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# ARE YOUR PRODUCT CONTENT NEEDS MET BY GS1 GLOBAL DATA SYNCHRONIZATION?

(VERSION 1.2)

LEVERAGING EXPERIENCE FROM A LEADING  
CUSTOM CONTENT PROVIDER TO MULTI-CHANNEL RETAILERS

AUGUST 25, 2006



VIRTUCOM GROUP



August 25, 2006

Multi-channel retailers continue to ask what the GS1 Global Data Synchronization Network (GDSN) can do to for their consumer-facing content. You seek to understand if those standards and the compliant data pools can meet your need for complete, accurate and consistent content that will deliver higher conversion rates and lower return rates.

While GDSN delivers great value, that value is limited to communication of set-up and supply chain data between suppliers and retailers. GDSN was not designed for, nor does it meet the product content requirements your online guests need to make informed purchase decisions.

There are some 30 data pools that have been certified by GS1 GDSN, Inc. to support GDSN requirements. Now that it is clear GDSN information is data and not content, some data pools are offering to bridge the gap between the data mandated by GDSN and the content needed by retailers to inform and influence online purchase behavior. These data services firms are providing a feed of manufacturer-authored content that is characterized by a lack of consistency, accuracy and completeness. Some claim they provide an easy method to deliver product information to any retail website. While that can be accomplished with simple data structure synchronization, it does not deliver content retailers need to maximize profitability and enhance brand value.

At the product-detail level, there is a big difference between data and content. You need data to communicate with your suppliers. You need content to communicate product value to your online guests. Content is comprised of important data components such as specifications/attributes, but it is much more than just data. Classic paper-based catalogers have known for years that content presented on their pages must describe the product, drive value and influence purchase behavior. They also realize that content must support the brand. Successfully meeting all content requirements typically delivers higher response rates, lower return rates and overall higher profits. Why should that play out any differently for your online catalog?

A classic catalog enterprise would never consider a data services company to create product descriptions in their catalog pages. They would never allow manufacturer data to flow to the catalog pages without significant review and substantial effort to eliminate unsubstantiated claims, ambiguous features, inaccurate, incomplete and inconsistent descriptions and feature/benefit statements. You know the results for the paper catalog would be lower conversion rates, higher return rates and absolutely no support for your brand. Do you really think the results will be any different if you consider a data services company to support your online catalog?

The following pages convey our thoughts and observations about the gap between information in GDSN data pools and manufacturer-authored private registries and content that is required to influence purchase behavior on a multi-channel retailer's website. We welcome your feedback.

Best regards,

VIRTUCOM GROUP  
J. Michael Jacobs  
Scott A. MacDonald

## Our Qualifications to Comment

Virtucom Group is a custom content publishing firm that creates product detail content for multi-channel retailers. Our firm creates thousands of custom product records each month for more than a dozen national multi-channel retail clients. While the finished content reflects unique differences of each retailer, it is all built using product manufacturer source material such as specification sheets, owners manuals, installation guides and other marketing materials published by manufacturers.

Our firm has a relevant and thorough understanding of how manufacturers describe their own products within these source materials and how much they differ from retail client requirements. We also have an intimate understanding of the “content” that manufacturers author in marketing data pools used by several retailers.

Retailers understand that at a minimum, their product content must be complete, accurate, and consistent. They also understand that at a base level, pricing must be right, product availability must be there and the tools and functionality of their websites must make it easy for guests to locate the items they desire. Given all of these basic tenants of ecommerce, the one component that cannot be ignored is content. Content is king and without it, your entire investment in the online channel will never reap the returns you or your shareholders expect.

## What is GDSN?

“GS1 GDSN™ (Global Data Synchronization Network) is an automated, standards-based global environment that enables secure and continuous data synchronization, allowing all partners to have consistent item data in their systems at the same time. The Global Data Synchronization Network (GDSN) connects retailers and suppliers, via their selected data pools, to the GS1 Global Registry™.” (Source: [www.gs1.org](http://www.gs1.org))

## What Information is in GDSN Compliant Pools?

Retailers and manufacturers use the GDSN for the attributes related to their products, such as color, size and weight. Trading partners that have signed up with one of several different GDSN service providers can pool their product information in a central repository that's automatically maintained and updated.

