



TOC: Without trying to convince you that monitoring every XML-related occurrence is good for you, I will explain why I monitor the W3C and other sites. Perhaps you'll see how stewards of econtent might also find it useful and even develop a taste for it.

Developing a Taste for XML-Standard Alphabet Soup

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I've lost count of the number of XML standard acronyms in this alphabet soup, distinguished from the myriad of technology acronyms by the preponderance of letters X and M. Switching food metaphors, I like broccoli but I know many people do not. I also monitor the activities of the World Wide Web Consortium ("W3C") avidly, and I know most of you do not. To keep track of W3C pronouncements on everything from HTML to XML, I have developed and maintain a standards database that has swelled to over 150 entries and grows monthly. I suspect most of you do not spend your idle hours this way. So, without trying to convince you that this activity is good for you and that you should do the XML standards equivalent of eating your broccoli, I will explain why I monitor the W3C and other sites. Perhaps you'll see how stewards of econtent might also find it useful and even develop a taste for it.

The W3C, located at www.w3.org and founded in 1994, is not like the International Standards Organization or other standards bodies in this *strict* sense: The W3C does not issue standards—HTML, XML, or otherwise. The W3C produces technical reports and specifications; "Recommendation" is the final stage of a released specification. For HTML or XML specifications, W3C is a one-stop shopping site. However, recommendations are also only the starting point for real-world applications and products, everything from Web authoring tools to special XML vocabularies are based on W3C recommendations. Some have likened XML to the "ASCII of the Web," important but not sufficient to add value to anything, like alphabetic pasta waiting to become soup. Other groups like OASIS define industry vocabularies built on W3C recommendations.

So far I probably haven't whetted your appetite. Indeed, why should you occasionally sample the W3C's site? There are many good business reasons, starting with "lots of good free stuff." You can peruse or download the specifications for free, and most include a highly understandable overview. The W3C also provides glossaries and tutorials for many of the standards. The approved and work-in-progress standards also list their authors and the firms they work for. Therefore, watching the W3C can give you an early warning system about what to expect from vendors roughly two

to four years after a specification is released. Noting who participates in which W3C committee can help guide your vendor selection. If two vendors offer a product based on a specification, but one of those vendors was on the committee that wrote it, that vendor's products will probably have the edge. Even if you're not an early adopter, you might review your content-related plans or purchases so you can avoid those that might clash with upcoming standards. Many XML authoring tools emerged in the two to four years after XML became a standard, and the truly mainstream suite with XML support, Office 2003, emerged over five years after the XML specification did in early 1998. Finally, keeping tabs on the W3C will help you avoid being blindsided when new XML acronyms, like "OWL," come up in conversation or purchase requisitions.

So much for the plain broccoli of basic XML standards; How about a little Hollandaise sauce, applying XML to specific types of content? No organization provides one-stop shopping for XML content applications, but one organization comes close: www.oasis-open.org. OASIS, the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards, says its mission is to "drive the development, convergence, and adoption of structured information standards in the areas of ebusiness, Web services, etc." OASIS creates standards and hosts related sites like XML.org and the "Cover Pages," xml.coverpages.org. XML.org applies XML and Web services standards to industry. Here you'll find horizontal XML efforts for ebusiness and vertical industry initiatives throughout the alphabet, from automotive repair to weather. Initial XML work often spawns separate Web sites, as happened to ebXML. ebXML is an emerging ebusiness standard to create a single global electronic marketplace for anyone anywhere to transact business on the Web. The Cover Pages technology reports provide information and links to discussions and resources. This site provided early analysis of Microsoft Office 2003 (a year

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before its release). In November, Oasis added an additional focus area, localization, to apply cultural issues to XML standards. Oasis' concept of localization goes beyond mere character sets and content translation. To Oasis, localization is a broader concept including the cultural aspects of digital content, to increase the effectiveness of content across different places and languages.

Since you've read this far, you deserve to know that "OWL" stands for "Web Ontology Language." It will eventually lead to related activities at OASIS, and may affect both ebusiness and search systems. Don't have time to monitor the W3C and companion industry activities? Then keep reading. We at *EContent* will eat the broccoli for you and help digest the trends. ☞

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