ELECTRICAL DISTRIBUTORS' ASSOCIATION

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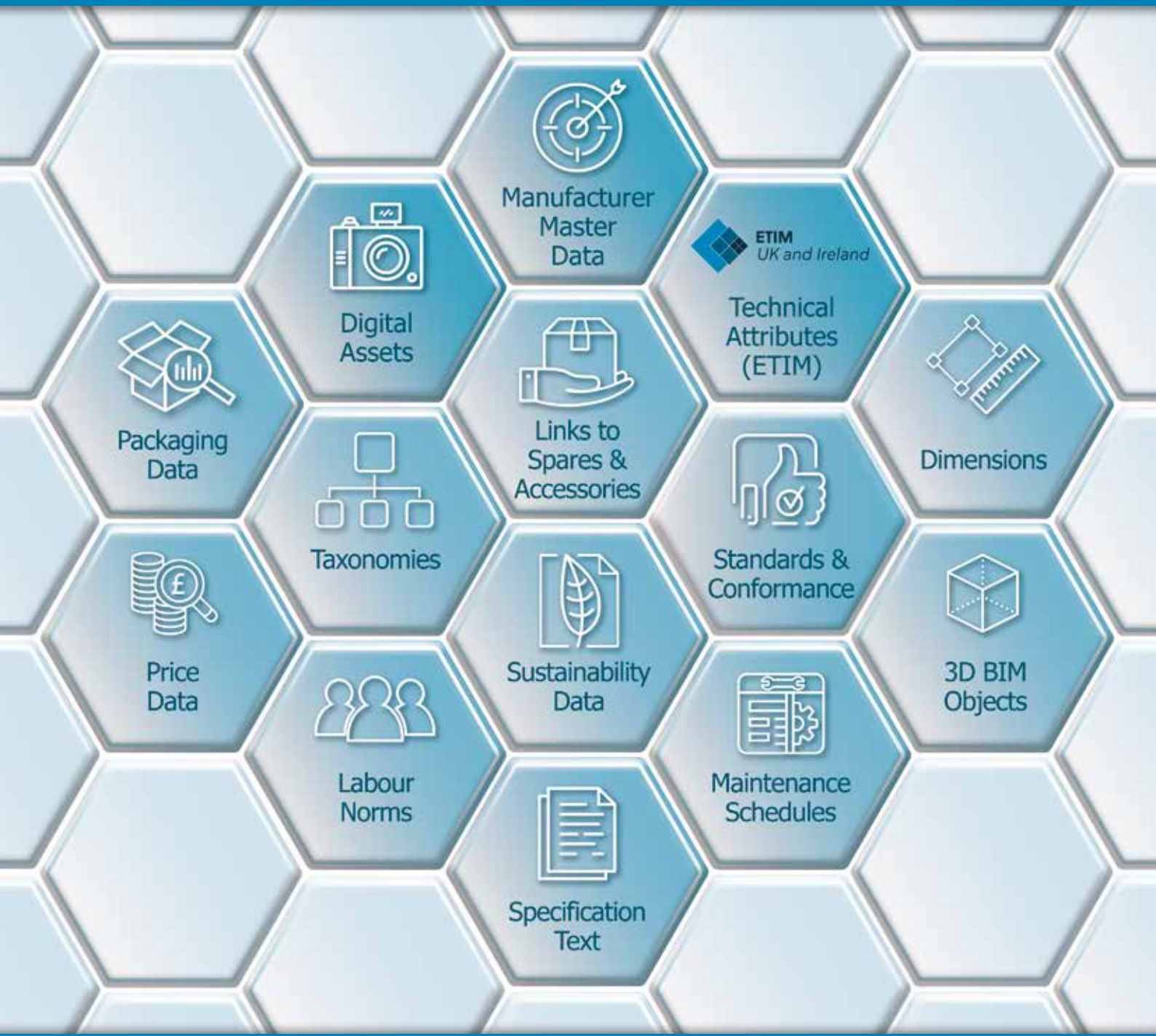
By: **Richard Appleton,** Head of Digitalisation at the EDA, and Board Member at EDA Data Services

Creating a Product Data Strategy:
A Seven Point Plan for Manufacturers



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Creating a Product Data Strategy: A Seven Point Plan for Manufacturers

This paper is one of a series of White Papers produced for EDA members and affiliates covering topics relating to digitalisation and product data. Now five years from its original publication, much has changed and much has been learnt. In the light of this the paper has been **completely revised and updated for 2025**.

