Triple measures

Beer, wine and spirits wholesaler Preston Beer Company has transformed its operations with the delivered wholesale IT solution from Sanderson. What's more, the investment has paid back three times over within the first nine months.

Robust pricing control, real-time stock visibility and unparalleled management data are just some of the benefits now flowing through Preston Beer Company following its recent implementation of Swords, the specialist delivered wholesale system from solution provider Sanderson.

Preston Beer is a £5 million, 10-employee business, located in Bamber Bridge near Preston. Trading as Preston Beer Company and La Vinea Wines, it supplies an extensive range of beers, spirits, soft drinks and wines to restaurants, hotels and pubs in the north of England. In a fiercely competitive market, Preston Beer wins and retains business with unrivalled service, as managing director and co-founder Tony Oxley explains: "We are independent and we offer exceptional service, keeping us close to existing customers and helping us to secure

new clients. Price is always important, but so too is the ability to respond swiftly, beating rivals with same-day delivery, seven days a week."

Prior to the installation of Swords, Preston Beer's service offer was only made possible by the efforts of its directors and employees. Behind the scenes, most processes were manual, time consuming and prone to error, requiring frequent checks and rework. The business used Sage Line 50 for day-to-day finances, but as well as offering no specific functionality for the wholesale sector, Preston Beer found the system unreliable and cumbersome to work with. A recent system failure proved the catalyst for change: "We had to reload a month's information," recalls Oxley, "which was incredibly time consuming. We also knew we were losing customers because of pricing errors. It was definitely time to take the

Case study at a glance

About Preston Beer
Leading independent drinks wholesaler in north west England

Challenges
- Increase efficiency in all operations to support growth
- Release valuable time from inefficient manual processes
- Eliminate pricing errors to improve customer service

Solutions
- Swords Wholesale Distribution System
- Financial Management
- Stock and Warehouse Management

Benefits
- System investment paid back three times over in under a year
- Accurate stock control achieving a saving of £5,000 per month
- 100% customer retention as a result of accurate records
- Margin improved by 2% since Swords implementation
- Improved efficiency with bank reconciliation functionality
- Daily delivery routes automatically scheduled and optimised

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plunge and get a new system that would enable us to run the business more efficiently."

The best system
He knew immediately where to turn. Some years earlier, a friend who owned a frozen food wholesale business had introduced Oxley to Sanderson. "He'd planted the seed and when I saw Swords, I could see it was the best system for our type of business. However, at that time, we were still a very young business and we decided to wait until we'd grown a bit." In hindsight, he says, delaying the decision was the wrong thing to do: "If I'd known then what I know now, I wouldn't have hesitated. We had no idea how much benefit this system would bring us – we wish we'd installed Swords years ago."

Once Preston Beer signed the contract for Swords, the Sanderson project team moved swiftly to understand the company's objectives and business model, prior to

implementation. "They really took the time to learn how we run the business, the challenges we face and the way the system could help us to meet those challenges," says Oxley. "The Sanderson team steered us through the process with military precision – I have nothing but praise for the way they worked with us. Their help was invaluable, especially to a small company like ours."

A go-live date was scheduled, just four months later but enough time for Preston Beer to ensure customer and financial data was cleaned and ready for transfer. Even then, says Oxley, the pressures of running a small business meant it was sometimes a struggle, but Sanderson stepped in to make sure things ran to schedule. "The support we received was way beyond what we expected – and, in truth, beyond what we were paying for," he admits.

The system went live as planned, and has brought fresh efficiency, order and accuracy to Preston Beer's

Swords has brought fresh efficiency, order and accuracy to Preston Beer's operations

operations. Stock control is one element that has been transformed. The system presents detailed stock information, in real time. Oxley says. "The data is accurate and immediate – everything is there at the touch of a button." Monthly stock takes are now a thing of the past: "I just do random checks on individual items and I've never found an error. The way Swords manages stock is fantastic. It saves us £5,000 month, which makes a huge difference to a business our size."

Pricing control

Preston Beer now also has much-needed pricing controls, simplifying complex pricing and eliminating the need for manual unit cost alterations. "Prices vary by customer, which meant previously, we had to load information separately, by item." Not only did this take time, but it also led to errors – in contrast, Oxley reports 100% accuracy and, more importantly, customer retention since the introduction of Swords.

The quotations module has enabled this to happen: "Now, using the quotations functionality, we can produce a quote for a new customer, and they agree it, we press a button and the system converts all the information straight to a customer account," explains Oxley.

Swords' financial capability is saving valuable management time for Preston Beer too, he adds. "Take daily banking: it was always fraught with problems, but now it's so simple and always correct. And the bank reconciliation functionality is brilliant: statements are downloaded from the bank into the system and it verifies transactions against data held. This used to take me hours, but now it's a breeze."

Significant time savings

Preston Beer has secured significant time savings, thanks to the system's ability to optimise and schedule delivery routes. "It's a task, which used to take at least two hours each morning. Now it takes just minutes," explains Oxley. Swords produces delivery routes for each driver and sheets are compiled and printed for each route: at the end of the day, the sheets are returned along with money collected. "Again it helps make daily banking more straightforward," he says.

Customer PLOFs (price list and order forms) are easy to display, enabling Preston Beer to see regular order patterns and historical data. "When a customer phones, we can see straight away what they usually order, so we can remind them if items are missed, making sure we don't lose any sales opportunities," Oxley states. And he has now recruited a new full-time telesales representative, who will be able to use this, as well as other functionality, to drive up revenue.

Just nine months in, Preston Beer is continually discovering new and better ways to work. "The system has so much rich functionality that we haven't even tapped into," admits Oxley. "We are learning all the time." Sales forecasting, for example,

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Managing Director

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will enable Preston Beer to set stock levels which meet the dual goals of minimising inventory and meeting its same-day service promise.

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Tony Oxley
Managing Director

"Currently we use the historical sales data for management reporting, but we do plan to extend that for forecasting and stock management very soon," he adds. Radio frequency hand-helds, too, are on the agenda to boost warehouse efficiency.

The company is also considering the new Mobile CRM solution, which enables field sales representatives to deliver a faster, more efficient service to customers. Quotations, stock information and customer account information will all be available to reps via smartphones and tablet PCs, enabling live orders and account queries to be run remotely. "I've never seen anything like this before," says Oxley. "It will give our sales team real-time data at their fingertips, at the customer sites. It's absolutely brilliant and will enable us to raise the bar on service even higher."

Operational efficiency

Such has been the transformation in operational efficiency that Preston Beer has already recouped its investment more than three times over. "We've been able to improve our margin by 2% since implementing Swords – that's a threefold payback resulting from better efficiencies within the business and better-informed decisions," says Oxley. "Crucially, however, it's not only about internal improvements: this is really enabling us to up our game in front of customers, giving us a sharper, more professional edge."

He concludes: "Swords has removed all the headaches and released valuable time to do more productive, constructive work, seeking out new business. It will undoubtedly help us to grow – and we know that this is a system that will grow with us. But beyond the software, Sanderson has over-performed on service: we were so impressed by their commitment to understand our business and it is paying dividends."

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