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Effective Ecommerce: 3 product data essentials for electrical wholesalers



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This White Paper is one of a series produced for EDA members and affiliates covering topics relating to digitalisation and product data.

In this guide Richard Appleton, who has thirty years of experience in the world of digital product data, describes the essential elements of product data required to start you on your digital journey.

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Introduction

More and more B2B product suppliers, across many sectors, are investing in a highly functional ecommerce web site. So why are so many let down by poor quality product data?

With the advance of ecommerce and BIM (Building Information Modelling), product data has become increasingly important to the point where it is now central to many key business processes.

But for each product there are hundreds of pieces of data describing every aspect of it throughout its life cycle, from conception to decommissioning and disposal.

This data is often seen as belonging in different "containers" and is managed by different parts of the business. You can see a selection of common types of data in our diagram here.

This can be daunting to the non-specialist, making it hard to see the wood for the trees, so it is important to identify and understand the requirements for your specific application.

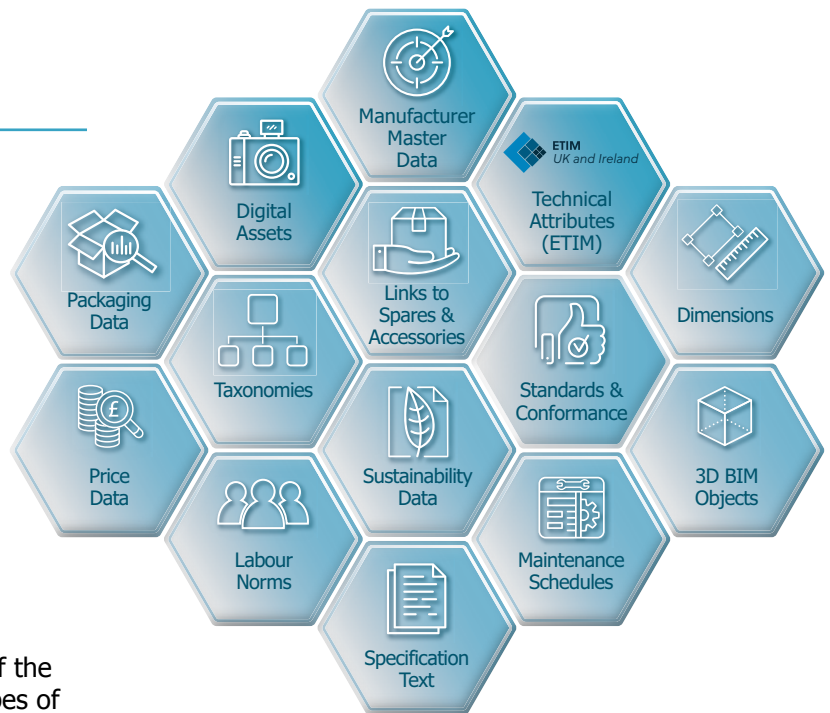
So, what are the key pieces of data needed by an electrical wholesaler creating a B2B trading web site or wishing to improve an on-line or paper catalogue?

This paper explains the 3 key data elements a wholesaler will need to consider and discuss with manufacturers, PIM system and web shop providers.

For simplicity, they are grouped under 3 headings:

- 1. Manufacturer Master Data**
- 2. Technical Attributes**
- 3. Digital Assets**

This paper also considers the most efficient methods by which wholesalers can acquire the product data.



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1. Manufacturer Master Data

Manufacturer Master Data includes the core data you need to identify a product: manufacturer name, brand name, range name, the manufacturer's part number and, if available, GTIN code (i.e. the EAN code or bar code number managed by GS1-UK). This category also includes long and short product descriptions and product classification.

There is currently no single standard for this data. Each manufacturer follows their own style, creating additional work for the wholesaler. The emergence of industry data pools such as EDATA, the EDA's new industry datapool, serves to create a standard and reduce workload for all parties.

Here we highlight 3 of the major Manufacturer Data components:

- a. Long and Short Product Descriptions**
- b. Marketing Bullets**
- c. Product Classification**

a. Long and Short Product Descriptions

You'll need concise and compelling text description which clearly describes the product. In most cases you will need more than one:

- a short header description, up to perhaps 150 characters.
- and a long description containing a detailed listing of the product features.

