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JD WILLIAMS AND SPIRIT GO SHOPPING FOR NEW MOBILE COMPUTERS

Companies with large warehouses need to be able to identify and move stock with speed, reliability and accuracy. In recent years, warehouse operations have been transformed by the advent of mobile computing. J D Williams, the UK's leading direct home shopping company, has been using mobile computers for many years. It recently decided to upgrade some of its devices. The company subsequently opted for three models of mobile computers for three different applications. The new devices were supplied by the independent specialist, Spirit Data Capture Limited.

J D Williams & Company Limited is the UK's most successful direct home shopping company, with over two million customers and 4,000 employees. Its catalogues boast a huge selection of clothing, appliances and other products. The company is part of N Brown Group plc. It was founded in 1875 and seven years later became the first firm to develop the foundations of a mail order delivery system for its customers.

The company's first warehouse was obtained in 1907. More recently, J D Williams has been using two converted mills (Lilac & Briar) at Shaw, near Oldham. The Lilac mill employs a system-driven 'direct put-away' process – i.e. the warehouse management system (WMS) selects the carton from the high bay warehouse via the replenishment suite and determines where it should be located within the warehouse.

The operator then places the carton in the relevant location and confirms put-away via the Radio frequency (RF) hand held terminal, by scanning the barcodes on the location and the carton. The Briar mill, which is predominately used for returns, employs a 'non-direct put-away' process. The operator selects a location for a single item and again uses an RF hand held terminal to scan both the product and location barcodes to confirm put-away.

J D Williams also purchased a large distribution centre at Hadfield 30 months ago. This site is predominately used to handle non-collatable items (larger items that can't be handled by couriers). The Hadfield site has been comprehensively extended over the last 30 months and now houses two pick/pack/despatch warehouses, two pallet high bay warehouses and a hanging garment warehouse. The company is also applying for planning permission for a second carton high bay warehouse at Shaw, near Oldham. This will be used to provide additional collatable storage capacity as the company continues to grow.

Meanwhile, the company decided to upgrade its mobile computing systems. Joe Fisher, Project Manager at J D Williams, explains: “Our existing devices had been in use for over ten years. We needed to replace them with models that would be very robust, as they would be used in a harsh warehouse environment. They also needed to be light, easy to use and handle and have a battery life that would last for a full shift.

“Another problem we had was that the age of the network and the equipment we were using were causing delays. The operators were sending information from their scanners to the mainframe and then having to wait for network points to pass the data to the mainframe to update the stock file. This ‘lock-out downtime’ was affecting the efficiency and speed of our operations. We therefore wanted devices that would reduce the lock-out downtime and increase our Items Per Man Hour (IPMH) rates.”

The company consulted Spirit Data Capture, an independent consultancy that specialises in mobile data capture systems. Spirit has worked with JD Williams for several years, providing advice and offering different solutions. It recommended three models (the Dolphin 9501, Dolphin 7600 and Motorola MC3090) to meet the differing needs of the home shopping company.

The Dolphin 9501 is crammed with the latest technology, including Adaptus™ Imaging Technology; an Intel® X-Scale™ processor; and a Microsoft®

Windows® Pocket PC platform. It also incorporates an industry-leading triple-radio design. As the 9501s had been successful at Shaw, they were chosen for use in the new distribution centre, mainly in the new hanging garment warehouse at Hadfield.

The second solution involved Dolphin 7600® mobile computers to supersede Dolphin 7200s. This also required the migration of the original software from DOS to Windows, using MCL software provided by Spirit. The 7600 is a compact, industrial-grade mobile computer that provides world class reading performance on high, medium and low density bar codes. It can read any linear or 2D bar codes and can also capture digital images.

JD Williams is using the 7600s for data collection in the warehouse, mainly for internal compliance scanning. These units also help to identify potential issues with the company's carriers. For instance, a number of parcels can be scanned as they are despatched to the carrier. Their progress can then be tracked to ensure that the carrier is hitting the speed of service deadlines.

Finally, Spirit recommended Motorola MC3090s for use in the warehouse replenishment process. The MC3090 is a rugged mobile computer that is ideal for scan-intensive environments requiring high quality and accurate data capture. It is light and ergonomic and uses a Microsoft® Windows® CE 5.0 operating system.

One other issue that Spirit helped to address was the lack of network connection points within the warehouse. As J D Williams continued to expand, it was using more and more hand held devices, and the network was unable to cope. Spirit therefore carried out two RF surveys of the warehouse to assess the number of network points required for a more efficient operation.

Joe Fisher continues: “Throughout the changeover to the new devices, Spirit have been particularly helpful. They have identified and supplied appropriate evaluation units for us to trial, supplied the maintenance support levels we need, and have responded rapidly to any queries we’ve had.”

He adds: “The new devices have all been working well, with no hidden issues, and there have been minimal maintenance requirements. The users are very happy with the kit: we have allocated individual devices to specific users.

Because the new mobile computers don’t lock up the system, our IPMH rates have improved significantly. The end result is that our processes have all been streamlined – they are now both faster and more efficient.”

ENDS (1020 words)

Notes for Editors: Spirit Data Capture is based in Preston Brook, Cheshire. The company is an independent mobile computing and data capture house, with an in-depth knowledge of the latest wireless and mobile computing technologies which boost productivity and profitability.

Spirit's capabilities include software application development, mobile computing technology (e.g. rugged mobile computers), wireless network implementations, maintenance and other services. Its extensive client base includes a diverse array of organisations in the utilities, field service, transport and logistics, healthcare, government and manufacturing sectors.

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