In this guide Richard Appleton, who has thirty years of experience in the world of digital product data describes how to go about creating an integrated Product Data Strategy. The guide is primarily aimed at manufacturers of electrotechnical products and especially those wanting to host their product data in EDATA, the industry product data pool. However, the concepts described here are equally relevant to manufacturers of HVAC, plumbing and building products and, to some extent, wholesalers and distributors too.

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Creating a Product Data Strategy: A Seven Point Plan for Manufacturers

Introduction

There has never been a greater need for manufacturers to put in place a robust and integrated Product Data Strategy.

In the digital world, product data is your "silent sales team", central to both your own and your distributors' sales and marketing activity. Managed effectively, good quality, accessible product data is a major strategic asset which can be leveraged both for sales growth and improved customer experience.

But this is just part of the picture. The Grenfell enquiry has shone a spotlight on the need for better quality manufacturers' product data traceable throughout the construction process (the "Golden Thread"). In addition, a growing number of customers require sustainability data such as embodied carbon and packaging data to fulfil both compliance obligations and their own ESG policies. Looking to the longer term, ongoing discussions across Europe about Digital Product Passports and the implications of the recent UK Government Construction Products Reform Green Paper further reinforce the need for manufacturers to focus on their product data.

For many B2B product manufacturers, creating and managing product data has traditionally been secondary to other marketing activity. Data was created and supplied in an ad hoc way, often in response to an individual customer's request. In future this will not be enough. Now is the time for manufacturers to abandon the old, fragmented approach and create an integrated Product Data Strategy.

Your Seven Point Plan

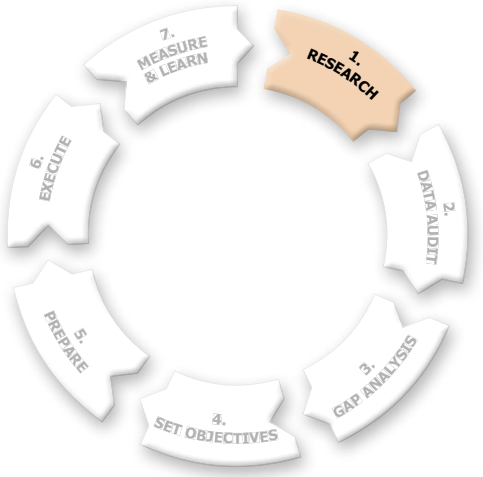
Of course, there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution and the strategy adopted by, say, a multinational manufacturer with a diverse product range will be quite different to a small specialist supplier. But, whatever your situation, you will benefit greatly from following a structured approach. This paper outlines a seven-point plan to creating your Product Data Strategy.

11 Key Business Benefits of an Integrated Product Data Strategy

Good quality product data...

1. Leads to increased sales and fewer returns
2. Improves customer experience and retention
3. Enables customers to match your products to a specification
4. Is a key factor when clients select product suppliers
5. Can be distributed via industry data pools such as EDATA
6. Enables your data to be integrated with customers' business processes
7. Retains greater control over brand image and presentation
8. Enables greater speed and flexibility in meeting customer requests for product data
9. Saves cost by avoiding duplication of effort
10. Demonstrates your commitment to meeting safety and environmental standards
11. Helps future-proof your business against new legislation and conformance requirements

