



## Smithware Technology Solutions Customer Case Study



### Incentive Publications

#### Overview

**Industry:** Publishing

#### Customer Profile

Tennessee-based and privately held Incentive Publications provides educational resources for middle school grades and teaching strategies for grades K-12.

#### Business Situation

Sales to end users through traditional printed catalog distribution was declining while sales through distribution (e.g. Barnes & Noble, Ingram Books, Amazon) continued to grow. A new approach to end user customers—teachers, school administrators, and parents—was needed.

#### Solution

Incentive Publications adopted Smithware's plan to revamp their web site, add an eCommerce engine, give users full preview into every page of every book online, and deliver books in either physical or eBook electronic form via the web.

#### Benefits

- Huge cost savings in reducing printed catalogs and associated mailing costs.
- Long-term cost savings by gradually transitioning from providing end users with printed books to delivering new virtual eBooks.
- Little infrastructure required to host and deliver eBook content.
- Standard off-the-shelf tools were used to produce, maintain, and generate the deliverable eBooks.
- Customers gained a perpetual online library of eBooks to ensure eBook availability 24/7.

## Educational Publishing Company Improves End User Sales Channel with Smithware's eBook Architecture and Delivery Plan

“Smithware's eBook architecture planning and implementation has allowed us to revitalize a declining part of our market by delivering virtual editions of our vast inventory of educational resources to our customers. This will allow us to greatly reduce costs, increase sales, and preserve our sales channel model.”

J. Blake Parker, President and CEO, Incentive Publications, Inc.

Headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee for 38 years, Incentive Publications is a privately held publishing company that produces middle school educational resources and teaching strategies for grades K-12. The company offers more than 350 titles that are available through retailers and distributors nationally and internationally. The company's publications are used by educators, both teachers and administrators, and parents (including homeschoolers) to help their students enjoy the learning process and do it more effectively. In the past few years, Incentive's traditional end-user product catalog, periodically distributed to hundreds of thousands of customers every year, was a steadily declining part of their sales channel while the distribution channel continued to grow. They began to work with Smithware to investigate ways to use technology to reinvigorate their end user sales while not creating channel conflict in the process. Smithware proposed revamping their web site with an eCommerce engine to eventually replace their traditional end user catalog. In addition to giving customers the opportunity to search through titles and book descriptions online, the site would have two very unique features for a publishing company. First the site would give users the ability to preview every page of every book online. And secondly, the site would give users the ability not only to buy books to be physically shipped, but also to purchase books in eBook format and download it immediately. This was a unique way to use cutting edge technology to revamp a slowly declining segment of the business.

**Over their 38 years of being in business, the company has built a substantial two-tiered sales and distribution channel consisting of both consumers and distributors. Distribution through partners such as Ingram Book, Barnes and Noble, Amazon, and many other resellers and distributors has been a significant growth segment of the Incentive Publications sales channel.**

**Over the past few years, however, while the reseller and distribution channel continued to grow for Incentive, the company saw end user response to the catalog to be shrinking.**

## **Business Situation**

Incentive Publications was founded in 1968 by Imogene Forte, an accomplished educator, administrator, and entrepreneur who successfully guided the company into becoming a leader in producing educational resources for middle school grades and teaching strategy books for grades K-12. The company offers more than 350 titles that are available through over two thousand retailers and distributors nationally and internationally

Privately owned and located in Nashville, Tennessee, Incentive Publications publishes books written by a wide array of top educator-authors dedicated to research and practical classroom know-how. These publications are used by educators – both teachers and administrators –and parents, including homeschoolers, to help their students enjoy the learning process and do it more effectively. Incentive’s books are correlated to or written based on learning standards and testing benchmarks.

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The other primary sales method had been through a traditional end user product catalog that was distributed periodically via the postal system to a very large customer and prospect base both in the United States and around the world. In fact it was this internally built and maintained mailing list that provided the early growth that enabled the company to be a widely known leader middle school educational resources.

Over the past few years, however, while the reseller and distribution channel continued to grow for Incentive, the company saw end user response to the catalog to be shrinking.

By early 2005, Incentive knew that they needed to thoroughly review how they were working with their end user channel to create new and effective ways of communicating and doing business with their readers and their potential customers.

## **Solution**

In mid 2005, Incentive Publications engaged Smithware to examine ways that new and emerging technologies might be used to address these issues. Smithware developed a comprehensive long and short term technology plan entitled “Incentive Publications: Using Technology to Enhance the Company.” This plan presented a broad analysis of ways in which Incentive might leverage technology including eCommerce, eBooks, mobile devices, various content delivery mechanisms, and online activities and communities to make Incentive’s collection of educational

**Potential readers needed to be able to get to know the books by being able to preview the books' content online.**

**Traditional book distribution by shipping physical books had to be partnered with the ability to distribute electronic versions of the books in a secure and controllable way.**

resources more attractive and available to readers in interactive ways.

Early on in the development of the plan, in consultation with executives within the company and outside experts, it was determined that Incentive should focus initially on some short term and quickly attainable improvements that the company could use to quickly improve the slowing of the end user sales channel.

