

# Product Feed Best Practice Guide – Retail

## Part I – Why do I need a product feed?

The IAB Affiliate Council

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### What is the scope of this guide?

This document has been produced by the Internet Advertising Bureau (Affiliate Marketing Council) to provide e-commerce retail category companies with specific guidance on the use of product feeds within affiliate marketing. Part I “Why do I need a product feed?” looks at the associated benefits and some basic questions around product feeds. Part II “Feed Structure and Attributes” provides specific guidance on file structure and attributes.

While Part I is useful for individuals interested in evaluating the potential value of product feeds and more general aspects of feed creation and management, Part II is for those involved in the practical specification, build and deployment of feeds.

### What is a product feed?

A product feed is a data file containing information about the products listed on an e-commerce company website. Hence, feeds are data files which can be used to represent the inventory that you had for sale on your website at the time the data feed was generated.

### What are product feeds used for?

Product feeds can be used within a variety of online marketing practices. Common applications of feeds include affiliate marketing, comparison shopping engines, Google product listings (Google shopping), paid search automation, dynamic display advertising, social media integrations and mobile phone applications. As the use of the web becomes more sophisticated, new applications for feeds are appearing all the time, meaning that they are becoming increasingly important in online marketing.

### Who needs to produce a product feed?

It's important to consider product feeds as part of your online sales and marketing strategy, particularly if your site retails many different products, or if you sell products whose pricing and availability frequently change. Hence, the three main e-commerce categories for product feeds are:-

- 1. Retail**

Where the product feed describes each product's attributes, pricing and availability.

- 2. Mobile Phones**

Where the product feed describes the combinations of product (phone) attributes such as the handset features as well as the contract attributes such as the price per month and the number of minutes of calls per month etc.

- 3. Travel**

Where the product feed could describe one or two legs of a journey (e.g. flights), or describes the combination of a product (perhaps a hotel and its facilities) along with the journey information (the combination providing us with all the information on a holiday).

Other categories can also benefit from the use of product feeds provided that a suitable data format can be used to communicate the products and services between the e-commerce company and the user of the product feed. However, they are out of the scope of this guide.

## What are feeds used for within Affiliate Marketing?

Within affiliate marketing affiliates use product feeds in a multitude of ways, all culminating in driving sales to the merchant. Here are some examples of how product feeds can be used within affiliate marketing:-

<b>Product comparison</b>	Feeds are essential for affiliates who compare pricing, attributes and availability of products for users.
<b>Paid search affiliates</b>	PPC affiliates will use a range of attributes within feeds to determine campaign keywords, copy creation, which products to bid on.
<b>Content affiliates</b>	From blogging to news aggregation, product feeds help to ensure well-matched embedded links within content-rich sites.
<b>Loyalty affiliates</b>	Voucher code and cash back sites are starting to incorporate product information into their sites.
<b>Innovative Sites</b>	Affiliates are entrepreneurs and innovators. If you have a poor product feed (or don't have one at all) you could be left out of exciting and dynamic revenue generating projects.
<b>Dynamic Advertising/Widgets</b>	There are a growing number of third-party providers who build functional widgets and applications based on data feeds. These can then be incorporated easily onto affiliate sites while providing enhanced functionality and conversion for merchants and affiliates.

## How much of my affiliate revenue should be generated by feeds?

Clearly, the exact amount of revenue that your product feed generates depends on several factors. However, a good quality product feed that is well distributed could be generating over 25% of all affiliate sales. Therefore, a good quality product feed is an essential part of your affiliate marketing toolset and is worth investing in. Your affiliate network will be able to advise you more specifically on your particular category, and based on their experience in your category.

## Are there differences in feed structure for different retail categories?

Clearly, the information required to describe a book, a DVD or a TV will be very different to those required to describe a pair of shoes or a dining room table. Hence, when considering which attributes (or data fields) your product feed will contain, it is important to evaluate the different types of products that you sell, and consider how the data contained within your feed(s) might vary between your product types.

However, in Part II of the Product Feed Best Practice Guide – Retail called “Feed Structure and Attributes”, we detail how some of these individual categories should be catered for, as well as providing guidance on core attributes such as title, category, image, URL, price and SKU which every product should contain.

