



ORDER STATUS REPORTING METHODS: ORDER LOCATOR vs. e-PSA

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Order Locator is now the industry's longest-running and most successful order status solution. In fact, Order Locator processed millions of order-status data reports for more than 4 years before an official "standard" for order status reporting was declared by e-PSA, the industry's not-for-profit alliance of firms dedicated to promoting e-commerce.

In its original form developed in 2001, Order Locator differs from newer methods of exchanging data in two ways. First, Order Locator was at first strictly web-based, which meant that the only way to obtain status information was by using a web browser. Second, until recently Order Locator accepted data submitted only as ASCII text files, sent via FTP to our server.

Now that XML has been adopted as a superior method of exchanging data, Order Locator has added this capability. Why? Because it enables two-way machine-to-machine communication that isn't feasible with our earlier one-way method of submitting data reports. This gives Order Locator the capacity to satisfy the needs of both suppliers and distributors, regardless of their level of technical ability.

Those suppliers who want to continue submitting their data as they have in the past can continue to do so. And the distributors and sales reps who find the World Wide Web a familiar and convenient search resource can continue using their web browsers.

Now, suppliers equipped to submit XML files may do so too. Order Locator will now process XML files just as readily as we have been processing ASCII text files for the past 5 years. And, distributors equipped to receive XML data can program their systems to automatically query Order Locator throughout the day to receive up-to-date information about their own orders. That data can be "channeled" directly into order management systems for use by customer service, sales reps and company executives -- even customers, if the distributor chooses to make that information available.

As we look ahead to the near future, we foresee many suppliers and distributors becoming equipped to subscribe to RSS "feeds", and Order Locator is ready to communicate using RSS too. When suppliers make their status information available via RSS, we will subscribe to their feed to obviate the need for the transmission of any data files. Similarly, distributors of any size can subscribe to Order Locator with an RSS "reader" to automatically obtain the status information about their own orders without having to visit our web site.

Does this mean that Order Locator is "compatible" with e-PSA? In a manner of speaking, yes, but according to the strictly technical interpretation of the e-PSA standard for order status, the answer is no. There are essentially three reasons why:

- First, the ePSA standard insists that each status report travel from one machine to another as a separate document. While this formula for sending individual reports makes sense for many disparate individual items like your personal e-mail, it doesn't make sense for a volume of information that can be sent as a single report. It's the same reason the Postal Service uses bags and mail trays to gather together large quantities of individual items for transport to a single location. The risks of error (a report not being successfully transmitted) are reduced from many thousands to just one.



The burden on the machinery for processing, logging, and managing the data is greatly reduced with bulk reports instead of individual documents, which translates to more robust performance for all users.

- A second and very important benefit of “bulk” vs. “individual” status reports is the date & time assigned to any order status event. According to the ePSA standard, the date & time of the XML document is the same as the status event being reported. This works satisfactorily if XML documents are sent only when the status of an order actually changes. However, the ePSA standard also declares that reports must be sent no less frequently than once each day. Therefore, if an order’s status hasn’t changed, there is a risk that an updated report could be sent simply to satisfy the requirement for daily reporting. Here is an example of how the ePSA standard can distort information and why Order Locator manages date & time information differently:

Suppose distributor ABC Promotions has only one order in production at supplier XYZ Manufacturing. On September 1, the status event might be “Proof Sent”. If there is no activity on the order the following day and XYZ is obligated to send another ePSA report to ABC, the report will indicate that a proof was sent on September 2 because that is the date of the XML report. If it takes several days for ABC’s client to approve the proof, there could be a series of daily status reports from XYZ indicating that a proof was sent on each successive day. Did the supplier send one proof, or several? What day was the proof really sent? Using the ePSA standard, there is no way to know these facts with certainty.

Order Locator handles date/time “stamps” differently. The date and time of the status event is preserved, regardless how often the same order is included in a bulk report. If the proof was sent on September 1, that information is repeated as often as necessary until a new status event with a new date/time stamp takes its place.

- The third difference is one of “protocol.” The ePSA standard requires that information be “pushed” from the supplier to the distributor. Although Order Locator is actually in the middle between both parties, the delivery of status information to distributors puts us in the same role as the supplier. Unlike the delivery of a purchase order or an invoice, order status is the kind of information that should be available, on demand, to respond to inquiries. That’s referred to as “pulling” the data. As we see it, the party requesting the information should be able to decide when to make their inquiry to insure that the most up-to-date information is retrieved at the time of the request. Here’s an example: you wouldn’t want weather.com to send you a weather report for every US city at the same time every day. Instead, you typically query their system for whatever city interests you, at the moment you have an interest. Similarly, it’s actually very easy for any company to gather specific data by programming their computer to make an XML query whenever and how often it’s desired. It also liberates the data source (Order Locator) from having to maintain a list of schedules and electronic destination addresses, both of which are subject to change.

In short, Order Locator is enabled to receive XML data from suppliers and also provide XML data to distributors. Instead of the official ePSA standard, Order Locator will operate by its own standard. And, it’s not proprietary - we’re making our order status standard available to anyone in the industry who chooses to adopt and implement it for their own purposes.