Creating a Product Data Strategy: A Seven Point Plan for Manufacturers



Step 1: Research

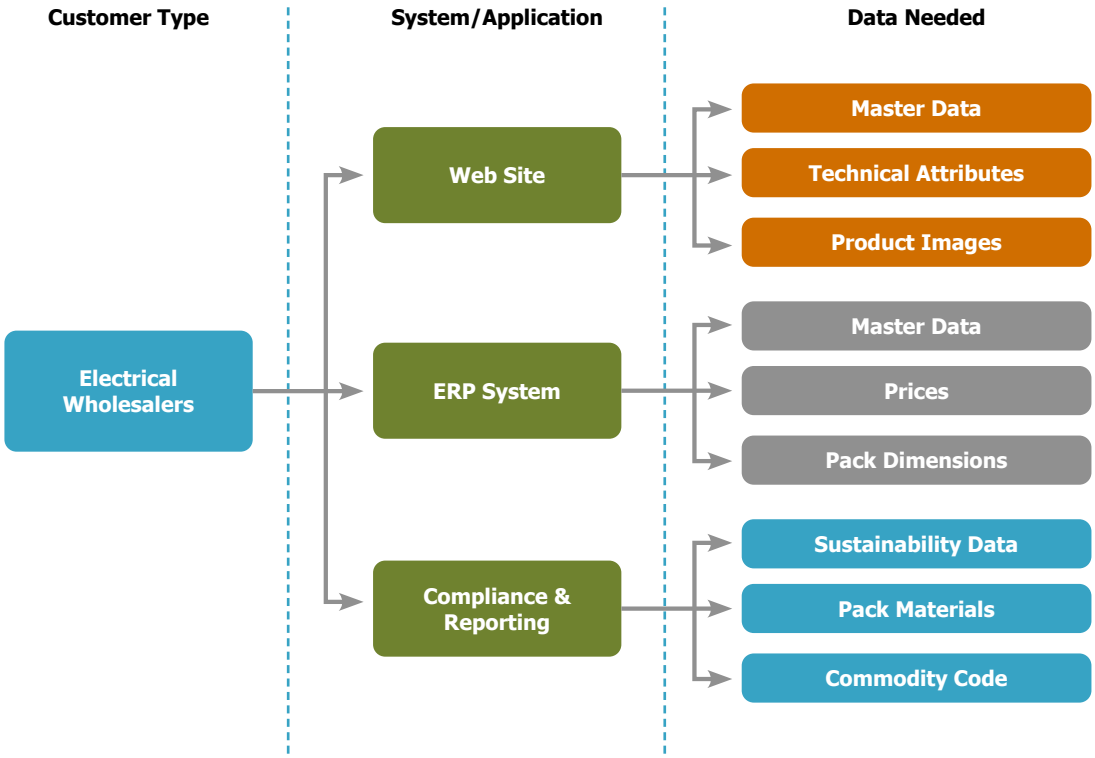
The first step involves researching your customers' product data requirements. You will need to understand:

- **Why** do your customers need product data?
- **What** data do they need?
- **What** systems are they using?
- **What** channels do they use to obtain the data?
- **What** data standards need to be applied?

When considering "customers" you should include other organisations which influence product selection, for example Specifiers and Building Owners as well as Wholesalers and Contractors. You should also consider "internal customers", others in your business who may need to use product data.

To visualise each group's needs, it is worth drawing a "map" showing the applications where product data is needed by each type of customer, and details of the data itself. A simplified example is illustrated below:

Data Map Showing Applications & Product Data Requirements for an Electrical Wholesaler



Manufacturers may decide to deliver data directly to each of their customers. Others may decide to simplify the process by entrusting their data to 3rd party channels for onward dissemination to customers as required. Typically, rich data for web sites may be obtained via an industry-owned data pool such as EDATA, 3D BIM objects via an independent data hosting company and trade price data by subscription to a price data service. This has major advantages in that you can supply data in a single format to a single intermediary channel rather than having to supply diverse formats to many different customers. It also helps to make your data easily accessible to the widest audience. Find out which channels are available, and which your customers use.