This will depend on the design of your own web site and also the requirements of any third party platforms (e.g. Google Shopping) you plan to sell through.

Typical short descriptions for use as product header on a web site:

- LED Lamp GU10 4W 35W Equivalent 2700k Warm White - Non-Dimmable
- Fire Rated LED Fixed Downlight IP20 2800K Non-Dimmable - Round 106mm Diameter - Polished Chrome
- Cooker Control Unit 50A White Moulded - White Rocker - Inc. 13A Switched Socket
- 6242Y Twin & Earth Cable 2.5mm Grey Sheath - 100m Reel
- MCB 16A Single Pole 10kA Type B
- 225mm Heavy Duty Return Flange Cable Tray - Pre-Galvanised Steel - 3m Length



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It is generally accepted that Google penalises sites that include non-unique content. This creates a problem for ecommerce sites where many wholesalers are displaying duplicate product data provided by the manufacturer.

To overcome this, wholesalers may be tempted to embellish or re-write long product descriptions received from the manufacturer. However, search engine rankings depend on many factors and the time taken to write unique descriptions may be better spent.

For example, you will see more tangible results from developing an integrated content or social media marketing strategy to draw traffic to your web shop.

If you do create your own descriptions, use tools such as Google Keyword Planner or SpyFu to make sure you include the words and phrases your audience are searching for.

b. Marketing Bullets

A keyword-rich long description will help users find the right product but, for a better user experience, key features and benefits can be displayed as a list of bullet points. These can relate either to the individual product or may be common across all products in a range.

Again, the number and length of the marketing bullets will depend on your web design but it is better to keep them relatively brief. The user needs to be able to spot and absorb the information quickly.

Rather than repeat information shown elsewhere, this is the ideal place to highlight Unique Selling Points (USP) omitted from the description or technical attributes, such as:

- warranty details
- suitable applications
- energy efficiency
- environmental credentials
- ease of installation

Typical set of marketing bullets highlighting product differentiators & USP:

- 3 year manufacturer's warranty
- Uses 75% less energy than conventional fitting
- Simple to install - up to 50% time saving
- Suitable for domestic and outdoor applications
- Comprehensive range of spares & accessories

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c. Product Classification

Your site will need to include a product classification ("taxonomy") to help site navigation and enable customers to find products by a stepped search. This is sometimes called a product hierarchy.

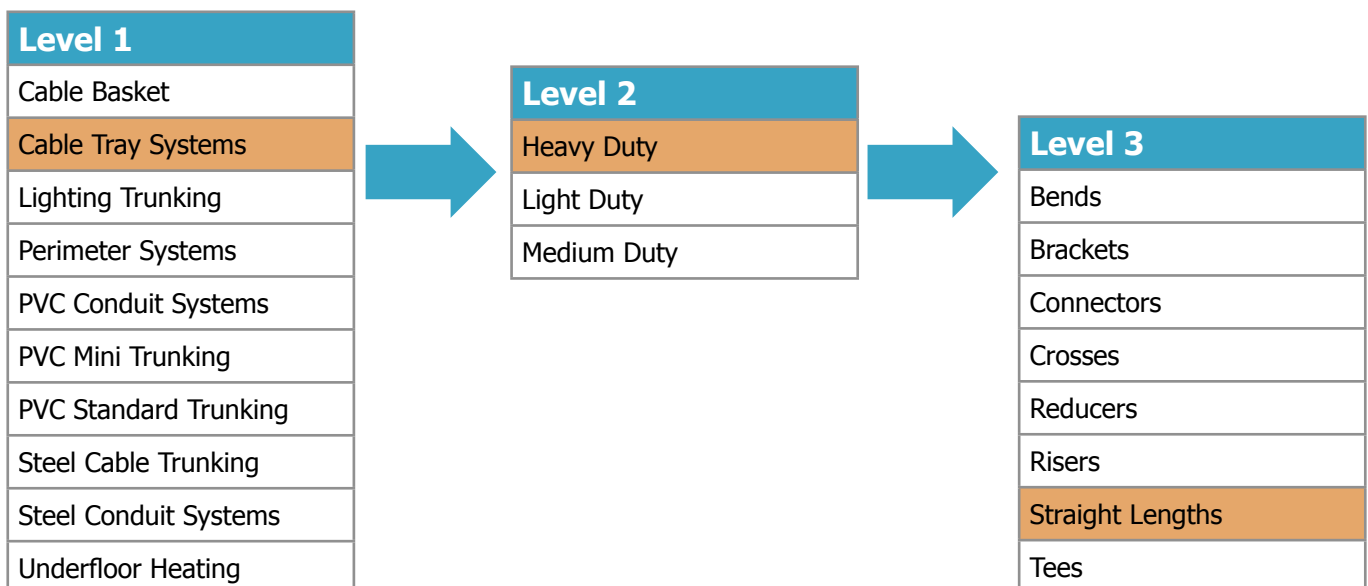
The structure will depend on the type of product but try to avoid offering too many choices at each step or too many steps (3 is probably ideal). And again, keep it simple so it works effectively for the most popular products.

