

IXRetail Schemas Cut Costs, Time for Systems Integration

Standards can provide major expense savings on retail IT projects, but only if technology vendors adopt and implement them

BY RICHARD E. MADER

With the public release of the first IXRetail schemas, the benefits of using XML to integrate applications should be clearly understood by everyone.

At least, that's what I thought until recently, when I was excitedly telling a friend about the advantages of the new standards. "I believe you that there are benefits," he replied sheepishly. "But I honestly do not know why or how."

It seems to me that the old expression, "Familiarity breeds contempt," applies here. Although ARTS has assembled in IXRetail an outstanding group of XML practitioners and retail business experts, we forget that many retailers have not yet experienced XML. This is a good time to explain how XML works, so you can better understand the value of IXRetail.

XML is sometimes defined as self-describing data. That means that it contains data identified by an XML Tag, which can link to a dictionary for the complete description of data. For example, in <SSNumber> 123-45-6789 </SSNumber>, SSNumber is the XML Tag and the numbers between the Tags represent the actual data.

Yes, computers can read alphabetic information, since the days when only numbers could be used as codes are long gone. The software applications that read and interpret the Tags, so the computer knows that the 123-45-6789 is the SSNumber, are called Parsers. By matching the SSNumber tag to the dictionary, users can be sure that the SSNumber is the nine-digit number assigned by the U.S. government to identify a specific person's retirement account.

XML Schemas are lists of related XML Tags. The recently released ARTS Price Schema, for example, is a list of all the data

elements necessary to identify the correct price of merchandise for a specific customer at a certain date and time in one location.

To understand how this saves integration time and cost, assume that the two systems being integrated both use the same schema with the same tag names and dictionary. System A creates the schema and System B reads the schema to perform its assigned functions.

The need to write programs to create special extract files from System A, and then more programs to have System B input the extract files, is eliminated. So there is less time, less cost and less aggravation.

FOCUS ON POS The initial focus of IXRetail

is very extensive, involving many systems, and must be fast, efficient and accurate.

Next month IXRetail will release to the public a standard XML Schema for the POS Transaction Log (TLOG). This extensive schema satisfies more than 30 use cases (business functions) for using POS data within other systems. If all POS software and associated systems vendors adopt the IXRetail standard TLOG schema, integration of everything from a new commission system to complete ERP will be greatly simplified.

The IXRetail TLOG design allows for both nightly batch and real-time processing. In some instances for real-time process-

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has been on creating XML schemas to ease integration of systems that use POS information, which is the most used and important data in retailing. POS data is used daily in many systems, including Big Ticket, Gift Certificates, Stored Value, Stock Recording, Commission, Sales, Layaways, Replenishment, Customer History, Deposit Entry and Credit Card Reconciliation. Indeed, one of the largest tasks involved in implementing an ERP system, such as that provided by Retek, SAP, JDA or other companies, is integration with the POS system.

Nightly POS processing is critical, and many retailers size their computers and networks to ensure that during the busy holiday season they can complete this processing by the time the first store opens the following morning. Thus POS integration

ing, such as Stored Value and Stock Recording, IXRetail is developing special XML messages. A special series of Stored Value messages is being developed to create real-time transactions for value card issuing, tendering, status inquiry and reversal and other functions.

The standard TLOG and associated messages can provide major expense saving on IT projects. However, these savings can only be achieved if vendors adopt and implement these IXRetail standards.

Retail IT executives can be the heroes in this situation — but only if they insist that their vendors adopt IXRetail.

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