You will also need to research applicable data standards, as your product data will need to conform. Three that you will come across are:

ETIM

The international data model for the standardisation and classification of technical product data. ETIM data has many uses but is typically used to aid product search and identification on wholesalers' web sites.

BMEcat®

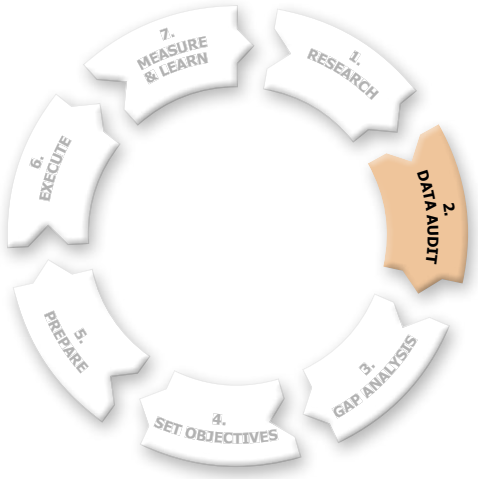
An internationally recognised format for exchanging product catalogue data. BMEcat® is still widely used but will eventually be replaced by a new, more flexible, exchange format ETIM xChange.

GTIN

The Global Trade Item Number managed by GS1. This is a globally unique number, normally 13 digits in Europe, and sometimes referred to as the EAN code. It is often represented as a bar code and is used by computer systems as a key to identify trade items and exchange product data.

It is of course impossible to anticipate in detail how these standards will develop. However, with an integrated product data strategy in place you will be in a far stronger position to adapt to new standards such as the Digital Product Passport when requirements become clear.

Step 2: Internal Data Audit



The next step is to carry out an internal audit of Product Data. During this stage you need to establish:

- **What** data you already have available?
- **Where** it is held?
- **Who** is responsible for creating and maintaining it?

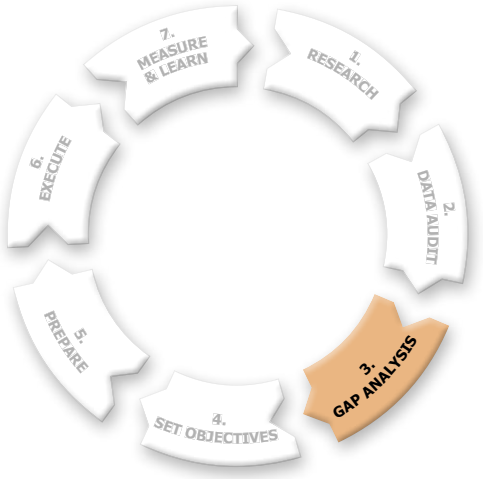
As with Step 1 it helps if you can find a way to visualise this, perhaps using a chart like the one illustrated below.

What?	Where?	Who?
Dimensions	CAD system	R&D
Product descriptions	ERP system	Product Managers
Pack sizes & weights	ERP system	Product Managers
Prices	ERP system	Sales
Product photographs	Web site	Web Development Agency
Product photographs	Catalogue	Marketing Agency
Product data sheets	Server - Word / PDF	Product Managers
Pack materials	Server - MS Excel	Compliance Manager
Carbon	3rd Party Hosting Company	Compliance Manager
BIM Objects	3rd Party Hosting Company	Marketing

You should also consider the quality of your existing data at this stage. Does your ERP system, for example, contain duplicate or obsolete records that need to be purged?

Clearly this step will vary greatly in complexity from manufacturer to manufacturer and is significantly more complicated for those based in multiple sites or countries. Many manufacturers find they have far more product data than they thought they did!

Step 3: Gap Analysis



In Steps 1 and 2 you identified the data you need to provide and the data you already have available (even if it is not integrated or housed in one place). The next step is to map the two together and identify what additional data you will need to create in order to satisfy customers and other target audiences.

