



PROMO
STANDARDS


Improving Service

Providing Distributors Instant Web Access to Real-Time Supplier Inventory Data

A PromoStandards Case Study

Publication of this document was made possible through funding by Essent Corporation.





With compressed order delivery cycles, distributors need real-time inventory availability data from their suppliers more than ever, placing a burden both on distributors and suppliers alike.

The PromoStandards™ Inventory Availability Web Service is a proven, industry-specific solution that provides real-time supplier inventory data. The specification defines the communication for inventory availability and pertinent product data.

The solution is delivered in the form of a W3C-compliant web service that provides distributors instant access to inventory data in a form consumable by automated business systems. Suppliers with staff web developers may develop the web service themselves or use a qualified integration service provider or cloud solution provider.

The traditional ways that promotional products trading partners – distributors, decorators, and suppliers – communicate inventory is manual. The approach costs the industry time, money, and opportunities. Phone calls, emails, and manual verification sap untold man-hours every day from suppliers, decorators, and distributors alike.

Suppliers are inundated with inquiries about product availability. How many T-shirts are in stock? What color? What size? What price? A supplier representative is on the receiving end, running down answers. It's a time-intensive back-and-forth, repeated order after order, day after day. As the order cycle further compresses, the problem will continue to get worse.

Just as importantly, distributors are looking for inventory information at the moment they're ready to buy. It's the Zero Moment of Truth, and a supplier who can immediately show the distributor what's available has a far greater chance of selling it.

Distributors increasingly expect suppliers to provide instant, online, hassle-free visibility to inventory. And suppliers who don't make inventory lookup easy will remain mired in that time-intensive back-and-forth, or even lose out on sales entirely.

Communicating inventory is ultimately a simple equation. Distributors want the ability to know what's available, suppliers want the ability to say what's available, and both want

it to be communicated fast and easy while minimizing labor.

PromoStandards, a group of technologically-minded suppliers, distributors, decorators, and service providers, personally experiences the supply chain communication problems and develops electronic communication standards to address them. As one of the first problems to tackle, the group has developed the Inventory Availability Web Service standard, starting with a draft in February 2014. The latest is version 1.2.1 released in April 2015. The standard is mature and stable.

It is also uniform and flexible, affording a method for suppliers to communicate supplier-specific and proprietary product-specific information.

The solution is proven, saving time and creating opportunities in the promotional

products industry right now. And the uniformity and scalability of the PromoStandards specifications makes the solution available to every supplier.

Early Adopter: It Fits Right In With Our Award-Winning Service

Beacon Promotions Inc. was among the first promotional products suppliers to go live with the Inventory Availability Web Service.

Beacon President Gary Haley said the Inventory Web Service cuts down on phone calls and emails and boosts efficiency. More importantly, he said, distributors instantly have the information they need to make a purchase.

"The real driver is this is the information the distributors are looking for at the time they place

orders," Mr. Haley said. "This is the information distributors want to know before starting the order entry process. It's a big deal to offer this information in a timely way."

Beacon has earned more than a dozen awards for its service to distributors, as well as perfect scores on the SAGE® and Advertising Specialty Institute® ESP™ supplier rating systems. The Inventory Web Service "fits in perfectly to what we try to do each day" in terms of providing top-rated, award-winning service, Mr. Haley said.

To implement the web service, Beacon selected technology solution provider Essent® Corporation, which offers a turnkey Inventory Availability Web Service based on the

PromoStandards protocol.

Beacon initially used the Inventory Availability Web Service to provide inventory visibility to six of

its biggest distributor trading partners and is actively looking to add more trading partners to the service. With the implementation of the web service, the need for distributors to call for inventory availability is eliminated.

"Some people might find it funny to hear me say that no communication is the best communication but in this case that's true. Rather than phone or write us to get the inventory information needed, the distributor can now look at their own system and see what we have ... any time, day or night," Mr. Haley said.

How it Works: Hassle-Free, Instant Inventory Visibility

A supplier, or a qualified integrator contracted by the supplier, can build the Inventory Web Service to PromoStandards specifications. The

"Being able to offer distributors real-time inventory availability is a big deal for world class customer service."

Gary Haley
President, Beacon Promotions

supplier then provides inventory visibility to any distributor or decorator by providing the distributor with credentials.

From there, it's easy for distributors and decorators to look up supplier inventory. The distributor or decorator will visit the service interface and enter a product identification number, typically a SKU. The distributor optionally can use filters for color, size, or custom variables set up by the supplier.

The service then retrieves the supplier's most recent inventory information and returns the data to the distributor or decorator. The return shows quantity available, brand, price, color, size, a custom message if desired, and a timestamp of the latest inventory update. The return can also include companion items, such as a carrying case for a pen, with the same details included.

The solution allows distributors and decorators to simply look up the information that suppliers spend the most time providing by phone and email. And the distributors and decorators have all the information needed to make a purchase, right at the time they're ready to make a purchase.

What's Next for PromoStandards

Promotional products companies who start using PromoStandards-specified web services right now are entering on the ground floor of movement that's bringing integration, automation, and efficiency to wide portions of the supply chain.

- The Inventory Availability Web Service built to PromoStandards specifications is already saving time and creating opportunities by providing instant, online, hassle-free visibility to supplier inventory.
- PromoStandards has also established specifications for an Order Status Web Service to allow easy look up of order status information that suppliers and distributors spend the most time communicating.
- Up next for PromoStandards is to establish specifications for a web service for distributors to see supplier product catalogs. And before the end of 2017, PromoStandards aims to have specifications for Purchase Order and Invoice web services.



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PromoStandards is a group of suppliers, distributors, decorators, and service providers who are establishing specifications and standards for trading partner integrations and web services that boost business efficiency and eliminate supply chain friction.

Representatives of the following companies serve on the standards body:

- Essent Corporation
- Starline
- Facilis Group
- BIC Graphic
- SanMar
- Halo Branded Solutions
- Hit Promotional Products
- Polyconcept North America
- Geiger

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