EDI Overview

by Ray Atia, ratia@amosoft.com

The Uniform Code Council (UCC), the standards group which defined the format of the UPC, has also published the Uniform Communication Standard. This standard defines both the message format and communication protocols for exchanging retail documents between the store automation system and the automation systems of the stores' trading partners. This exchange of documents between the two computer systems is termed Electronic Data Interchange, or EDI. However, the Uniform Communication Standard is so broad based that many elements do not apply to the college store market.

The retail industry has defined a subset of the Uniform Communication Standard which is termed VICS. For the book side of the college store market, the committee has defined and implemented another subset.

As with any new technology, EDI has certain terms which have a specific meaning to EDI. Each document that is defined in the Uniform Communication Standard has a number assigned to it. A purchase order is document number 850, and the invoice is document number 810.

As with any standard that is devised, the Uniform Communication Standard has a methodology for introducing revisions to the documents. This allows for changes in the industry or shortcomings in the current revision. The EDI documents are based on revision 3060 and the non-book EDI documents are based on revision 4010.

There are two principal message formats used for EDI. One is called EDIFACT; the other is ANSI X.12. Both EDI documents are based on ANSI X.12.

Transmission of EDI documents to and from your trading partner is simplified by using a Value Added Network (VAN). By using a VAN, you are able to transmit documents to a number of trading partners with one phone call. The VAN service will then sort out the documents and direct them toward the appropriate trading partner. If your trading partner uses a VAN other than you do, your VAN can relay your documents to their VAN. A unique account number identifies the documents for each trading partner. For bookstores, this is the SAN (Standard Address Number). The VAN would refer to this account as a mailbox address. Those bookstores already have a mailbox established on the GEIS (General Electric) network.

Even with all the effort and documentation of standards there remain differences between the documents that you exchange with one trading partner and documents that you exchange with another trading partner. These differences may be as obvious as using revision 3060 of the standard and non-book using revision 4010 of the standard. However, differences may arise from the product mix that you get from the trading partner or the purchasing relationship that you have with the trading partner. For the bookstore system to have a consistent EDI interface, an EDI translator is essential. The EDI translator normalizes the EDI documents going to and from the bookstore system to the trading partners. EDI translators are available from a number