In some cases, you will need to drill down further into the detail than shown in our examples above, taking into consideration factors like the length of product descriptions or the resolution of images. The results could be summarised using a RAG (Red/Amber/Green) notation like that illustrated below.

Customer Type	Application	Data Required	Data We Have Available	RAG Status	Priority
Wholesaler	Web Site (via EDATA)	150 Character (max) description	30 Character description		HIGH
Wholesaler	Web Site (via EDATA)	At least one image per product	Images for 80% of products		HIGH
Wholesaler	Web Site (via EDATA)	ETIM technical attributes			MED
Wholesaler	ERP	< 40 Character description	30 Character description		MED
Wholesaler	ERP	Trade price	Trade price		MED
Contractor	Estimating	40 Character description	30 Character description		LOW
Contractor	Design	BIM Object			LOW
Contractor	O&M Manual	PDF data sheets	PDF data sheets		HIGH
Client	Specification	Sustainability Data	Few EPDs		HIGH
Client	Specification	Specification Text			LOW

It also is worth agreeing a rough priority for each data type. This will inform the next steps, objective setting and preparation. Armed with your Gap Analysis you will be able to start estimating the work required and start working out budget and timescales.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

...How does the EDATA data pool measure the of quality what's inside?

The EDATA Data Quality Standards create a benchmark for the quality of product data held in EDATA, the award-winning UK electrotechnical sector data pool. Data is measured for completeness at individual SKU (product) level and assigned a Bronze, Silver or Gold quality rating.

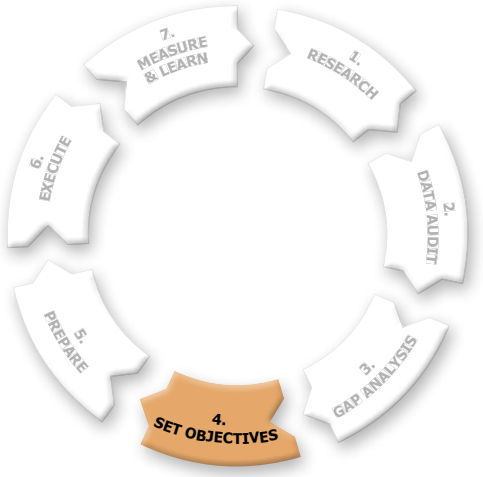
Each manufacturer is then awarded an overall quality ranking.

To achieve overall Gold a manufacturer's data needs to fulfil the following criteria:

- The majority (66% or above) of individual SKUs scoring Gold
- Data is regularly verified as being up-to-date
- Data has been supplied for the full UK range
- There are no major breaches of best practice

At this stage in the process, and with so many different factors to consider, it can be hard to see the wood for the trees. Many manufacturers have found the EDATA Data Quality Standards provide a clear basis for setting priorities and objectives.

Step 4: Set Objectives



You are now in a position to start setting some objectives for your Product Data Strategy. In B2B markets, products are purchased to meet a specific need or solve a problem so your product data objectives should focus on delivering the right information to the right people at the point that a product selection is made. Beyond this, your objectives will depend very much on your own business and situation, but there are a number of key principles to follow:

1. Product Data objectives should be aligned with Business objectives

Product Data is not an end in itself. Your Product Data Strategy must support your Marketing Strategy and contribute towards achieving overall business objectives. For instance, you may have marketing goals such as:

- Increase the number of our products listed in distributors' web sites by 30% this year.
- Increase sales of branded spares and accessories by 20%, displacing sales of generic alternatives.
- Reduce the frequency with which our specified products are substituted during construction.

Success in all of these relies upon making the right product data available to the right audience and will thus guide your Product Data Strategy objectives.

2. Objectives should be clear and measurable

The concept of SMART (Specific-Measurable-Achievable-Realistic-Timebound) objectives is something of a business cliché, but none the less valid for that. A typical SMART objective might be:

- Add our full UK range to EDATA and achieve overall EDATA Gold standard data quality rating by 31 December 2025.

