



Planning for the Age of ISBN-13: *A BISAC Briefing on How to Manage the Transition*

by Tom Clarkson

As of January 1, 2007, the numbers issued by all ISBN agencies throughout the world will be 13 digits long, rather than 10 digits long. Because ISBNs are used to identify books for production, ordering, inventorying, or researching, publishers are understandably concerned about this upcoming major change.

Fortunately, planning for the transition can start now. A working group of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is in the final stages of preparing a specification for the new ISBN. Although it probably won't be published until the beginning of 2005, the specification has been widely circulated in draft and its acceptance appears certain, so the format of the new ISBN is known.

The difficulty—or ease—of making the transition will vary from publisher to publisher, depending on present systems and practices. This article summarizes issues to consider as you begin formulating plans to accommodate the expanded number. As you'll see, some aspects of the change are old hat; others may appear to be innocuous but have serious ramifications. In the coming months, we'll be able to offer more details about how to make the transition as smooth as it can be.

Why Is the Change Taking Place?

We hear this question frequently because many publishers, large and small, have enough ISBN-10s to last for years. Nonetheless, the expansion is necessary, and for two reasons:

- To conform to a unified worldwide numbering system; product identification for retail trade worldwide is standardizing on the International Article Number (EAN), a 13-digit identifier.
- To provide additional ISBNs for parts of the industry and parts of the world that are running short, such as (respectively) proliferating small presses and countries that did not publish many books when the ISBN system was developed.

Converting to the New Number

In structure and appearance, the ISBN-13 is the familiar Bookland EAN—the number encoded in the bar code on Cover 4 of trade books, and on Cover 2 of mass market paperbacks. There is an algorithm for constructing the Bookland EAN from an ISBN-10—available from Bowker—and publishers should use this formula to convert their

existing ISBN-10s to ISBN-13s.

If you outsource relevant operations, ask your system provider about its ability to convert ISBN-10s to ISBN-13s. Otherwise, you may want to investigate the software and/or Web sites that will become available to facilitate these calculations for low-volume conversions.

After January 1, 2007, the numbers issued by all ISBN agencies will have the new 13-digit structure; but as blocks of ISBN-13s built on existing ISBN-10s are exhausted, new blocks will be prefixed with 979 instead of the current 978.

Timing for the Transition

The obvious critical question is: When do I have to be able to handle the 13-digit ISBN? In the hope that most publishers will have more interesting things to do the night of December 31, 2006, than converting systems and data, the book industry is promoting the use of dual numbering throughout the period from now to January 1, 2007.

Using dual numbering means that a publisher furnishes both a book's ISBN-10 and its ISBN-13 to customers, and that the publisher is capable of accepting either version in communication, whether that communication is written, oral, or electronic. The purpose of the dual numbering approach is to allow each organization to make the transition at its own pace, instead of subjecting the industry to an abrupt cutover.

Communicating with customers using the dual numbering approach need not entail maintaining both numbers internally as long as you are capable of communicating using whichever version a given customer uses.

Where to Start?

The most pressing issues are those involving interaction with customers or suppliers. The more you can communicate with either ISBN, the smoother an operation will be for you, since you probably can't control when any other party will start handling the new number.

Title management. Because furnishing title information to customers is a crucial first step in book distribution, you should ask each of your customers whether they can now accept ISBN-13s and, if not, when they will be able to accept them.

Production. Find out which version(s) of the ISBN your bindery can handle now. As soon as you have converted your ISBN-10s to ISBN-13s—using the required algorithm—and/or as soon as you have received ISBN-13s for new titles, incorporate both identifiers in your books wherever you formerly incorporated one. The Library of Congress will begin supporting the ISBN-13 in Cataloging-in-Publication (CIP) records on or about July 1, 2004, by running both the 10-digit ISBN and the 13-digit ISBN in the CIP blocks.

Catalogs, title cards, and other sales material. To interact smoothly with customers that are themselves in various stages of transition, put both the ISBN-10 and the corresponding ISBN-13 for each title on ordering, sales, and promotional material.

Order processing. Because some customers may convert early, you should be prepared to accept orders with ISBN-13 long before January 2007. And because some customers may not convert on time, you should plan to continue support for ISBN-10 after that date.

Invoicing. Invoicing is another area where early transition to dual numbering will pay off. Don't create a situation in which a customer who converts early delays payment because your invoice still uses only ISBN-10 when the customer has converted to ISBN-13.

Reports. Most publishing systems generate a myriad of reports. In many cases, your staff will need access to one number or the other or both when they are interacting with outside parties. Thus, reports will probably need to carry both identifiers during and even after the transition. A careful analysis of the reports you use is necessary, and it will entail a significant effort.

Financial Systems

Your financial systems represent the one area where a clearly demarked cutover is not just desirable but virtually required. Fortunately, almost all the impact will be internal, and the timing is, for the most part, under your control.

Accounting systems. Almost every publisher tracks costs and revenues at an ISBN level. Converting accounting systems to use the ISBN-13 will require a distinct internal cutover date; your other systems will have to be ISBN-13 compliant first, including all feeds and reports.

Royalty systems. For obvious reasons, these systems will have to be ISBN-13 compliant at the same time as the other financial systems.

Sub-rights systems. Similarly, sub-rights systems will have to be converted at the same time as the other financial systems. This is one more area where it will be useful to handle both identifiers so that you can deal with statement and payment information coming in from other publishers that are at various transitional points.

Communicate Early, Communicate Often

Get the word out that you are planning your transition. Talk to everyone you deal with—employees, authors, printers, customers, and more—about your specific plans and your timetable. It's important to make sure you respond to the needs of all your constituents.

As your plan develops and implementation progresses, keep communicating. The more people know about what you're doing—and what you believe they're doing—the smoother the transition will be.

Tom Clarkson, director of supply chain technology at Barnes & Noble, chairs the Book Industry Standards and Communications Machine-Readable Coding Committee, which is working in various ways to facilitate the transition to the ISBN-13. For more information, visit www.bisg.org.