

The AdsML 'Advertising Standards Matrix' project

# Helping to bring clarity to a confusing situation

**One of the things we discovered when we launched the AdsML initiative is that there is a lot of confusion about what formats to use when exchanging advertising information between software applications.**



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There are numerous standards and formats that might be suitable for the task, but which are the right ones in a given situation? Who is actually using them? How can an implementer know what the available options are, and if there is more than one format that would do the trick, how should he decide between them?

The "Advertising Standards Matrix" project, which kicked off in July and will run through the coming year, is designed to address this problem. In this article I will explain the issues we face, and the approach we are taking to address them.

## Background

The AdsML Standard is an XML-based (eXtensible Markup Language) open standard that will manage the digital exchange of information between all parties involved in the advertising workflow, from concept to publication to billing.

Most of the articles about AdsML have focused on its technical capabilities. As described in May's *nt* (page 42), AdsML version 1.0, to be made public at IfraExpo 2003, specifies XML "envelope" and "response" message formats that provide a straightforward and easy-to-implement packaging mechanism for exchanging advertising information electronically. The AdsML Envelope is a generic container that can convey any kind of electronic content. Inside the Envelope are one or more "AdsML Items." These Items are where the action is, because they are the business messages our systems create and consume: insertion orders, advertising content, performance results, invoices, payments, etc.

The key point is that although AdsML specifies the format of the AdsML Enve-

lope, it does not specify the formats for the Items contained within the Envelope. Each Item can (and should) be transmitted in an electronic format optimised for the information it carries. This makes sense: you wouldn't expect an Insertion Order to use the same format as a Display Ad, or a Mediapack to use the same format as an Invoice, because they contain different kinds of information.

As a result of this flexibility, when two trading partners set up communications between their systems, they need to agree on the types of information they will exchange electronically and the formats they will use to represent that information. Right now, it is difficult even to have this conversation, because there isn't any single source you can consult to find out what standards and formats are available. While a few XML standards, such as CREST and AdConnexion, are fairly well-known, most advertising information is transmitted in proprietary formats that only the vendors and publishers who have implemented them know about. Since the rest of us don't know these formats exist, and probably wouldn't have access to them if we did, as a community we run the risk of "reinventing the wheel" by creating formats to solve problems that have already been solved.

What the AdsML implementer needs is information: for any given type of Item that he may want to send electronically, what standards or formats exist, and if there are more than one, which one is likely to do the best job?

## Enter the Matrix

The Advertising Standards Matrix will address these problems by providing

objective information about the standards and formats that are currently being used to exchange advertising information. The Matrix is being developed by the AdSM Technical Working Group, the same team that is developing the AdSM standard, in order to provide AdSM implementers with the information they need.

We have developed questionnaires for each of the likely sources of information: organisations that have published formal standards, software vendors that provide proprietary formats, and publishers that are using these standards or formats. A portion of the questionnaire for standardisation organisations is shown below.

AdSM 1.0 defines 11 main categories of information that users need to be able to send in AdSM messages, from "Ad Inventory" to "Proof of Publication." For each of these categories, the Advertising Standards Matrix will list the standards or formats that are available to convey that kind of information. Then, for each combination of 1) Type of information, and 2) Standard or format used to convey that information, the Matrix will indicate:

- > Which media (e.g. print, online, SMS) does this standard or format support?
- > Which advertising classes (e.g. display, classified or insert) is it used for?

> Is it an XML standard or vocabulary, an EDI standard, or a generic format such as a tab-delimited file?

> Is the standard or format actually in use? If so, in what regions is it used?

> Is the standard or format publicly available?

> Has this format been "blessed" by an association or standardisation body, and if so, what association was it?

The information in the Matrix will go a long way towards helping the AdSM implementer who needs to decide which standard or format to use when exchanging a given type of information. For example, if the Matrix shows that two different formats are available for display ads in a particular media, but that one of them is a publicly available international standard that has been implemented around the world, while the other is a proprietary EDI format that is not widely used, most users will decide that the objective facts about the first standard make it a safer implementation choice than the second one.

Besides supporting AdSM users and implementers, the Matrix will also provide information that is useful to the industry as a whole:

> The filled-in squares will identify business activities that are being supported by

the use of existing message formats, and will show which of these are readily available to other organisations that have similar requirements.

> The gaps in the Matrix will identify business activities for which a publicly available standard or format is still needed.

> The overlaps (where two formats are listed for the same type of information) will suggest areas where, in the future, a more detailed functional analysis of those standards might be warranted in order to help implementers choose between them

or in order to facilitate their convergence into a single standard.

### Facts vs. recommendations

In its first round of development, the Advertising Standards Matrix will consist of objectively verifiable information: which standards or formats are available, how and where they are being used, what technology they are based on, etc. By sticking to objective facts we hope to gather as much information as possible without getting bogged down in trying to determine which formats are "better" than others for a particular purpose. Our discussions with vendors and publishers have shown there is a real need for this kind of information.

It is part of the long-term vision of AdSM to go further than this, however, by encouraging convergence of existing standards where they overlap, by sparking the creation of new or improved standards where the need exists, and by providing guidance and recommendations for making best use of existing standards. The guidance and recommendations will be particularly useful for users faced with not knowing which standard or format to use when there are multiple formats available - e.g. "I have an insertion order, should I send it using AdConnexion, CREST or SPACE/XML - which is best for me to use?" These activities will be initiated after the release of AdSM 1.0, and the results will be provided in future releases of the standard.

### You can help

The Advertising Standards Matrix project began at the end of July in Antwerp, and is expected to continue during the coming year. At this stage, the version of the Matrix that we include in AdSM 1.0 will necessarily be incomplete. We need your help to fill it in.

We invite all parties associated with or developing standards or formats for any part of the advertising process to become part of this project. If you know of a standard or format being used to convey advertising information between computer systems, please send an e-mail to [technical.wg@adsm.org](mailto:technical.wg@adsm.org) and we will get in touch with you. It will only take a few minutes to tell us about the format, but the information you provide will be invaluable in helping to turn the promise of AdSM into a reality. <

**3.2. Advertising class: Classified ads**

3.2.1. In terms of classified ads, please indicate which of the following types of media this standard can handle:

print	<input type="checkbox"/>
online	<input type="checkbox"/>
broadcast	<input type="checkbox"/>
sms/mms	<input type="checkbox"/>
other (please specify):	

3.2.2. For each media that this standard supports when dealing with classified ads, indicate which types of information can be sent using this standard (check all boxes that apply):

Short Name	Message type	Print	Online	Broadcast	SMS/WMS	Other
Ad	Ad Inventory	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
AM	Ad Material	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
AO	Ad Order	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
AQ	Ad Quotation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
AR	Ad Reservation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CB	Campaign Brief	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FD	Financial Document	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
IO	Insertion Order	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
MP	Media Pack	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
PO	Proof Of performance or publication..	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
QR	General query/response (e.g. has my message been received?)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Part of a questionnaire that has been developed for standardisation organisations by the AdSM Technical Working Group for the Advertising Standards Matrix.