GDSN is all about supply chain data and does not address the marketing content and full product attributes needed to effectively sell your products online. Put another way, without the supply chain data you cannot execute a transaction, but without product content, you can't get an online guest to make the transaction. It's very important to understand that GDSN information is back-end supply chain data, not front-end marketing information you need to influence purchase behavior.

Component	GS1 GDSN Data	Website Product Content
Audience	Manufacturers and Retailers	Online Consumers
Data Requirements	Supply Chain/Logistics such as some weights and dimensions, colors, sizes, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Product names</li><li>▪ Lead-in sentences</li><li>▪ Descriptions</li><li>▪ Feature/benefit statements</li><li>▪ Complete, accurate and normalized product specifications</li><li>▪ Metadata</li></ul>

## **The Gap between GDSN Data and Content You Need to Inform and Influence Online Purchase Behavior**

The above chart compares, at a high level the information contained in GDSN data pools and the actual content you need to influence purchase behavior on your site.

You can easily prove this for yourself by comparing any consumer-facing product detail page on your website with the data mandated by GDSN. You will find that GDSN data is supply chain data not content that would in any way describe your products the way you require or the way your guests expect it.

GDSN data does not meet your requirements for marketing descriptions, feature/benefit statements, metadata, and classifications/taxonomy. What you will find however is a slight match between the product specifications you may feature such as dimensions and weights but no support for the full list of product specifications demanded by your guests to compare and contrast products within a category.

In short, GDSN data in no way supports the presentation of the product information you need to inform, influence and close the sale to your online guests. Yes it's important to the back-end supply chain processes needed to communicate with your suppliers but it has nothing to do with the presentation layer of content needed to influence purchase decisions.

Another way to look at the gap is to compare your retail enterprise item set-up sheet that is required to create a SKU number with the product detail page in a corresponding category. Look at the logistics data fields required to set-up the item and compare those to any product detail page on your website. This comparison will quickly confirm that logistics data on its own does not influence purchase behavior.

### **What the Data Pools Are Offering**

Some GDSN compliant data services companies are offering to bridge the gap between GDSN data and the presentation layer of product detail content on your website. Their solution is a separate database of "marketing content" that has been authored by manufacturers and intended to be presented "as is" on your website.

The data services companies lead with the presumption that your consumer facing product content requirements can be met with manufacturer-authored content. This is the very content that is characterized by incomplete, inaccurate and inconsistent information. It is also characterized by unsubstantiated, contradictory or ambiguous claims and often contains references to features that have virtually no meaning to your guests.

You can prove the above statements for yourself by picking one product category that you currently support with products from four or more manufacturers. Go to the manufacturer website for each product and download the specification sheet, owners manual and installation guide (if applicable), product images and other marketing materials presented by the manufacturer. After reading through each product source item from the manufacturers, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do any of the manufacturers describe the product in a way that is compatible with your universal or category requirements?
2. Which manufacturers use terms that you never heard of to describe very simple features or functions? Do you think your guests would find those terms of any value? Can you imagine your customer care associates trying to explain what those terms mean?
3. Do the manufactures lead with information about features and benefits with any consistency? How do you think that information is going to look on your website when it was entered by hundreds of manufacturers?
4. Do you feel any pain in trying to normalize the product specifications they each feature?
5. How many important product specifications are omitted from certain specification sheets leaving you wondering if the item supports a particular capability or not?
6. How many of the manufacturers claim to have the best (insert feature) on the market?
7. Are weights, dimensions and warranties clearly identified?
8. Do you get a sense of frustration in trying to determine what the points of differentiation are among each of the products? Would you describe those points of differentiation on your website just like the manufacturers do?

