BISACs, Amazon Categories and the Search for Actionability

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Overview

With every discussion we have with publishers we hear one consistent message.

"We don't need more data; we need actionable insights that help our bottom line".

While this has always been a true objective of smart companies in all industries, the last decade has been awash in the glare of increasing amounts of data available through a myriad of sources. Sales data, metadata, social data…the list is long. Many publishers were happy just to get clean, valid data and throw it into reports that they could use to see large problems or shifting trends. Yet many of these same publishers struggled to quantify and justify the benefits of these efforts. 2020 has forced many publishers to look more closely at what they pay for and how it is used to move the bottom line upward.

This article looks at a specific example of this shift – the intersection of BISAC codes and Amazon Category Rankings.

A Brief History of BISAC Codes.

It's almost certain that if you are reading this, you know what a BISAC code is so we won't spend much time here. Publishers push data to retailers through a file format named ONIX (for Online Information Exchange). This file contains data elements about each title being sold by these retailers on behalf of publishers including the visible ones such as Title, Author, List Price and Publication Date, and many others that aren't visible to consumers but are vital to how books are sold. One group of these data elements are called BISAC codes, which sit within a taxonomy defined by the BISG and are used to categorize books.

Trade partners such as libraries and bookstores use these codes to properly place books on shelves and retailers use them to link them more readily to shoppers who might be interested. Publishers are encouraged to submit three BISAC codes for every title, and a number of best practices have been developed to make the process more productive. An example of a BISAC code is:

ART003000 Art / Techniques / Calligraphy

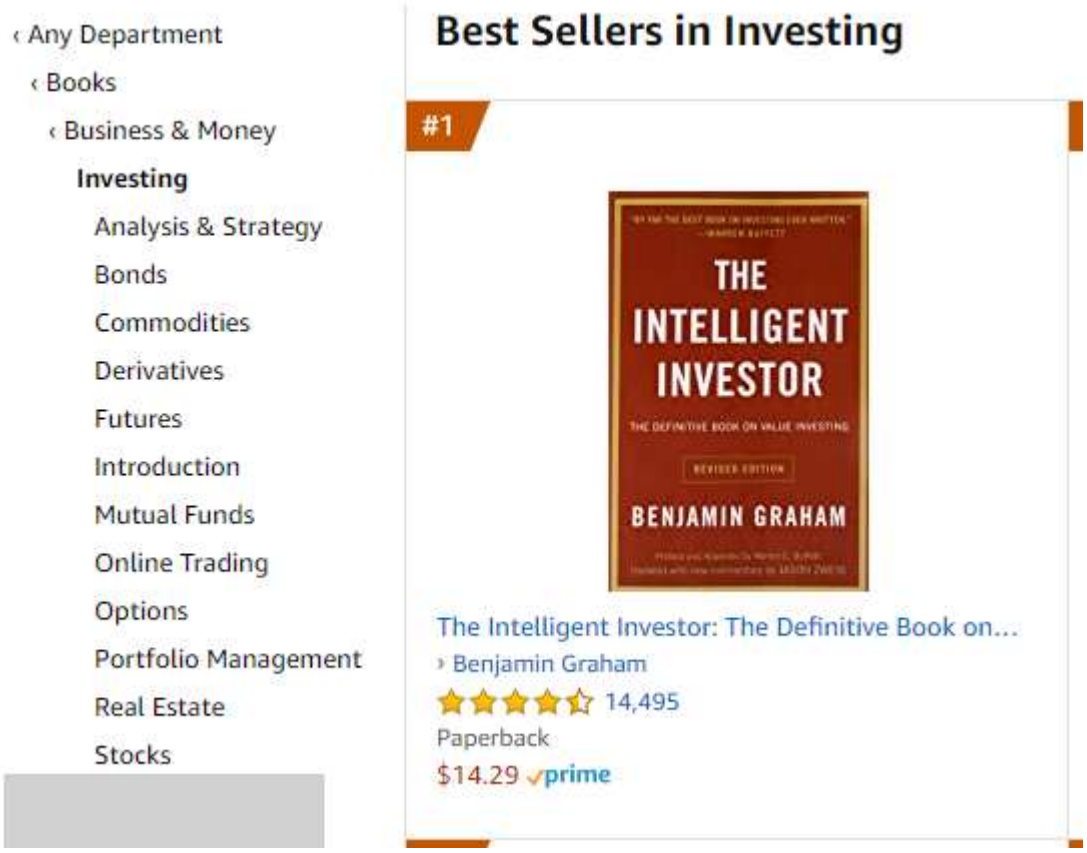
This shows a code that is on the third level of the tree. The 9-character code tells the data partner everything they need to know about this code.