Product classifications may be either generic or manufacturer-specific.

A generic classification is based on product type. For example, all LED lamps are grouped together regardless of manufacturer. A number of standard generic classifications exist including ETIM (of which, more on page 7) and United Nations Standard Products and Services Code (UNSPSC).

A manufacturer-specific classification enables a digital replication of the manufacturer's catalogue, enabling the user to select brand, product family and product range to locate the required product.

Example of a generic classification system for cable management products.



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2. Technical Attributes (ETIM)



Technical Attributes are individual technical performance characteristics of a product displayed in a structured way. They are essential information for all those involved in the design and specification of electrical products, no matter how large or small. They enable rich product content to be displayed on the page in the form of a product data sheet.

In the world of complex B2B products, structured technical attributes are also the basis for powerful searching and filtering functions. Typically, buyers may navigate to a brand or product type but will then need to apply filters to find a product matching their exact requirements.

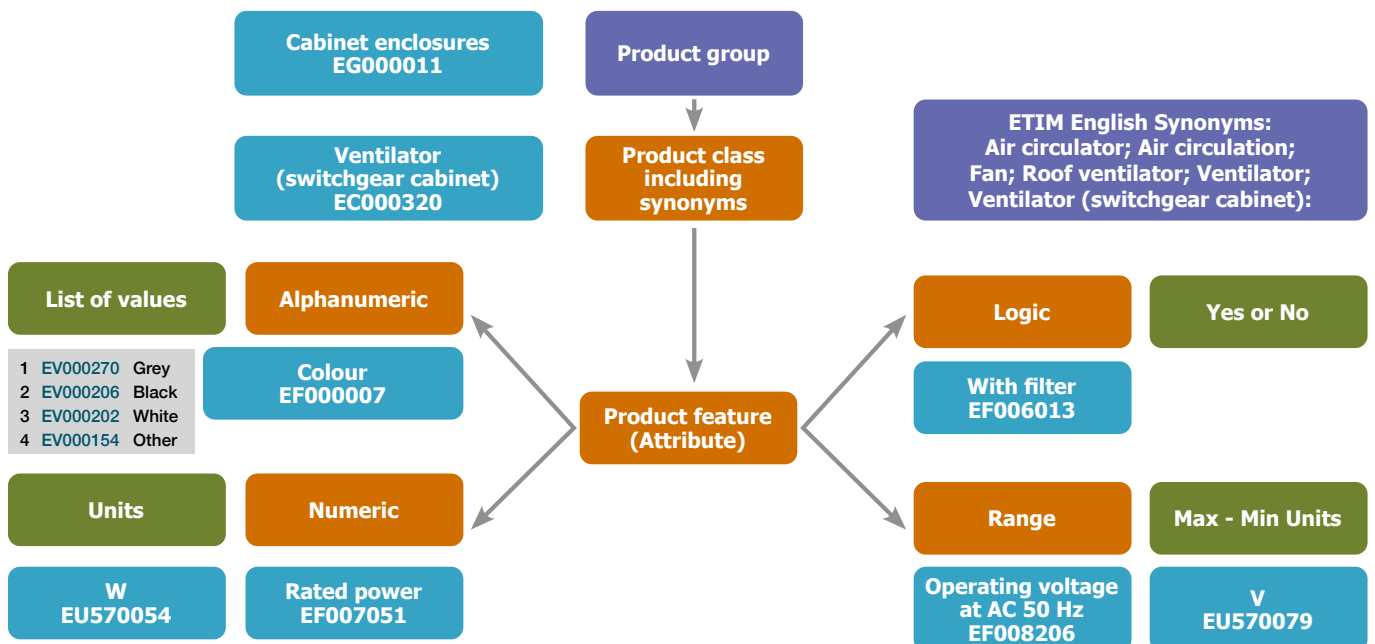
The use of filters on a wholesaler’s website can only work effectively if the data from all manufacturers is consistent in structure and application.

