

# Product Feed Best Practice Guide – Retail

## Part II – Feed Structure and Attributes

The IAB Affiliate Council

Last Updated - September 2010

### 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.

### Which file format(s) should I use for my feed?

The two main formats for distributing product feeds are XML and delimited text files (e.g. “CSV” and “Pipe Delimited” files). XML files use a hierarchical structure to describe products whereas text files are similar to spreadsheets in that each row is a product entry, with each column containing an attribute value. The main advantage of XML is that you can “nest” multiple attributes within the parent-child structure. The main advantage of text files is their smaller file size.

Your affiliate network(s) will be able to advise you whether they would prefer an XML or text file format.

For text delimited files, normally using commas (CSV) or pipes (pipe-delimited) it is important to ensure that the commas and pipes are used even if you do not have individual attribute data for particular products. Hence, your feed structure might be labelled as follows:-

Brand, Category, Currency, Delivery Cost, Description, EAN, Image URL, Last Updated, SKU, Stock, Thumbnail, Title and URL

If you do not have an EAN for a particular product it should be listed as (note the two commas together):-

Sony, DVD Player, GBP, 5.99, a wonderful DVD player,, [www.retailer.com/images/sonydvg137g.jpg](http://www.retailer.com/images/sonydvg137g.jpg), 234526, Yes, [www.retailer.com/images/sonydvg137gthumbnail.jpg](http://www.retailer.com/images/sonydvg137gthumbnail.jpg), Sony DVG137G DVD Player, [www.retailer.com/sonydvg137g.html](http://www.retailer.com/sonydvg137g.html)

For XML, it is important to use the UTF-8 standard which will require you to encode any special characters as well as ensuring that you state this standard in the header of the file.

It is also recommended that you include the required information for your affiliate network in the header of your feed. For example, you may be required to supply merchant identifiers, feed identifiers (some merchants have more than one feed) and field specifications. Please check with your network on specific header or file naming requirements.

Also, the standard XML format for multiple word attributes is to use lowercase until the first letter of the next word. For example, delivery cost should be written as <deliveryCost>, number of customer reviews would be written as <number OfCustomerReviews> etc.

## How often should I update my feed?

As a general guide daily updates are acceptable and it is ideal for you to publish your feeds at the same time each day (or by a given deadline) so that consumers of the feed know the best time to retrieve your data.

If your stock or pricing is particularly dynamic, it may be worth considering updating your feeds more than once per day. Whichever frequency you choose, you should ensure that this information is clearly communicated to your affiliates, including information on what time of day the feed is updated.

## Which attributes should I include in my feed?

The following attributes are **CORE** attributes for retail feeds and should always be included for all categories. More detail will be provided in the attribute detail section of this guide:-

- Category
- Currency
- Price
- Delivery Cost (if applicable)
- Description
- Standard Image
- Last Updated Time Stamp
- Mature Content Rating (if you have this type of product in your inventory)
- SKU/Unique Identifier
- Stock
- Thumbnail Image
- Title
- URL

The following attributes are **RECOMMENDED** attributes for retail feeds although they may be considered CORE attributes for particular categories. There may be other attributes that you need to include in your feed based on your particular products and website. More detail will be provided in the attribute details section of this guide:-

- Brand
- Colour
- Delivery Time
- EAN
- Features
- Gender
- Genre
- ISBN Number
- Keywords
- Model Number
- Platform
- Promotional Text
- Size
- Stock Level
- Warranty
- Was Price

## Attribute Details

In this section of the guide, each attribute will be reviewed in detail with notes on categories that the attribute is particularly recommended for, the format that the data should be provided in, and an explanation of why the attribute is needed. Some examples will also be provided for clarity.

### Category (Core)

Format	Text, possibly shown as a hierarchy with ">" used to separate the categories (e.g. "Men's Trainers" or, "Mens > Shoes & Trainers > Trainers")
Why Needed?	Affiliates utilise this information to group products from multiple retailers and to assist with comparison algorithms. This information is important to help understand what type of product you are selling.
Do	Provide multiple categories if appropriate. Always discuss required category structure and formats with your particular affiliate networks.
Do Not	Use marketing terms instead of actual product types (e.g. use "Themed Mugs" rather than "Gifts for Him" for a football-themed mug.)

### **Currency (Core)**

Format	3 Letter ISO Code (e.g. "GBP", "EUR", "USD")
Why Needed?	Some sites offer prices in multiple currencies, plus it's important to make clear which currency you are operating in. Also see "Price" attribute.
Do	Always include this field, even if you only operate in one market (your affiliates may be operating internationally).
Do not	Use the £, \$ or € symbols.

### **Delivery Cost (Core)**

Format	Number, 2 decimal places (e.g. "5.99", "0.00"). Note that the currency identifier should not be included in this field as this should be set in the "Currency" attribute.
Why Needed?	It is important for users to understand the total cost of products purchased online. Hence, if there is a delivery cost then affiliates are able to present a total price by combining this with the product price.
Do not	Use the £, \$ or € symbols.