## **Where can I go for more professional guidance on product feeds?**

As you'll be using product feeds for affiliate marketing, one of the best sources for additional help and advice on your feeds will be your affiliate network(s). Your network will be able to provide you with specifications and information on uploading your feed to their feed platform. It is important to note that these vary according to each network. Your network(s) will also be able to provide you with information and contact details for feed creation and management specialist companies who are able to assist with all aspects of your feed marketing.

## **Which file format(s) should I use to create my feed(s)?**

The most common file formats for product feeds are XML and CSV. There are advantages and disadvantages with each of these, the key advantages being that XML files are better at representing products which have variants (e.g. colours and sizes in fashion) whereas CSV files can be opened and viewed in standard spreadsheet software such as Excel. For more detail on file formats, please refer to Part II of these guidelines.

## **Should I send affiliates products that are out of stock or available for purchase in-store only in my feed?**

As affiliates only get remunerated from online sales that they have initiated, providing products to affiliates that are not available to purchase online (be they out of stock or in-store purchases only) will lead to reduced earnings per clicks (EPC) and conversions which will negatively impact your affiliate programme. Hence, it is not recommended that you include these products, or at least include the appropriate attribute values so that these products can be filtered out by affiliates as required. Another possibility is to enter a date into this attribute to indicate when a product will be available to purchase if you have this available (this is especially the case for items that can be pre-ordered).

## **How should I apply tracking to the URLs in my feed?**

Should you wish to incorporate your own tracking into your feed activity you simply need to apply this to the URLs as per normal before supplying the feed to your affiliate network. Your affiliate network will then apply their tracking to your URLs prior to sending it out to affiliates.

## **What should I do if I have products that are restricted to adults, or adult products?**

If you sell adult rated products such as adult DVDs, alcohol or provocative lingerie it is recommended that you include an attribute in your feed to mark which of your products is adult rated. Hence, affiliates can filter these appropriately to suit their own audience requirements.

## **Since feeds are being used extensively in fashion these days, do I need to include gender information in the feeds?**

If you sell product which is targeted at particular genders such as fashion it's important to help affiliates filter these products by gender. Hence, this attribute should feature in your feed.

## What about specific attributes for particular vertical categories? How do I include these?

Many product categories have specific attributes which only apply to these types of products. For example, if you retail books and DVDs then you can make use of attributes such as “ISBN” numbers and “genres”. If you are a multi-category retailer then it’s worth reviewing your categories to determine which attributes you need to add for these particular products.

## What testimonials does the IAB have from retailers who have invested in their product feeds?

FusePump and Argos published a case study recently which shows how improving the quality of a product feed improved their metrics in the affiliate channel. Argos achieved an increase of 171% in their earnings per click (EPC) and 34% increase in their conversion. For a copy of this case study, please see the IAB Affiliate Marketing website or contact FusePump directly.

Marks & Spencer also replaced their feeds with feeds that meet the requirements of the IAB guidelines. They have seen a significant return on investment on this project and have continued to expand on their feed marketing activity since.

## Glossary of terms

Attribute	- A component of a product feed that describes a particular property of the product. For example, “Price”, “Colour” or “EAN”.
CSV	- Comma separated values. A CSV format is simply a way of listing product attributes within a text format. Each attribute is separated by a comma, hence the term “comma separated”.
EAN	- European Article Number. This is a universal European number used to identify a particular manufacturer’s product. It is extremely useful for product comparison as it can be used as the single identifier to group the same product from different retailers.
EPC	- Earnings per click. The revenue typically generated by affiliates for each click that they pass to an advertiser from their site. The earnings per click is an important metric for affiliates as this determines if they are able to make a profit when compared to the cost of generating source traffic to each affiliate program.
SKU	- Stock keeping unit. This is a unique number or code used to identify each product individually. It is extremely important that every product in a feed has a unique identifier such as a SKU so that affiliates can manage product inventory within databases effectively.
XML	- XML (Extensible Markup Language) is a set of rules for encoding documents electronically. It’s most useful feature is the ability to “nest” values into parent and child structures. This is further detailed in Part II of this documentation “Feed Structure and Attributes”