In the electro-technical sector (and HVAC, plumbing and building) this issue has been addressed by introduction of the international ETIM standard.

ETIM comprises a product classification structure where each class is linked to a set of technical attributes (ETIM “features”). Each feature is in turn linked to a closely controlled set of possible values guaranteeing consistency for similar products across all brands.

Wholesalers should strongly encourage their suppliers to provide data which complies with the ETIM standard.

The ETIM Data Classification Model.



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3. Digital Assets

Digital Assets is the blanket term covering attachments to the Manufacturer Master Data.

The most common (and most important for wholesalers' web sites) are images and documents (e.g. technical data sheets and Material Safety Data Sheets or MSDS). This category also includes videos and 3D CAD (or BIM) objects.

a. Images

The product image is usually the first thing the buyer sees. Good quality images can both enhance company image and win conversions. On the other hand, even the best web site can be made to look distinctly average by poor quality images.

Images should be simple and consistent, showing just a single product on a plain background.

For most products, a single image is enough, but you need to ensure you have a separate image for each colour option or any other visible variation. For more complex items, or where visual appearance is important, it may be beneficial to use both a lead "hero" image and a number of supporting images showing different angles or close-ups.

Consider where your audience is likely to be in the buyer journey. In B2B markets the buyer often knows what he or she wants before visiting your web site. In this case the main function of the image is to help find the correct product quickly so make it helpful for that purpose. If you are buying labelling tape, you'd want to see an image which clearly shows the background and font colours. You don't need to see a picture of the box. Remember, too, that contractors may be ordering from site using a mobile device so try to ensure the images will be clear and informative in that context.

Try to obtain high resolution images from the supplier. They can always be made smaller if the web site requires.



b. Documents & Other Digital Assets

Consider adding supporting documents which buyers can download as PDF files. These might include technical specifications (ideal for including in submittals or O&M manuals), installation and maintenance instructions and Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS).

Of course, the documents must be accurate and kept up to date. And they should not be too large. A technical specification for example should be specific to an individual product or, at most, a range of similar products.

This information doesn't just help buyers make a product selection. Get it right and it will turn your site into a resource which they will keep on coming back to.



The primary image should be kept simple, showing a single product on a plain background.

(Image copyright Signify Commercial UK Ltd)



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Where to Obtain Product Data

You can source data directly from manufacturers but this can be very time consuming. This has led to an increasing trend towards collaborative industry data pools, such as EDATA which was created for the UK electrotechnical sector and is managed by the Electrical Distributors' Association (EDA).

Other examples of industry-run data pools in the electrotechnical sector are:

- 2ba in Netherlands
- STK in Finland
- Metel in Italy
- EFO in Norway
- SEG in Sweden
- ELDAS in Switzerland
- IDEA in North America