It is easy for publishers to figure out which of their titles are not following best practices, but that is 'data'. How do we create 'insight' to help publishers discover their own unrecognized best practices, efficiently improve their data, and measure the impact of every change they make?

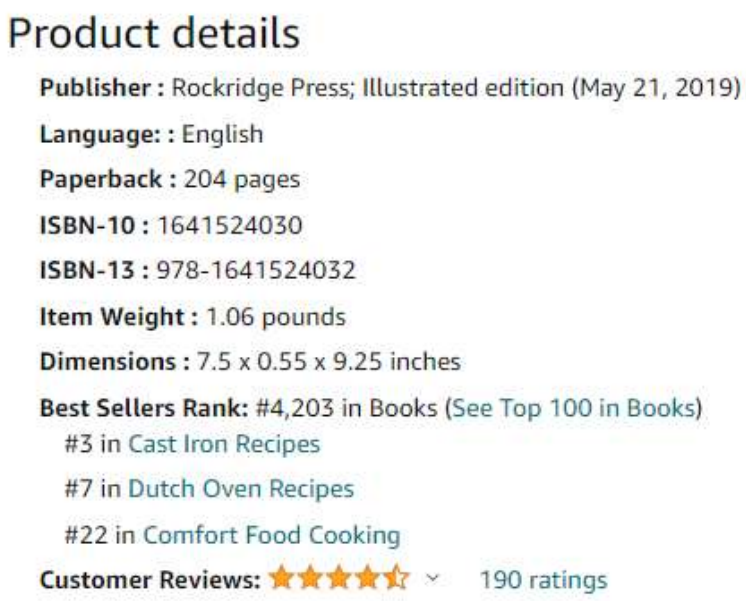
The Amazon Category Tree

Amazon has its own taxonomy for all products it sells. Books are a branch of their overall tree. Kindle books are a separate branch under the Kindle main branch, but Books and Kindle books share a great number of common nodes.

The tree can be seen in any Bestseller List such as this:



You have likely seen that Amazon often (but not always) provides three sub-category sales ranks in their Product Detail section, which looks like this:



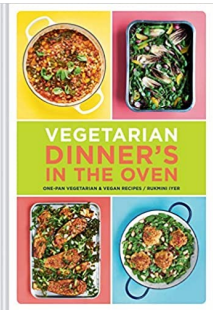
These subcategories are an important way that readers can discover books that they aren't familiar with. This discoverability is critical to sales of both new authors and backlist titles. A user might click on the Bestsellers in 'Cast Iron Recipes' and notice this book up near the top of this category.

It is important to note that Amazon does not map the BISAC codes directly to their category tree, but also use other factors to decide how they categorize your titles. Adding or changing BISAC codes may or may not have any effect on the categories shown on a page, but what you can do is create a strategy to test and observe how you can manipulate the categories and understand and quantify the benefits.

Putting Them Together

The first step of this process is to line everything up title by title. Look at this sample row from one of our reports. Note that we show not only the Amazon category but also the depth of the category and sales rank of the book within that category (more on this later).

Title	BISAC 1	BISAC 2	BISAC 3	Amz Category 1	Amz Category2	Amz Category 3
Vegetarian Dinner's in the Oven	Cooking /Methods / Quick & Easy	Cooking / Specific Ingredients / Vegetables	Cooking / Vegetarian & Vegan	Vegetable Cooking	Vegan Cooking	Quick & Easy Cooking
	CKB070000	**CKB085000**	**CKB086000**	**Depth: 4 Rank:187**	**Depth 5 Rank: 507**	**Depth: 4 Rank: 705**



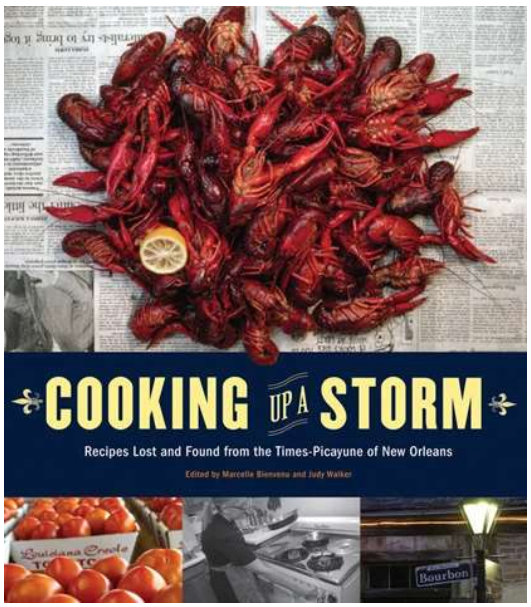
This is a great example of Amazon following the publisher's mapping perfectly. Each BISAC has a matching category on the Amazon side. This is actually extremely rare.

