

Translating The Angle-Bracket Crowd

THE BUSINESS IMPACT OF CONTENT STANDARDS

SIIA's Content Division has formed a new working group focused on the business impact of the myriad technical standards impinging on information and content distribution. Not only are the number and complexity of these standards growing but there has been little effort to bridge the growing gap between the technically adept writers of those standards and the publishers, licensing agencies and distributors who may be affected by them. Two members of this working group offer two different views of how standards can affect operations. For more information or to join the working group, contact Ed Keating at ekeating@siaa.net.

A Solution Vendor Perspective

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Standards affect many facets of a content solution vendor's business. For this reason, it can be difficult to answer the question of exactly how important standards are to such businesses. To really understand the standards landscape and how the various industry standards shape a content vendor's world, it helps to segment the standards into two logical groups: development standards and technical standards.

Many content software solution vendors have their own internal development methodology and adhere to some type of framework to manage projects. In order to show the marketplace they indeed have the ability to produce outstanding products or services, many content solution providers attempt to

receive certification in International Standards Organization (ISO) 9000 and/or Carnegie Mellon's Software Engineering Institute's (SEI) Capability Maturity Model (CMM) rating. Although the ISO certification is a standard and the SEI CMM is a best practice, both drive content vendors to adopt industry-accepted practices.

For content solution providers, the widespread adoption of standards means content companies can be assured that a product or service will be based on a set of methods, nomenclature and processes that have wide acceptance by the industry as a whole but also in its respective vertical industry.

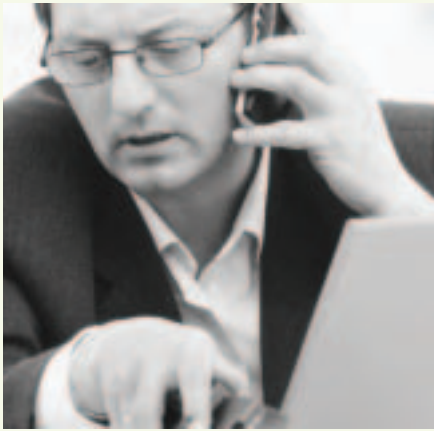
Although development standards shape the overall process by which a content solution provider produces a product or service, technical standards form the basis for developing industry-accepted content structure, communication channels, and software and database structure. Sometimes these standards are applied in the internal architecture of a vendor's solution (for example, XML as a messaging format within applications). Such use might be invisible to customers but essential for the long-term technical viability of the product.

In other areas, support for technical standards is highly visible and an impor-

tant purchase-decision factor. The impact of the World Wide Web Consortium and its standards is well-documented. Other groups' technical standards provide a framework to deliver content solutions, for example Open Ebook, EDI and PRISM. Each content solution provider must be aware of the overall development standards but also understand vertical industry standards. For example, vendors supporting journal publishers should be aware of MathML, while vendors to magazine publishers should be more focused on the PRISM metadata standard.

It is a challenge to keep abreast of the evolving standards and how they shape the content marketplace. Just understanding the standards landscape is a challenge in itself, then understanding the standard's implication for a content vendor product or service is another challenge. However, these are not optional activities for content solution providers. Providers need to pay close attention to standards activity, or they may be left providing propriety solutions that will not meet future requirements or customer expectations.

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The Publisher's View

KEN FICARA, DOW JONES

“Most publishers don't have the time, energy or interest to sort out the many overlapping standards or decide which they should use.”

As standards for content markup proliferate into an alphabet soup of acronyms and abbreviations, one begins to suspect there may be a new market for content management vendors to move into: standards management. These systems might come complete with version control (which RSS are you using?), workflow (which groups in my company have implemented what standards?) and permissioning (preventing the marketing department from going out and adopting some standard no one else is using).

The standards community thinks it is helping publishers, but most publishers probably don't share that view. Most of us are awash in editors, editing systems, formats and standards. We really do need a content management system to keep track of our content management systems, our users and our formats.

Few of the decision makers in publishing got into the business because they were passionate about markup formats. We're passionate about our content: making it the best it can be, adding value, creating products. The angle-bracket crowd will cry out, “Our standards will help you do all of those things.” If only that were true. As a content strategist at Dow Jones, a company that has been publishing news and information in multiple formats since Thomas Edison came to our offices to demonstrate his ticker machine, I do see the value of standards. But I don't believe people who come in and say they're from a standards body, and they're here to help.

Most publishers don't have the time, energy or interest to sort out the many overlapping standards or decide which

they should use. Top-level decision makers have no patience for the intricacies of the RSS-vs.-Atom argument and no way to judge the reliability of their internal developers who tell them their own custom-developed formats are better than the industry standards. The markup language to which decision makers are most susceptible is what I call FUDML, which is a method of transmitting doubt and misunderstanding about standards in order to prevent their adoption. We've heard them all, haven't we? RSS doesn't scale. NewsML is too complicated.

Meanwhile in the real world we have customers who have implemented our proprietary formats, however dreadful, and are loathe to change them and internal users and editors who can argue endlessly over how many control messages will fit on the head of a pin and whether an industry standard can cover every possible functionality of the system they're already used to.

So those of us who propose the use of standards have, on the one side, competing standards groups promoting their pet acronym and, on the other side, users and developers wedded to the nonstandard systems they're already using. Meanwhile in front of us are impatient executives who know only what they saw in a Gartner Group report last week and behind us are idealist markup evangelists who want to adopt the richest (and most complex) possible standard no matter how impractical it is.

We also need to consider questions such as: Is a standard a standard if only one company supports it? What if that company goes out of business? Will standards free

us from dependency, or will they just end up being yet another way of locking us into a particular vendor or set of vendors? What if we bet on the wrong horse?

What can standards groups do to help us? We don't need white papers, we don't need idealized demos of Utopian worlds where every bit of metadata is properly applied and ready to use; those demos cause knowledgeable editors to shake their heads in disgust. We need practical approaches from people who understand that content can't easily be tamed and editors not easily controlled. We need to talk to business people and news people – the ultimate decision-makers in these questions – in terms they understand. We need standards creators to understand our processes and problems well enough to solve them without resorting to horrendous complexity or to open their standards to allow private extension of them without interfering with their general usefulness. We need reference implementations that work in the real world.

Promoting standards at a real publishing company is a lonely job. The standards community needs to support its friends in the industry and help them promote the use of standards in practical, real-world applications.

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