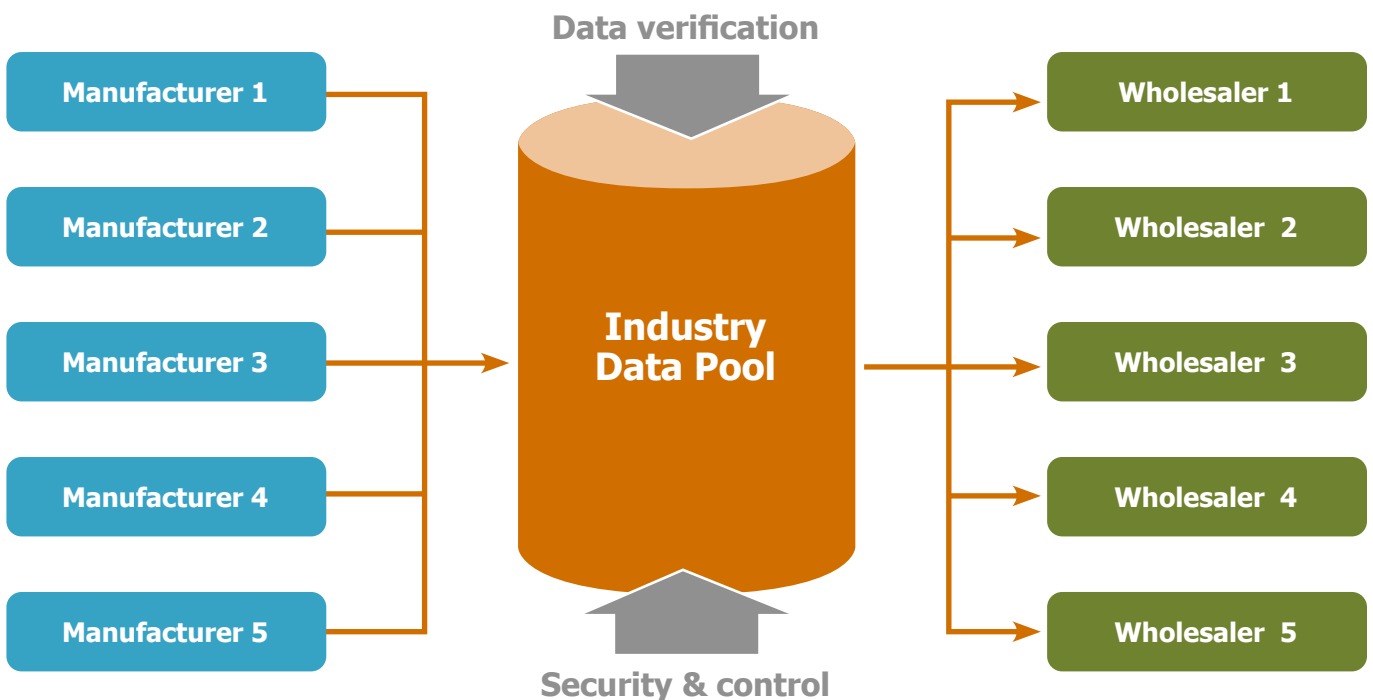
*Access to EDATA is free to EDA Members and their branches.
To find out more: 020 3141 7350 • edata@eda.org.uk*

A very well-known industry data pool in the consumer retailing sector is productDNA developed by GS1 UK®. This is used by major supermarkets including Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose and hosts data from suppliers such as P&G, Unilever, Pepsico and Nestlé. Being owned by and managed for the industry, these data pools are developed specifically for the purpose and offer a number of distinct advantages.

Wholesalers using EDATA will be able to obtain many manufacturers' data, independently verified, in a single standard format and from a single source.

A further benefit is that an industry data pool can actively engage with stakeholders across the industry to promote standards such as ETIM, interoperability and best practice throughout. The management team behind EDATA is working closely with manufacturers to ensure their data meets these standards.

In an industry data pool, data flows in a controlled way from manufacturers to wholesalers, enabling both to focus resources on implementing digital strategy and building USP.



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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
- Effective Ecommerce: 3 Product Data Essentials for Electrical Wholesalers**
- Creating a Product Data Strategy
- Creating Excellent Product Descriptions
- Creating Excellent Product Images

Useful Links & References

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

Google Product Data Specification

<https://tinyurl.com/Google-Merchant-Support>

GS1-UK

www.gs1uk.org



Manufacturer
Master
Data



Digital
Assets

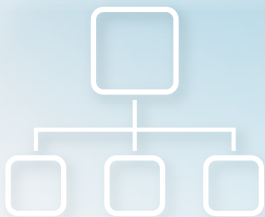


ETIM
UK and Ireland

Technical
Attributes
(ETIM)



Links to
Spares &
Accessories



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Sustainability
Data