While the ranks within the categories are outside the top-100, this will also calculate into Amazon search algorithms and help lead interested buyers to the book page.

When Things Get Stormy

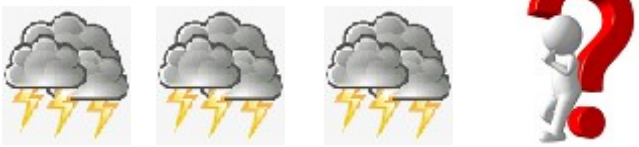
On to an extreme example where things don't go quite so well:

Title	BISAC 1	BISAC 2	BISAC 3	Amz Category 1	Amz Category2	Amz Category 3
Cooking Up A Storm: Recipes Lost and found from the Times-Picayune of New Orleans	Cooking / Regional & Ethnic / American / Southern States	Cooking / Regional & Ethnic / Cajun & Creole	Cooking / Regional & Ethnic / General	Cajun & Creole Cooking, Food & Wine	Atmospheric Sciences	Southern U.S. Cooking, Food & Wine
	CKB002060	**CKB013000**	**CKB031000**	**Depth: 5 Rank:10**	**Depth 4 Rank: 16**	**Depth: 5 Rank: 52**



The publisher put three very reasonable BISAC codes in. Amazon followed two of them. Cajun & Creole, and Southern U.S. Cooking look good. But the third one went a little awry.

"Cooking / Regional & Ethnic / General" didn't get used by Amazon. Instead, they went way off script, and mapped the book to the category of 'Atmospheric Sciences', presumably because the world 'Storm' was in the title.



Our theory on where this may have gone wrong is that they publisher already had two more specific BISAC codes in the 'Cooking / Regional & Ethnic' parent category so that the 'General' code wasn't likely to be as useful to shoppers, prompting Amazon to pick another. One could argue that their algorithms went a bit rogue on this particular

example. More importantly though, this behavior can be tested and largely mapped out with enough data.

Finding Opportunities

Looking at an example now of a missing BISAC:

BISAC 1	BISAC 2	BISAC 3	Amz Category 1	Amz Category2	Amz Category 3
Cooking / Methods / Barbecue & Grilling	Cooking / Methods / Outdoor		Barbecuing & Grilling	Party Cooking	
CKB005000	**CKB060000**		**Depth: 4 Rank: 83**	**Depth 4 Rank: 90**	

Here is a book that was only assigned two BISAC codes and in turn, only received two category rankings on the Amazon page. Several weeks later, this is still true (the category sales ranks have changed but the two categories remain).

The missing third category represents a lost sales opportunity. These can add up over an entire catalog, and **in a world where more buying is moving online, these additional categories are one of the best vehicles available for having a backlist title discovered and purchased; and they are free.**

Earlier we mentioned the ranking within the category and the depth of the category in the tree. These numbers are important because it is presumed to be better for sales to have a higher rank (lower number) in a deeper category than vice versa. Being top-10 in a level 5 category puts you above the fold when customers look at the Bestseller list. Being outside the top-100 has far less, if any, value.

We can assign a value to each category ranking based on the depth and sales rank and come up with a normalized value for each product. This allows you to quantify the categorized rankings of an entire group of products and create a framework for testing.

Idea: It may be useful to monitor category rankings for bigger-selling titles and attempt to move them down the tree to maintain top rankings in these categories.

Tracking Amazon's Behavior

In order to give the reader a sense of how well Amazon tracks BISAC codes in determining their own category rankings, we ran some numbers against several large catalogs, measuring in the thousands of titles. This one is fairly representative of the group.

Publisher 'X'

	Categories				
BISACs	0	1	2	3	% of Total
0	18.3%	19.2%	27.3%	35.2%	45%
1	23.9%	14.5%	28.3%	33.2%	7%
2	17.4%	2.7%	18.4%	61.2%	8%
3	14.6%	0.8%	5.5%	79.0%	40%

What this shows is the percentage of titles with 0 BISACs that were placed in 0, 1, 2 or 3 Amazon subcategories, and so on for titles with 1 through 3 BISACs. For this group of titles, 79% of titles with 3 BISACs were placed in 3 Amazon categories. When the number dropped to 2 that declined to 61.2% and at 1 or 0 BISACs, only about a third of them had the full contingent.