Sub-objectives, identified during the next preparatory stage, should follow the same principle. For example:

- Train 3 Product Managers to enter ETIM data into a Product Information Management (PIM) system.
- Recruit a Product Data Manager by end of third quarter 2025.
- Transfer packaging data from ERP to PIM system by end of Q1 2026.

3. Don't try to do everything at once

In Step 3, we mentioned prioritisation. Aligning your Product Data objectives with business objectives will further emphasise which tasks, or which product ranges, to prioritise. Focus on these. If, like many businesses, you are still learning the ropes when it comes to product data management **crawl-walk-run** is a good motto for success.

Step 5: Prepare

This step is about getting ready to implement your strategy and involves three key elements:

1. Planning

Create a detailed project plan to achieve each of your key objectives containing estimated timescales, key dependencies and assigned responsibilities.

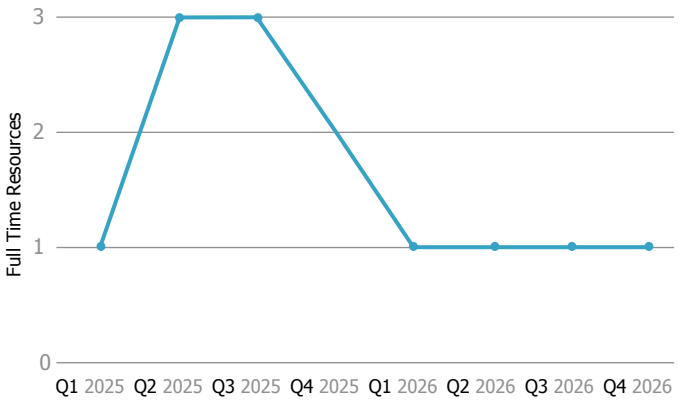
Estimating timescales is, of course, difficult and the first attempt may be no more than an educated guess. As a starting point try using a "T-shirt sizing" approach, designating each task as Small, Medium or Large depending on whether it is likely to take hours, days or weeks.

2. Budget

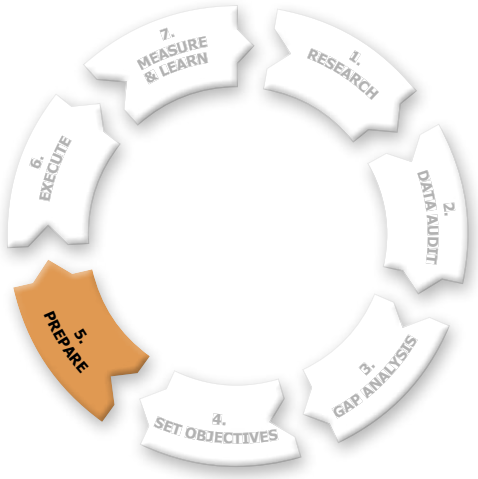
Identify and agree budgets both for the initial project and longer-term product data maintenance.

3. Resources

Ensure the necessary human resources and infrastructure are in place. When considering human resources, you are likely to have an early peak requirement while you tackle labour intensive tasks such as enriching your back-catalogue product data with new, ecommerce-friendly, images and ETIM features. In the longer term, the volume of work should reduce as you focus more on responding to customer requests and creating data for new products. Rather than extend the initial project timescale, consider using freelance or temporary help or engaging the services of a data management company to get you over the initial hurdle.



Example short- and long-term product data management human resource requirements



If you don't already have one, you should consider installing a Product Information Management (PIM) system to act as a central repository for product data. The right PIM will make a huge difference to your product data management capabilities and should be considered as a long term, strategic, investment.

You will find more information about PIM systems overleaf.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

...What is a PIM system?

A PIM (Product Information Management) system is a centralized platform that allows businesses to manage and distribute all product-related data efficiently. It serves as a single source of truth for product specifications, descriptions, images, pricing, and technical documentation, ensuring consistency and accuracy across all sales and marketing channels.