The plan focused on five key areas where technology could best be utilized:

1. The web site at [www.IncentivePublications.com](http://www.IncentivePublications.com) was out of date and lacked the proper messaging to communicate the mission of the company or the potential of the products. The site needed a major overhaul.
2. Incentive Publications needed to leverage Search Engine Optimization for the site to bring untapped potential customers to the new site.
3. eCommerce had to be a cornerstone of the new site. While the distribution and retail sales channel enjoyed their own success with using the Internet to sell their products, Incentive was falling behind. All books had to be available for immediate purchase on the web.
4. Potential readers needed to be able to get to know the books by being able to preview the books' content online.
5. Traditional book distribution by shipping physical books had to be partnered with the ability to distribute electronic versions of the books in a secure and controllable way.

In early 2006, Incentive began the process of implementing the key elements of the initial plan. Scott Smith from Smithware partnered with Tom Ranseen of [www.NoSpinMarketing.com](http://www.NoSpinMarketing.com) to work with the company to develop the plan for the new site. Tom focused on working with Incentive to determine how best to position the company and products on the site, how to include and implement the appropriate methods that would accommodate Search Engine Optimization, and how to build the best possible eCommerce site for the company.

While the site and the eCommerce engine was being implemented by [www.StaffordStreet.com](http://www.StaffordStreet.com), Smithware focused primarily on developing the eBook strategy that would:

1. Automate the conversion of PDF versions of their books into a secure deliverable eBook for distribution to customers.
2. Enable users to preview books online in a way that they would give readers the ability to know exactly what they were buying. At the same time, books could not be copied or nor could the eBook functionality be a substitution for buying the book.
3. Give users the ability to download eBook versions of

purchased books in a way that was secure and traceable to avoid abuse.

4. Provide a library of purchased eBooks for customers so that purchased eBooks would always be available.
5. Be highly secure and available for users at all time.
6. Limit the infrastructure overhead that would be required to store eBook materials.

The detailed plan is available at [www.smithware.com/IPE-BookStrategicPlanPublic.pdf](http://www.smithware.com/IPE-BookStrategicPlanPublic.pdf).

What made the Smithware approach to the eBook plan unique was that while the plan was being developed, Smithware produced a proof of concept site that demonstrated to everyone on the team what the plan really meant and just how it was really going to work in the site. The proof of concept site is located at <http://intranet.smithware.com/IncentivePublications:8080>. This site contains two sample books with online preview and eBook delivery.

Smithware used off-the-shelf tools to make the plan one that was built on existing standards and that could be implemented quickly and with confidence of success. ASPPDF from [www.PersitsSoftware.com](http://www.PersitsSoftware.com) is a tool that allows complex manipulation of PDF documents from web sites. Everything that Incentive needed to do with PDFs to deliver eBooks was available in their library. Other tools were acquired to automate the process of converting existing PDF documents into the image files required to drive the eBook preview process on the site.

With the eBook plan in place and with the proof of concept site fully operational, the web site designers and engineers were able to focus on the look, feel, and functionality of the site and eCommerce engine and, in the end, simply pull over the proof of concept code to implement the required eBook features for the site.

## **Benefits**

### **Huge cost savings in reducing printed catalogs and associated mailing costs**

The benefits of having an online versus a traditional print catalog are numerous. From reduced printing costs to the gradual elimination of catalog mailing expenses, having the online version of the catalog has improved the overall customer experience and made the value of the publications more clear.

### **Long-term cost savings by gradually transitioning from providing end users with printed books to delivering new virtual eBooks**

The benefits of distributing books via the eBook format are numerous as well. Customers are able to get instant access to their purchased materials instead of waiting for delivery via normal shipping methods. In addition, since many of Incentive's books are

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reproducibles or books that are designed with pages to be copied and passed out to students, it is much easier and cost effective to have the book in PDF format and print the pages that are needed.

**Little infrastructure required to host and deliver eBook content**

Since deliverable eBooks are generated on-the-fly from an existing library of base eBooks, and deliverable eBooks are sent directly to the customer's web browser, regardless of how many eBooks are sold only small additional record space is required in the eCommerce database. Very little backed resources are used to support the eBook engine.

**Standard off-the shelf tools were used to produce, maintain, and generate the deliverable eBooks**

Incentive Publications first standardized on Adobe's ubiquitous PDF file format for eBook delivery. It is secure and customizable to meet Incentive's and their customer's needs. ASPPDF and other tools were readily available to enable relatively easy implementation of the eBook plan from base eBook building to deliverable eBook distribution.

**Customers gained a perpetual online library of eBooks to ensure eBook availability 24/7**

One of the top benefits for customers was something that was not actually in the original plan. When a customer logs in to the [www.IncentivePublications.com](http://www.IncentivePublications.com) eCommerce site, they perpetually have an online virtual bookshelf that contains all eBooks that they have ever purchased. So if a teacher has a hard drive crash or does not have access to their personal computer, he or she can log into the site from any Internet browser and immediately open any of their eBooks.

For more information about Smithware eCommerce solutions, contact Smithware at [ask@smithware.com](mailto:ask@smithware.com).