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# A new bookshop business at Edge Hill university



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## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In September 2007, Edge Hill University and Blackwell Bookshop entered into an innovative and very interesting business partnership.

The university, having just been awarded taught degree-awarding powers and university status, introduced a new and unique (at the time) bursary scheme, which offers all full fee-paying students a £200 credit to be spent on learning support materials. (This scheme won the 2006 Times Higher award for outstanding financial student support package; see [www.edgehill.ac.uk/news/2006/11/edge-hill-scoops-national-award](http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/news/2006/11/edge-hill-scoops-national-award).)

Learning support materials can be anything from textbooks supporting course reading through to pen drives and other computer consumables. In addition the usual binding combs, plastic wallets and pens are catered for.

During the first year of the scheme, learning services ([www.edgehill.ac.uk/ls](http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/ls)) attempted to support the purchase of textbooks and stationery through existing staffing, taking orders through the service desk and purchasing through an existing library supplier. This put a significant amount of pressure on an already busy service.

In January 2007 it became clear that existing staffing and resources could not support this service effectively. Some students were waiting up to 12 weeks for the delivery of their orders; staff complained that they were unable to deal with real 'library' queries due to stationery sales. Complex queries were arising where orders had been placed and then cancelled and where refunds were required or necessary, and the financial accounting was taking more time than dealing with the customers.

## THE SOLUTION

We started to look around for a solution that would ease the pressure on the service and offer a professional retail experience. In thinking about this, and in discussion with colleagues, we decided that we needed both a virtual/online presence and a physical store. We also wanted to use a third-party supplier to ease the issues with finance.

At that point, the choice of booksellers offering a dual option was limited. A meeting with the head of library supply at Blackwell's led to a recommendation to speak to the retail and online arms of the company, since they seemed more able to offer a bespoke retail solution.

Blackwell already offered a 'connect' service where they offered a limited shop service at peak points in the academic year, for periods of approximately six weeks. This would take place at the beginning of a term or semester.

A rapid succession of meetings followed, with the formation of a unique business model taking place. Blackwell's online and retail divisions are very separate and at times it seemed to be a three-way conversation rather than a two-way supplier/customer relationship, but everyone was keen to make a success of the project.

The business model of bringing together both online and physical shops to support each other is a first. If the required stock isn't in the shop, an online order can be placed and delivered to an address of choice.

## IMPLEMENTATION

From initial meeting to go-live was a period of six intense weeks, which involved designing the shop area (luckily we were refurbishing the foyer area at the time) and designing a bespoke online co-branded shop area for Edge Hill students and staff.

As part of the negotiations, a discount to all students and staff was agreed, as well as free delivery over a spend limit and delivery to any address, allowing customers to choose to send their orders to university, placement, work or home. In addition, a marketing strategy was developed to ensure that customers were made aware of Blackwell's and the partnership with the university.

Launched in September 2007, the shops were a roaring success. An evaluation in November led

to very positive comments from students, who enjoyed the flexibility of ordering from home and having items delivered or browsing in the campus shop. Interestingly, there was a 50/50 split in online and shop sales, with customers having a strong preference as to which they wanted to use at different points in their studies:

*'I think it's better now there are books available to browse before you buy them. Allows you to see if they are going to be relevant. It's always open during uni hours and I can use my student card!'*

*'I have always had the relevant books on time, therefore I could continue with my studies promptly.'*



*Blackwell shop*



*Blackwell online*

## CURRENT SITUATION

Blackwell's is continuing to work in partnership with Edge Hill University. The physical shop matches the opening hours of the university library, over 70 hours a week in term-time, and supports the full campus year. The co-branded online shop is available 24x7 and has links to online reading lists, allowing students access to the library catalogue and giving them the opportunity to review their borrowing against their purchasing needs.

Joint marketing initiatives – particularly around the collection of reading lists – have been successful, contributing to 99% of reading lists being available online (a significant improvement on previous years).

Marketing included Blackwell's getting involved with the student union, sponsoring treasure hunts and other activities in freshers' week and also donating prizes to offer to academic departments who submitted their reading lists by a certain date. Selling Blackwell and university merchandise has also been successful. Learning services' limited-edition designs of jute bags have sold well, with a donation from each sale supporting a charity. To date over £2,000 has been raised, with the 2010 design currently in progress. The bookshop has been flexible in buying in what students have asked for, and the range now ranges from notebooks to printers, pencils to external hard drives. Moving from the print to the digital marketplace is something affecting all of us, whether working with eBooks or contemplating how we buy our next music single/album (CD vs iTunes). Developments for 2010 include how we can make eBooks for student use more widely available, how we can further integrate reading-list data so that stock matches need and a further extension of the physical shop.