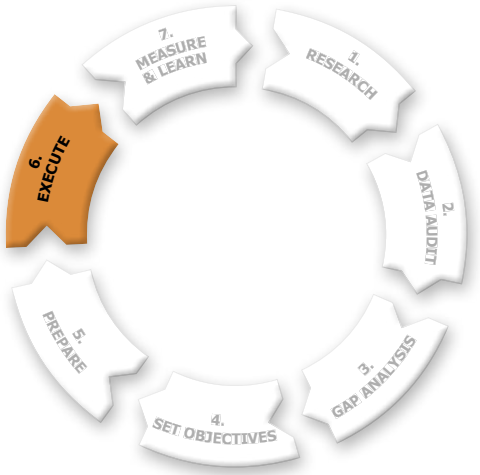
For **manufacturers of B2B products**, a PIM system offers several key benefits:

- **Centralised Data Management**: PIM consolidates product data from multiple sources, reducing errors and eliminating duplication.
- **Improved Data Accuracy and Consistency:** Consistent and accurate product information helps build trust with distributors and end customers. It reduces costly mistakes in orders and customer service.
- **Faster Time-to-Market:** By streamlining product data updates and enabling rapid publication across channels, manufacturers can launch new products or updates faster and more efficiently.
- **Enhanced Multichannel Distribution:** PIM allows seamless integration with e-commerce platforms, ERP systems, and digital catalogues, making it easier to distribute product data across multiple B2B sales channels.
- **Regulatory Compliance:** With centralised control, manufacturers can ensure that product data meets industry standards and compliance requirements.

In summary, a PIM system improves operational efficiency, data quality, and customer experience – key advantages that help B2B manufacturers stay competitive in a complex and fast-moving market.

Conclusion:

With the information gathered using this process, you'll be able to create a detailed specification of your requirements when engaging with potential PIM system suppliers. Most systems are flexible in their data structures and output, but you will need to ask specifically about ETIM and BMEcat® capability or creating an API to feed data into your own web site.



Step 6: Execute

Now all the pieces are in place, it's time to execute your project plan. The plan will be tailored to your business, however, as product data is an important part of your brand image and needs to be both accurate and consistent, this is an appropriate place to mention house style, workflows and data governance.

House Style

Create a house style manual and glossary of abbreviations so that data remains consistent even if, for example, it is created by several different product managers.

For more information see the EDA's white papers:

- **Creating Excellent Product Descriptions**
- **Creating Excellent Product Images**
- **Starting Your ETIM Journey**

Workflows and Governance

Ensure that the ultimate responsibility for product data management is clearly assigned, preferably to a specialist data manager, and ensure that the person responsible has sufficient training and authority to succeed in the role. To achieve the highest quality standards, product data creation and management processes should be documented and include a final sign-off before any data is released to customers.

Long Term Process

Once over the initial hurdles, product data creation and management should be embedded into your business processes ensuring that it remains complete and up-to-date. You should no more launch a new product without ensuring full product data is available than you would without agreeing a price or training the sales team.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

... Is there a role for Artificial Intelligence (AI)?

AI is developing fast and its role in creating product data will inevitably grow rapidly. Generative AI can assist in creating product data by automatically applying classifications and producing descriptions based on existing inputs but, while it offers significant advantages, there are also important limitations to consider.

Pros:

Speed and Efficiency: Generative AI can rapidly create large volumes of product data, reducing time-to-market for new or updated products.

Cost Reduction: Automating content generation reduces the need for manual writing and technical documentation efforts.

Consistency: AI-generated content maintains a uniform tone, structure, and terminology across all product data.

Content Enrichment: AI can enhance raw product data with SEO-friendly descriptions tailored for digital platforms.

Cons:

Accuracy Risks: AI may generate technically incorrect or misleading information if not properly trained or monitored.