There are some mitigating factors that differ from publisher to publisher. In some cases, non-book products like puzzles, calendars, cards, and games, or odd products like diaries can be treated very differently by both the publishers and by Amazon.

It is clear from our data that Amazon's category rankings correlate to the BISACs chosen in the ONIX file.

Best Practices Hiding in Plain Sight

But here is an interesting learning moment leading to clear actionability. Publishers are often not consistent with regard to managing metadata and BISAC codes. We looked at a different group of over 1,000 *non-book* products of the same type at one publisher and measured the average number of Amazon categories they were ranked in.

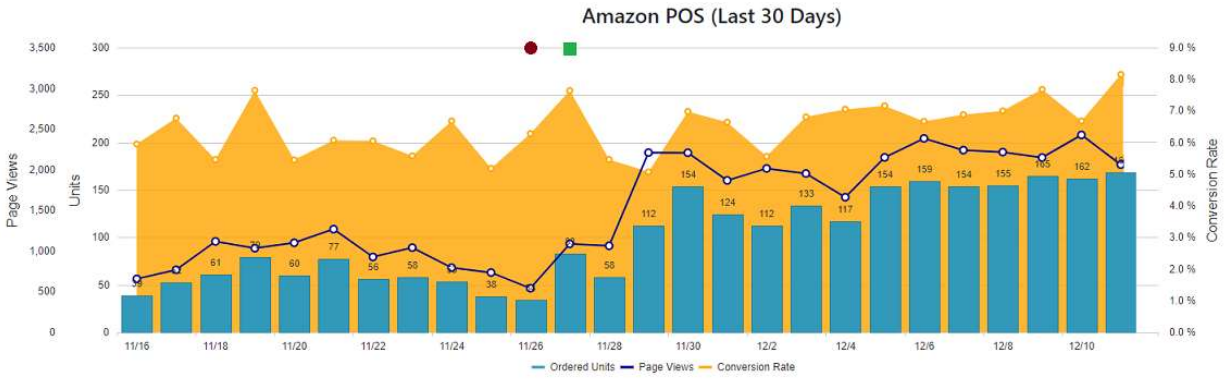
- Products with 0 or 1 assigned BISACs had an average of 1.62 Amazon categories
- Products with 2 or 3 assigned BISACs had an average of 2.31 Amazon categories

Average Amazon categories per product becomes a useful way to baseline your current catalog and measure improvement. Interestingly, in this case, there was little difference in this metric between 2 and 3 BISACs for this group.

The learning moment here could be that the best practice is already being used internally and it may be that only recognition of this is keeping the publisher from maximizing discoverability and sales. 70% of these products could be brought up to 2 or 3 BISACs and even a small increase in sales could result in material improvement.

Putting Numbers on It

We have seen how to align BISACs with Amazon Categories. We have also seen examples of how to identify some key opportunities to improve. The last part is measuring the impact with real numbers. We do this both individually and in aggregate **by lining up two milestone dates with the POS - the date you push the change out in ONIX and the date that Amazon changes their on-page categories rankings** (if they even do).



ONIX Change Date

Amazon Change Date

By layering both of these milestones we learn two important pieces of information.

1) What changes in ONIX (or other metadata) are most likely to result in a change in Amazon category listings?

2) What impact do the changes made to Amazon category listings have on sales?

As with our previous article on Page Views and Conversion, we look to learn both how Amazon behaves and how their consumers behave. Both pieces together enable a company to optimize their behavior to have the greatest positive impact on sales.

We want to track not just the POS, but also the Page Views and Page Conversion. The impact of being on a new Amazon Category in the top-100, is that your product will appear on the Bestseller list page as well. **It will be useful to see if this is generating clicks to your page that aren't converting. If that's the case, you might try moving the product into another category.**

Conclusion

We are demonstrating that there are new ways to measure the impact of metadata management, starting with assigning the 'best' BISAC codes.

Quantifying metrics like average Amazon categories per product, followed by an exercise to improve that metric, is great feedback. Further tying that into average % increase in sales per adjusted title is even better.

This results in the ability to see what is already working in your organization and then measure how much improvement you are providing by expanding those practices to a larger set of products. This is one example of how we can turn data into actionable insight.

We would like to hear what you think of this article and would be happy to engage in further discussion. Please send questions, comments, or feedback to dan@iobyte.com

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