After you have completed this exercise, consider that you have content standards that must be maintained in each product category. Those standards are unique to each retailer. Do you really think hundreds of manufacturers will meet the individual standards of multiple retailers or the brand presentation each requires? Then how can one data pool of marketing content authored by hundreds or thousands of manufacturers have any relevance to the unique requirements of the many retailers they claim to be able to support?

We are not suggesting these marketing data pools have no value to anyone. We are however, stating they have no value to the retailer that demands accurate, complete and consistent product content.

## **GS1 Certification Means Nothing for Marketing Content**

Retailers that reject manufacturer-authored marketing content do so because it is not accurate, consistent and complete. At the same time they understand the importance of GDSN data to the supply chain and are reaping many benefits by doing so. However this is where the value stops.

Retailers in the know understand manufacturer-authored marketing content suppresses conversion rates and increases potential for return rates. Retailers that have not yet experienced this may engage the marketing data pools because they are "low cost" and appear to have legitimacy simply because they are associated with GDSN. In fact, GDSN compliant certification simply means the data services provider has in place the mechanisms to deliver GS1 registry information, nothing more.

When the lower cost of manufacturer-authored content is analyzed in relation to the lower sales and increased costs of returns, not to mention lost brand equity, the picture becomes very clear. The information these marketing pools offer is not compatible with what retailers need to meet their online objectives for profitability.

In time, retailers that subscribe to these data pools will analyze conversion rates and realize they are significantly lower than expected because the content does not answer all the questions a guest would reasonably ask about a product. Further, they observe that inaccurate or incomplete information resulted in user experience dissatisfaction. And finally, if the retailer is fortunate to have developed a solid tracking process with Customer Care, it will quickly see an increase in calls from guests related to inaccuracy, ambiguity or incompleteness in product information.

## Why Manufacturer-Authored Content Fails

Manufacturers, like retailers strive to present their products in a way that closes the sale. The difference however is where the product is sold. Today a manufacturer may only sell to the retail vertical or may offer products direct to the general public. In both cases, the manufacturer is presenting their products with no presentation of products from a competing manufacturer. A retailer on the other hand must present products from multiple manufacturers in one location. Think about it for a moment. The manufacturer can, and should present information in a way that highlights the particular features of its products. This often results in emphasis or “spin” on one or more features of the product with no reference to the features that are present in a competing manufacturer’s product.

The retailer on the other hand presents products from competing manufacturers in the same category. The information on the retailer’s Website must “normalize” the information in a way that

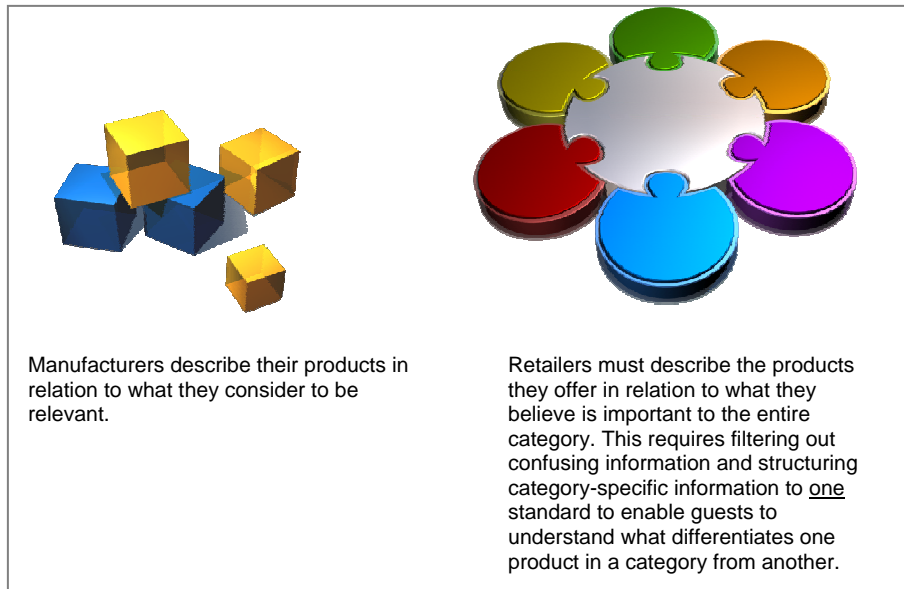
presents the products on a level playing field. Yes there is plenty of room for differentiation among these products but there is absolutely no room for ambiguous hype, references to rating agencies that mean nothing to the guest or worse, using units of measure that cannot easily be compared to products from other manufacturers. A very simple example is the unit of measure common to digital cameras. One manufacturer may use 5 Megapixels, another 5,000,000 pixels. When multiple products in the category are reviewed by your guest, making these translations results in a less than optimal experience.

