure, Order Quantities, Lead Times
Pricing Information	Various, including multi-currencies
Descriptive	Short descriptions, long descriptions, catalogue descriptions, extended descriptions
Descriptive attributes (generic)	Material, colour, size, finish
Descriptive attributes (product specific) including performance attributes	Voltage, flow rate
Marketing and Promotional	Product features and benefits, USP's
Attached Digital Assets	Product images, drawings; Data sheets and other documents; Information for BIM and CAD systems
Product dimensions and weights	Height, width, depth, diameter etc....
Packaged product dimensions and weights	Volumetric information
Packaging Waste Information	Weights by material type
Product conformance, compliance and certification information	FSC, BS, EN, ISO
Product "ECO" attributes	Embodied carbon

Sharing information: Sharing information easily and quickly is also important. Thus, contractors expect a merchant/distributor to supply information in a standard format, irrespective of the manufacturer. This means that merchants need to assimilate information from many suppliers and standardise its layout, appearance and depth of content. In parallel, manufacturers need to be able to provide information to merchants in a format that suits their requirements and helps the merchant promote their products.

Meeting these challenges inevitably imposes a drain on the resources of merchants and manufacturers that detracts from their core business and reduces the time available to focus on strategic management of the business.

Even worse, information management often gets put to one side when more pressing tasks arise, potentially eroding customer service and losing customer loyalty.

Clearly, significant competitive advantage will go to those suppliers who address all of these challenges and meet their customers' requirements effectively and efficiently.

CHOOSING A DATA MANAGEMENT PARTNER

A number of services are available to help manufacturers and merchants manage and disseminate their information effectively, with varying levels of service and functionality offered. It is important to be aware of exactly what the service entails to ensure maximum benefits. Signing up to a free or cheap service that still imposes significant demands on your own resources will prove to be a false economy.

Some services provide a portal but expect the users to upload their own information. This means these users still have the onerous task of harvesting all of the information from disparate sources, converting it from various suppliers' formats to a standard format and then updating the information every time there are changes. This is one of the most time-consuming aspects of managing product information, so the productivity benefits of such 'self-populating' services are minimal.

It is also important to ensure that the service provides the functionality to structure the information in a single format irrespective of supplier AND to link any additional information to meet more demanding requirements, such as BIM.

The ideal solution is to partner with a third party specialist that can deliver a complete package with a fast return on investment.

The following provides a check list of the services that such a partner should be able to provide:

- A comprehensive service that covers all aspects, rather than simply providing a template for you to spend time populating yourself.
- Ability to provide a single hub to store data and content for use by all parties – merchants, manufacturers, contractors and house builders.
- Functionality to restructure data into a single format, making it easier for all users to download it and use it on their systems.
- Link all documents, images, features and benefits, and specification details to individual SKUs – enabling automatic feeds into website and eCatalogues.
- A regular review of contents to ensure information is kept up-to-date.
- Interfaces between manufacturer information and merchant systems to allow access to additional data while branch staff are using their sales order processing (SOP) screens.
- Facility for merchant branches to place orders for non-coded items, thus reducing the need for specials.
- Established links to house builders' and contractors' eCatalogues.
- Ability to store all relevant product information, at both product family and individual item level, for use in BIMs.
- Free valuable PR distribution to help promote your products.

THE SMART APPROACH TO MANAGING PRODUCT INFORMATION

The COINS e-Xact system addresses the criteria listed above through a tried and tested process comprising a number of key steps.

Step 1: Standardise supplier product files in various formats into a common structure to facilitate downloads by merchants.

Step 2: Link core data to the SKU. This includes images, technical specifications, COSHH information, dimensions and waste packaging information.

Step 3: Feed the core data into ERP systems, back office sales systems and merchant websites/catalogues.

Step 4: Enhance the core data with added-value information such as extended descriptions, key features and benefits, attributes, certification and additional images.

Step 5: Feed the enhanced data into the electronic community and eCatalogues.

In addition, e-Xact uploads all PR from subscribing suppliers onto its own website and distributes it via social media, as well as including it in regular eNewsletters to community members. Additional coverage is achieved through a quarterly hard copy newsletter distributed with Professional Builders Merchant magazine

SUMMARY

Creating a flexible product information database and managing that information efficiently is a demanding task that is becoming increasingly complex. It is highly resource intensive and requires specialist skills backed by a profound understanding of information management techniques and processes.

Established in 1999, e-Xact is a well-established information management service for distributors, merchants and manufacturers in the plumbing, heating and building material sectors. Its proven processes are highly cost-effective and provide the peace of mind that your product information in the marketplace is being disseminated effectively and kept up-to-date with the minimum strain on your own resources.

- Increase product visibility
- Meet customers' information requirements
- 'Future proof' for initiatives such as BIM
- Save time and reduce costs
- Ensure your product information is up-to-date in all locations
- Exploit additional sales channels with no extra time input

For further information, visit the e-Xact website: www.e-Xact.net