### **Description (Core)**

Format	Text (e.g. "An indulgent treat, this box of delicious Belgian chocolates is a perfect gift for friends and loved ones.")
Why Needed?	Descriptions enrich the product listing and can often include features and selling points not included elsewhere in the feed.
Potential Issues	Sometimes the description may also contain additional information that you would ideally want to include as feature attributes. For example, a TV description may contain the screen size which would ideally be included as a feature attribute ("screen size").
Do	Spell check and punctuate.
Do not	Use HTML in any part of your description. Put any other data in this cell other than a text description.

### **Large Image (Core)**

Format	JPG
Why Needed?	So people can view the product.
Potential Issues	Poor image quality will reflect badly on a merchant.
Do	Leave blank if no image is available. Use as large an image as possible which can be reduced afterwards. Aim for 200x200 pixel minimum.
Do not	Upload a "no image available" image or a blank image

### **Last Updated Time Stamp (Core)**

Format	ISO 8601, YYYY-MM-DD hh:mm:ss. The numbers are zero-padded where appropriate, and the time is in 24-hour clock. e.g. 2010/04/08 14:05:00
Why Needed?	To let people know how up to date the data in the feed is.

### **Mature Content Rating (Core)**

This is a Core requirement for retailers who sell DVDs, adult products, alcoholic products or any other age-rated or sensitive products.

Format	Alphanumeric (e.g. "18", "U", "12", "adult", "questionable")
Potential Issues	Some merchants may not consider some products (especially lingerie) as mature content. You should consult with your affiliate network regarding this issue.
Do	Utilise the "questionable" value in the attribute here if you are unsure so that affiliates can make their own judgements on whether to include certain products on their sites

**Price (Core)**

Format	Number, 2 decimal places (e.g. "12.99", 1299.95"). Note that the currency identifier should not be included in this field as this should be set in the "Currency" attribute.
Why Needed?	Price is clearly one of the most important attributes for any feed. It is important that your "Price" attribute matches the current price that the product is selling for. This should not be confused with MSRP, RRP or Was Price.
Do not	Use the £, \$ or € symbols.

**SKU/Unique Identifier (Core)**

Format	Alphanumeric (e.g. "534256645", "BK12046754")
Why Needed?	Every affiliate will need to uniquely identify the products in their database. This attribute allows affiliates to download products to their database and understand if and when specific product information has changed when they next download the feed.
Potential Issues	If you are providing variants (e.g. different colours and sizes) then you need to ensure that you provide a different SKU for each item
Do	Provide a unique SKU for each and every product
Do Not	Provide duplicate SKUs

**Stock (Core)**

Format	Text (e.g. "Yes", "No")
Why Needed?	Whether the item is in stock or not
Potential Issues	Clearly this attribute relies on you regularly updating your feed. It is important to consider how fluid your stock levels are when you consider your update frequency.
Do	Check with your affiliate network to see if they can also support dates within this field to indicate when a product is coming back into stock, or for pre-order products.

**Thumbnail Image (Core)**

Format	JPG (e.g. "http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/41u3J0m8PgL._SX85_SH35_.jpg")
Why Needed?	So people can view the product
Do	Leave blank if no image is available
Do Not	Upload a "no image available" image

**Title (Core)**

Format	Text (e.g. "Philips 19" 19PFL3404D HD Ready Digital LCD ")
Why Needed?	This is the actual name of the product, usually exactly as it appears on the merchant website.

**URL (Core)**

Format	Valid URL (e.g. "http://www.marksandspencer.com/LCD-TVs-TVs-Accessories-Technology/b/79405031")
Why Needed?	Users should always be sent directly to the product page
Potential Issues	If your URL is longer than 256 characters some affiliates may have issues using your feed.
Do	Make sure the page resolves correctly and deep links through to the product

**Brand (Recommended)**

Particularly recommended for Fashion and electrical

Format	Text (e.g. "Nike")
Why Needed?	Affiliates use this information to filter products on their websites as well as utilising the brand information as a key selling point.
Potential Issues	Inconsistent naming, e.g. Miss Sixty, Missixty
Do	Start brands with a capital letter. Keep brand names consistent.

### **Colour** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Fashion

Format Text (e.g. "Red")

Why Needed? If this attribute is available in your feed then users are able to filter products by colour on affiliate sites. Hence, this will ensure that your products are included in these types of applications.

Do Use colours as close to the primary colours as possible to assist with comparison sites.

Do not Use shorthand, codes or obscure colours

### **Delivery Time** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Furniture, Fashion, Appliances

Format Text (e.g. "3 days", "3-4 days", "1 day")

Why Needed? It is important to communicate how long a product will take to reach the consumer so that they can make an informed decision on this before they arrive at your site via an affiliate link.

Potential Issues If you have multiple delivery types you should consider how best to represent this in your feed. You need to ensure that you can communicate the delivery cost for each associated delivery time accordingly.

Do Include the number and the unit in the text (e.g. 1 day rather than next day)

### **EAN** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Electrical products

Format 13 digit number (e.g. "4026203591752")

Why Needed? The EAN is a unique number that singularly identifies a product. Therefore, if this is available it assists with comparison shopping by allowing affiliates to easily group the same product from multiple retailers.