The goal of content presentation is different for both retailer and manufacturer. On one hand the manufacturer presents product information in a way that makes the item most attractive. On the other hand, the retailer must cut through the hype and ambiguity to present these products in one data structure with features that are presented consistently. Why would a retailer think the results are going to be any different with manufacturer-authored content in a data pool?

## Data vs. Content

Data is not content. Content is made up of data but goes far beyond to include brand extension in descriptions, features that articulate real benefits, and product specifications that can easily be compared. Metadata and other components are also a part of what defines content.

A data services company provides data. Today, more data services companies associated with GDSN are claiming to offer content that you can present on your Website. While it is possible to upload this data, it will never deliver the high conversion rates and lower return rates that customized content



does. It can't because much of the data is incomplete, inaccurate and inconsistent. You can prove this for yourself by auditing the data these marketing pools offer with the facts listed on manufacturer source material and content structure supported by your Website.

Put another way, a GS1 certified data services company is certified to provide GDSN data. That certification has no bearing on the company's ability to deliver you product content that would inform and influence purchase behavior. To think otherwise would be like claiming a board certified plastic surgeon is automatically capable of performing brain surgery.

## **Auditing Accuracy and Completeness**

If you currently work with a data services company that claims to offer you content that sells products, do you have in place auditing processes to ensure the information is accurate and complete? Who pays when the information is wrong and return rates are driven up? Who pays when the information is incomplete and you lose sales because guests click to your competitor that features all the information required?

In order to implement an auditing process of manufacturer-authored content, you must have two critical elements in place. First you must define requirements for each category. Those requirements cannot just be simple normalization rules. They must include the full set of product attributes that belong to the category and define which of those are required vs. desired. Those requirements must also define rules for prioritization and structure of feature/benefit statements.

Second, you must have in place instant access to the source material that was used by the vendor to create the content. Data services companies will tell you the content was created by the manufacturer and thus no need exists to have access to the source information manufacturers typically use such as specification sheets, brochures, owners manuals, installation guides, etc. They are wrong. Product manufacturers create inaccuracies in data entry and generate errors of omission by leaving out important facts about products. This fact is why GDSN was started in the first place, to eliminate errors from supply chain data. If errors are made in just the logistics data (weights, measurements, etc.), how many errors do you think manufacturers actually make in the more complex marketing content used to describe products?

If you do not have an audit process in place to verify the content, you cannot enforce accountability for lost sales or increased returns due to bad content.

## **Conclusion**

GS1 certification means the data services provider meets requirements for participating in GDSN. The certification means absolutely nothing about the marketing data pools these companies are offering. Any data services company that implies their marketing data pools enjoy the same certification as their GDSN compliant data pools is stretching the truth.

GDSN delivers an incredible opportunity for retailers and suppliers to increase the accuracy of the supply chain information they exchange. But it has nothing to do with the marketing content retailers need to influence purchase behavior online.

There will always be a market for low cost product content that has been authored by manufacturers until the market understands its limitations and liabilities. GDSN data originates with manufacturers and is critical to the supply chain. That however is where the value ends.

Smart retailers know that picking up the ball from this point on requires a content capability that can maintain high standards for accuracy, completeness and consistency. There are no shortcuts to this objective so don't be fooled by a data services company that claims to provide a 100% easy method to do so.

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