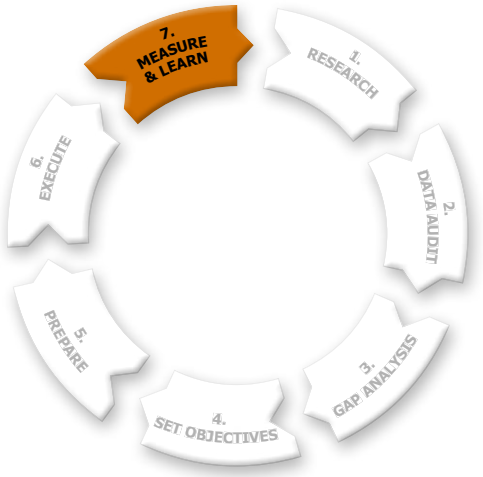
Lack of Contextual Understanding: Generative AI may struggle with nuanced product details, specific use cases, or domain-specific language.

Quality Control: AI-generated content still requires human review to ensure accuracy, compliance, and appropriateness.

Data Dependency: The quality of output is only as good as the input data and prompts provided—poor data can lead to flawed content.

Conclusion:

Generative AI can be an asset in the creation of product data, but it should be used as a tool to assist, rather than replace, human expertise, especially when accuracy, compliance, and detail are critical. The point about using existing inputs is important. By providing the AI tool with data to work from you will greatly reduce the risk of inaccuracy and intellectual property infringement.



Step 7: Measure & Learn

Product Data Management is an iterative process, which should be continually measured, reviewed and improved. The following are just a few examples of measures from which you can learn how to make both the process and the product data itself even more effective.

- Regularly monitor project delivery against the SMART objectives set above and be prepared to adjust either project scope or resources if you are off target.
- Gather data quality statistics and monitor the trend over time. What percentage of your products have associated images, ETIM classification or GTIN codes?
- Measure the time taken to create different categories of data, or to respond to customer requests. Both will help estimate and budget for future projects.
- Test how your products perform in terms of search engine rankings.
- Measure sales growth e.g. via those distributors who are using your upgraded product data.
- Gather qualitative feedback from customers and channel providers.

Conclusion

There is no right or wrong way, nor is there a magic solution to the challenge of creating a Product Data Strategy. How you go about it will depend on your individual circumstances. However, adopting a structured approach like the one outlined above will increase efficiency and greatly increase your chances of success.

Many manufacturers will have already embarked on this course, but we hope that all readers will have taken something useful from this paper, wherever they are on the product data journey.

And Finally...
A Few Dos & Don'ts to Consider...

Do...

... adopt industry standards such as ETIM and GTIN.

... syndicate your product data through industry owned data pools such as EDATA.

... encourage feedback from customers. An effective feedback loop will enable you to fine tune your data strategy.

... agree a separate budget for Product Data Management.

... assign ownership. Appoint someone directly responsible for Product Data Management and ensure they have the necessary authority to carry out the task.

... consider buying a PIM system.

Don't...

... separate Product Data Management activity. For example, splitting marketing data from design data will lead to duplication of effort and inconsistency.

... dismiss using experienced freelancers or third-party data companies to supplement in-house resources.

... ignore your existing products: it is easy to focus on new releases, but this may not be your customers' priority.

... assume AI can do everything for you. Expert human oversight is essential.

... delay. You can't afford to be left behind. Start now!

If you would like further information, or to discuss how to syndicate your product data via EDATA, please contact the EDA on 020 3141 7350.

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- ☐ **Starting your ETIM Journey**
- ☐ **3 Product Data Essentials**
- ☑ **Creating a Product Data Strategy**
- ☐ **Creating Excellent Product Descriptions**
- ☐ **Creating Excellent Product Images**

Useful Links & References

Code for Construction Product Information
www.cpicode.org.uk

Electrical Distributors' Association
www.eda.org.uk

EDATA
www.edata.org.uk

ETIM UK and Ireland Limited
www.etim-uk-and-ie.org

ETIM International
www.etim-international.com

GS1-UK
www.gs1uk.org

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