Case study

WHSmith introduces mobility for greater in-store efficiency

HP ElitePads provide performance, reliability and robustness at the right price

Industry
Retail

Objective
Introduce mobility to free staff from fixed, back-office computing

Approach
Acquired machines from all leading vendors then benchmarked them against each other

IT matters
- Rugged design provides reliability in a challenging retail environment
- Continuity of device format facilitates model changes
- Modern tablet design gives the stores a more up-to-date atmosphere

Business matters
- Store managers are no longer tied to the back office so work more productively
- Customer service is improved because staff have information at their fingertips
- Print has been reduced by 45 per cent, lowering paper usage and increasing environmental benefits

WHSmith

"The HP ElitePad is very reliable and robust and we have been pleasantly surprised at how well they have operated."

– Steve Wood, Head of Store Operations Development, WHSmith

Mobility supports better customer service

WHSmith, a leading UK retail group, wanted to free store managers from the back office to make them more productive and give them greater contact with customers. Mobile technology was the answer and it was provided by HP ElitePad tablets and HP Networking WiFi.

45%
Reduction in print volumes

Challenge

Vital in-store efficiency
Employing 14,000 staff, WHSmith is one of the UK's leading retailers. Research has shown that 91 per cent of the population live within a 20 minute drive of a WHSmith store and every year, 73 per cent of the UK's population visits one of its outlets.

WHSmith is made up of two core businesses – travel and High Street. The travel business operates over 700 units, mainly in airports, railway stations, motorway services and hospitals. The High Street business operates more than 600 stores with a presence in nearly every significant UK town. It sells a wide range of products including stationery, greetings cards, reading materials and confectionery.

Each year, WHSmith serves around 320 million customers on the High Street. This sheer volume of business conducted by WHSmith demands maximum efficiency and that is the foundation for a clearly defined corporate strategy to introduce mobile computing into stores. The plan is to get managers out of the back office and onto the sales floor to increase their productivity and enhance the customer experience.

"In-store PCs are our main communication and reporting hub," says Steve Wood, Head of Store Operations Development at WHSmith. "We do have other stock management systems but every communication that requires a store to do anything – all the trading-related activity, operational and health and safety work gets sent through the PCs. They also receive the information needed to do the job such as planograms, space information, the ability to print shelf pricing in-store and all the reporting information, both historic and current. It's all pushed through those systems."

Store managers used to have traditional, wired desktop PCs so the largest amount of their work had to be done in the back office or in the main staff room areas.

"The sheer amount of information we need to make our stores run and empower our managers to do their jobs is enormous and that's only the tip of the iceberg. Stores, on average, were generating 5,500 sides of print a month. That meant they were spending a lot of time in back offices, accessing this information, printing it and disseminating it out," says Wood.

"Our aims were twofold. The first was to improve efficiency by simply reducing the amount of dead time, walking to and from the office to get information and the manual cascade from that, and the second was to move the time they were spending in the back office onto the sales floor, so making them more available for customer service."

Solution

The power of mobility
The group's store operations team decided that tablet computers would be the most efficient way to convert the mobility strategy into reality. Portability was important, but because much of the information is quite detailed, a smaller form factor screen would not be viable.

Computers were brought in from all main vendors including HP, which was a pre-existing supplier to WHSmith and the team benchmarked them against each other. The trials were conducted without full connectivity but covered format size, performance and in particular, ruggedness.

"We shied away from the pure consumer type devices because they would not have withstood the rigours that our store environment would throw at them," says Wood. "At the other end of the extreme, there were machines that were specially designed for ruggedness but you pay an appropriate cost. What we were trying to find was a sweet spot in the middle and the HP ElitePad hit the sweet spot for us on performance, reliability, robustness and price.

"Performance and reliability were absolutely critical for us and we also wanted a Windows® operating system because although Android or iOS could have been an option, they would have involved a lot of development that was not something we particularly wanted to do at this stage."

The store group has now rolled out over 1,200 HP ElitePad 900s with ruggedised jackets to its 600+ High Street stores across England, Scotland and Wales, and blanket HP WiFi networks have been installed in the stores. Smaller stores may have just one device while larger stores can have up to six, depending on its work levels. HP delivered the devices to WHSmith's partner Omnico Digipos who installed a desktop package built by British Telecom (BT) which is the group's major implementation partner. Microsoft® provided some operating system consultancy and Omnico Digipos then delivered the HP ElitePad 900s into store, having first installed the WiFi. The ElitePads are covered by a standard three-year warranty.

Benefits

Improved customer service
"The HP ElitePads support efficiency improvements in the way stores run and there are other slightly less tangible benefits on top of those," says Wood. "In stores, there is a feeling of being more up-to-date and staff like using devices that are similar to the ones they would use in their personal lives.

"The benefit for customers is that the salesforce are more available to them, particularly including the managers and this is often critical. They have the information at their fingertips so if customers want to understand about a product and the staff don't know the answer they can go to the website and provide recommendations, particularly for books. If we don't happen to have a book in stock, we can order it through the tablet. Customer perception is improved because they know staff can access information on the sales floor without having to disappear to the back office, which neither customers nor staff like."

Customer solution at a glance

Hardware
• HP ElitePad 900

"Managers can also work more efficiently because a lot of their day is taken up with reviewing performance and taking actions. With the tablets, all the information is at their fingertips. Also there's a large amount of tactical activity and actions, some are just the bread and butter of making the store run and some are promotional changes where they need to engage with staff and the tablet provides all information right at the point of action.

"Because the HP ElitePads are available to all staff, not just managers, more people can now access content that was not previously available to them so they can be trained on how to understand and use company information."

"Our managers want to be on the sales floor to serve our customers so disconnecting them from the information they need was quite inefficient. Using HP ElitePads now puts that information at their fingertips and makes them much more productive."

– Steve Wood, Head of Store Operations Development, WHSmith

WHSmith has noticed a 45 per cent reduction in the amount of in-store print with a corresponding reduction in paper usage. This is good for the environment and also good for staff who do not want to carry large amounts of paper around.

"Another thing that is a plus point is continuity of the device format size, the connection points etc., because this is not always the case with some other vendors," concludes Wood. "When we move from the ElitePad 900 to the ElitePad 1000, apart from it being a different Operating System, 32 bit to 64 bit, it's exactly the same size and fits all the same accessories. The power ports are all in the same place which is critical."

Looking to the future, WHSmith now plans to extend mobility into its travel stores and also to investigate introducing smaller devices to the sale floors for certain kinds of content.

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