### **Features** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Electrical

Format Text (e.g. "Screen Size", "Resolution", "Pages Per Minute")

Why Needed? Product features will help affiliates to sell the USPs of the products that they are promoting for you. They can also be used in product comparison sites to help users select products.

Potential Issues There are an almost infinite number of possible features that could be included for products

Do Use nested XML for your feed if features are key to your product range as this will allow you to include different features in the feed without having to include individual features as an attribute for every product.

Do not Bundle all your features into your long description

### **Gender** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Fashion

Format Text (e.g. "Male", "Female", "Unisex")

Why Needed? Useful for filtering options.

Do Include "Unisex" as well as Male and Female if appropriate rather than leaving this attribute blank

### **Genre** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for DVDs, Music & Gaming products.

Format Text (e.g. "Western", "Hip-Hop", "First Person Shooter")

Why Needed? This attribute allows affiliates to group these types of products into their genre categories, simplifying product selection and filtering for users.

**ISBN Number** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Books

Format 13 Digit Number (e.g. "978-0470057933")

Why Needed? Allows easy comparison of the same book.

Potential Issues Standards have changed since 2007. Make sure you are using the modern 13 digit format.

**Keywords** (Recommended)

Format Text (e.g. "Chair", "Dining Room", "Mahogany", "Furniture")

Why Needed? Provides affiliates with a pre-defined field of useful words that they can use, particularly for SEO and for PPC affiliates.

**Model Number** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Electrical

Format Alphanumeric (e.g. "CQ61-405SA", "DSC-S730")

Why Needed? This is particularly useful when it comes to sites that are price comparing or sites that show the same product from multiple merchants. Especially if you do not have EANs available.

Potential Issues You may only have this as part of your product titles. You should map these values into a separate attribute for better match rates on comparison sites.

**Platform** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Media such as Video Games, DVDs etc

Format Text (e.g. "games: "ps2", "ps3", "DS", "wii". Films: "DVD", "blu-ray")

Why Needed? To indicate what medium/platform the product is compatible with.

**Promotional Text** (Recommended)

Format Text (e.g. "Free delivery with all orders over £50")

Why Needed? This additional text is an opportunity to help communicate with the user why they should buy your product.

Potential Issues If you are using this field for voucher codes, ensure that you include all the required information for the code in the text

Do Spell check and punctuate.

**Size** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Fashion

Format Alphanumeric (e.g. "small", "medium", "large", "10", "12", "42 inch")

Why Needed? Some affiliates will offer the ability to filter by size. This will help your conversion as consumers will only click through when you have their size.

Potential Issues Sizing metrics differ between UK, US and EU.

Do Be consistent with sizes and the way you communicate sizes of products from different categories. Be verbose as possible to avoid any ambiguity e.g. 32cm or 32inches rather than just 32.

**Stock Level** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for high turnover products

Format Integer (e.g. "10")

Why Needed? As feeds are generally updated once per day, some affiliates may prefer to only promote products with high stock volumes to prevent users clicking through to out of stock products

Potential Issues You may only have a range to work with here. If this is the case, use the lower end of the range to be sure.

Do Not Send users to the home page of your website, or even a category home page

### **Warranty** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for Electrical

Format Text (e.g. "2 years", "1 Year parts only", "3 years parts and labour")

Why Needed? This information may help to convert the sale, particularly for electrical products.

Potential Issues There are lots of possible permutations, particularly if the product is split into labour and parts

### **Was Price** (Recommended)

Particularly recommended for any retailer who discounts product.

Format Number, 2 decimal places (e.g. "59.99")

Why Needed? Providing the previous price of a product allows an affiliate to understand if products have been discounted and to promote these discounts accordingly.

Do Use the previous price that you had listed on your website

Do Not Simply list the RRP

### **Special Notes on Product Variants**

For products that have different variants (e.g. colours and sizes for clothing) It is important to consider how you communicate this information to affiliates.

If you are providing a feed in a text format then you should consider (and discuss with your network) providing a different product listing for each variant you have. Clearly you need to ensure that each of these has a unique identifier. However, you may also need to include another attribute (e.g. "parent SKU" to allow affiliates to understand that these variants belong to the same parent product.

Generally, for product variants, the XML feed format is preferred as this allows you to group variants as a subset of the parent product utilising the natural XML hierarchy. For example:-

```
<product>
  <title>title</title>
  <description>description</description>
  etc...
  <variants>
    <variant>
      <sku>sku</sku>
      <size>size</size>
      <colour>colour</colour>
      <stock>stock</stock>
      <price>price</price>
      <wasPrice>wasPrice</wasPrice>
    </variant>
    <variant>
      <sku>sku</sku>
      <size>size</size>
      <colour>colour</colour>
      <image>image</image>
      <stock>stock</stock>
      <price>price</price>
      <wasPrice>wasPrice</wasPrice>
    </variant>
  etc.
</variants>
</product>
```

Note that you should ideally provide the appropriate images for the products if colour is one of the variants for the products (as illustrated above)