



# BLACKWELL'S

Customer Story

**Blackwell's  
boosts book  
sales with  
itim's mobile  
technology**



**Blackwell's, the UK's largest academic and specialist book retailer, has introduced a raft of new technologies - including tablet computers and mobile POS devices - to help improve customer service and reduce queuing times in stores and to improve customer experience and operations in over four hundred off-site book-selling events a year.**

Mobile point-of-sale technology through retail software provider, itim, has contributed to increased sales of physical books and cut administrative tasks by almost forty hours a week in the busiest weeks for many outlets. The retailer has supported £500,000 sales in the last year on the new mobile devices at off-site events.

The 140-year-old academic books specialist operates around 40 permanent stores across Britain and another 40 pop-up stores that open temporarily – some on university campuses for a few weeks at the start of each term and others at book festivals and conferences across the UK. Some pop-up shops might open for a few days or a week – for instance, during university Freshers' Week. Others typically operate for around six weeks, or sometimes up to three months, depending on demand.

## Blackwell's Customer Profile

**140 yrs**  
of trading.

**40**  
permanent UK stores plus,  
**40**  
pop-up shops.

**8 million**  
titles available.

**£60 million**  
approximate annual revenue.

## Challenge

Selling more efficiently at 400+ offline events a year as well as providing a seamless checkout experience at permanent stores.

## Solution

itim's Chameleon solution was chosen for both fixed tills and mobile tablets.

## Results

Stores benefit from a very stable, seamless checkout system and mobile tablets at off-line events helped increase sales by £500,000.

**"We wanted to use mobile technology to improve customer experience and extend our services across multiple channels."**

Kate Stilborn,  
Customer Service & Operations Director

"Mobile technology will also give our customers access to not just the stock in our bookshops, but also across eight million titles available online for free home delivery or collection."

Stilborn was promoted to the board in 2016 after almost twenty-four years at Blackwell's, specifically to focus on customer service.

## Retail theatre

The company dates back to 1879 when its first shop opened in Oxford. In 1915, it published JRR Tolkien's first poem. The business expanded rapidly during the 1990's and became the first UK bookseller to go online in 1995. Blackwell's Oxford branch even boasts a theatre that can seat 250 people.



**"Serving our customers better is how we differentiate ourselves. Empowering our staff has been the best way to do this, and the implementation of easy-to-use mobile technology allows us to focus more on delivering outstanding and engaging service to our customers."**

During the last few years, the privately-owned book chain has introduced more stores with digital displays and interactive touch-screens including a new shop at Oxford's new Westgate Centre. It also launched digital versions of textbooks for students to read on tablets. Blackwell's offers a bespoke academic e-reading platform which allows students to choose how they wish to study across laptops, tablets and smartphones. Students can bookmark, annotate and share notes using the platform.

The move to more personalised service via mobile devices comes at a time when traditional booksellers are under growing pressure from online retail goliaths and supermarkets, not to mention new forms of reading online on tablets and e-readers.

Nonetheless, Stilborn is quick to point out that Blackwell's hasn't seen a fall in demand for physical books. Indeed, sales have actually increased for the retailer.

### **Extending the store**

Thanks in part to new mobile technology and being able to sell more books at universities and at regional or seasonal events throughout the year - for instance, by running stalls at book festivals or specialist industry conferences; or by boosting footfall by staging book launch events and celebrity signings - the retailer has seen a return to profit on sales of around £60 million a year.

"During a six-week trial period, we were able to take an extra £100,000 by being able to use tablets off-site and by being at events where thousands of extra books can be sold," says Stilborn. "This has now escalated to around £500,000 when we started to use them more."

During the first three months of using itim's mobile technology off-site, Blackwell's recorded over a quarter of a million pounds in sales processed using the tablets. However, she says that time savings, simplicity and offering much better customer service is really how mobile retailing has benefited the independent bookseller.



## Moving on from manual processes

Previously, going to a literary book fair would entail printing off endless lists of books and laboriously referencing and ticking off each one sold, then spending hours back at the store manually inputting into the central stock system (BookSolve, which is also used by other independents and Foyles). Clearly, this often led to a number of discrepancies and inaccuracies, so stock losses were an issue.

"When you go back to store you can spend hours re-keying and trying to reconcile your stock and your takings," says Stilborn. "So we needed a system that was not just about taking money, but one that would integrate across other IT platforms, updating exactly what we've just sold and providing pertinent information to our staff and customers."

Blackwell's uses itim's Chameleon point-of-sale solution on 122 fixed tills across 37 stores, as well as on tablets for queue-busting and at off-site events. The software is able to manage promotions and quickly process book tokens and rewards via its loyalty scheme (GiveX), whether in-store or off-site. Blackwell's even offers a buy-back facility for its customers, exchanging used books (often at the beginning or end of each university year) and recording them in the system for selling second-hand in stores and online.

## Mobile operations

Now, transactions can be swiftly processed using mobile devices – whether directly on the shopfloor, to reduce queues at the checkout during busy periods; or off-site at university campuses, popup stores and even in marquees at events where there might not be any mains electricity or wifi. Blackwell's uses mobile peripherals, including battery-powered scanners to swipe barcodes on the back of books, as well as Bluetooth receipt printers.

"It can be quite a tough operation when you're selling off-site. For every thousand pounds that we've taken using our mobile tills, it's probably saved us an hour or two. It's extremely worthwhile in terms of efficiency. It's also something consumers have come to expect and it certainly makes us look a lot more professional," Stilborn explains.

She estimates the time savings on a week of peak trading in a flagship can be around forty hours a week – the equivalent of a full-time bookseller – which frees up a lot of time for its 700 employees to do other more meaningful tasks, like serving customers. Other benefits cited include improved data accuracy for more consistent stock levels across the business and reduced shrinkage (stock losses). The new mobile technology has also been well received by staff and customers alike.

**"Our customers really like the mobile tablets. We can sell books anywhere and we can take books to wherever the customer is, with ease."**

Kate Stilborn,  
Customer Service & Operations Director

