

Akamai Acceleration Boosts Marks & Spencer's Online Orders by 100%



The Situation

Launched five years ago, Marks & Spencer's online presence has grown steadily in stature and sophistication. From the initial launch of a limited product catalogue, today the site provides a rich and sophisticated product showcase and is viewed by the company as a key sales channel. Many customers use the site to review products before visiting stores to purchase. However, with UK online spending progressively gaining momentum, Marks & Spencer wanted to ensure it was at the forefront of the UK's ecommerce retail revolution.

A primary objective was to take Marks & Spencer's brand values and replicate these online. Elevating the customer service experience meant Marks & Spencer needed a scalable solution that could cope with growing demand, especially in peak retail seasonal periods such as Christmas, January Sales, Valentines Day and Mothers Day. In addition, a highly successful series of one-day 20% discount promotions had proved highly successful in whipping up site traffic from an Internet savvy UK consumer base. This incredible drawing power posed technical challenges for Marksandspencer.com which needed to satisfy high demand bursts as part of its overall commitment to customer service.

"From the start we realized that the tremendous response to promotions generated through national TV advertising meant we had to be capable of providing the very best user experience, sustaining intense traffic bursts in short time frames," explained Paul Greenwood, Operations Manager of Marksandspencer.com. "It was essential that our online shopping channel met and exceeded customer expectations of our brand values and that it reinforced and extended our physical business too."

The e-commerce team recognized that it needed to improve traffic management and distribute content faster to ensure it delivered a fast performing user experience. And it needed to achieve this quickly, with minimum infrastructure investment.

The Challenge

Marks & Spencer has become synonymous with high quality, value and service. Satisfying customer expectations online was a paramount objective. Populated with thousands of high quality images, it was essential that page download speeds for the Web site could be optimized. In addition it was critical that surges in demand would not impact outstanding performance, affecting online browse-to-buy conversion rates or reflecting negatively on the company's brand values.

To support traffic bursts during promotions, the e-commerce team needed access to resources capable of scaling instantly to meet traffic spikes. This was to be achieved without a costly, complex infrastructure build out that would have resulted in extensive redundant capacity outside peak demand periods.

The Goal

Marksandspencer.com wanted to achieve:

- **Provisioning Capable of Supporting Highly Variable Traffic Loads** caused by seasonality and promotional activities.
- **Improved Browse-to-buy Ratios**
- **Secure Transactions and Reliable Content Delivery** to extend customer confidence.
- **Instant Scalability** without the need for costly infrastructure investment.
- **Ease of Implementation**

Why Akamai

Improved Site Performance Generates Record Traffic

The Akamai solution places a globally distributed highly scalable platform of more than 25,000 servers in 71 countries at the disposal of Marksandspencer.com.

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"In 2005 we would not have been able to achieve what we did without Akamai. It is the cornerstone of our online business."

—Ian Christie, Head of IT Solutions, Marks & Spencer Group

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COMPANY

Marks & Spencer Group plc
London, UK
www.marksandspencer.com

INDUSTRY

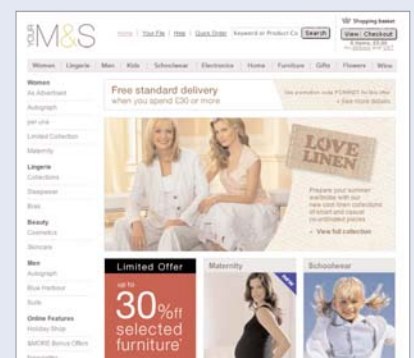
Retail

SOLUTION

Akamai Dynamic Site Accelerator

KEY IMPACTS

- Increased customer order rates by 100%
- Achieved a five-fold increase in visitor traffic and bandwidth capacity
- Improved page download times for 56K modems by 35%
- Capacity to process 300% more orders per hour during special promotions
- Exceeded previous daily trading revenue records by over 200%



Why Akamai *(continued)*

"The business impact has been tremendous," confirmed Paul Greenwood. "We've increased site throughput by five times, beating all previous visitor and traffic records. This allows us to maximize the value of each customer visit by providing a seamless, consistent user experience."

Site promotions and seasonal demand peaks now pose no threat to site performance and provisioning for capacity has been eliminated as an operational issue, as Ian Christie, Head of IT Solutions, explained. "We have instant access to scalable bandwidth, so we can match demand loads in parallel. The unpredictability of demand in a 24x7 online environment is no longer a topic of concern for us."

Underpinning Brand Value

Marks & Spencer now provides an agile and responsive online business. Improved and highly consistent Web site content delivery has delivered benefits beyond managing spikes in traffic. With high customer expectations of service and reliability, there have been other gains. Alongside an increase in capacity by almost 100% in peak demand periods, page download times for 56K modems have also been decreased by 35%. This has been achieved without diluting the commitment to providing high quality images on every page. "We monitor abandonment rates, session length and other indicators to assess customer experience," confirmed Ian Christie. "We've seen significant improvements in all these areas which indicate that we're truly fulfilling customer expectations."

Extended Buying Power

In addition to optimizing the connectivity between Marks & Spencer's origin infrastructure and Akamai's Edge Platform, the Akamai solution seamlessly manages all static and dynamic content delivery and rendering on servers closest to end users. This frees up Marks & Spencer's servers to perform core e-commerce transactions instead of mundane and CPU intensive Web and application server processing. Since implementing Akamai for Dynamic Site Accelerator, Marksandspencer.com now has the capacity to process 300% more orders per hour at peak load periods. As a result, overall customer order rates for the channel have increased by 100%.

"We've been able to significantly increase browse-to-buy conversions. This means we've achieved record revenue sales—smashing our best ever single daily trading figure record by over 200%," said Christie.

Powerful integration with back-end systems has enabled optimal, customer centric processing. For the channel, this translates to achieving its highest browse-to-buy conversion ratios ever. Revenue from the online operation means the channel now regularly rivals the company's 'top 5' in the company's UK stores performance league.

An ability to maintain a strong focus on the pre-eminence of the customer is helping the channel to attain its strategic vision in the competitive world of online retail.

"Our goal is to lead the way in terms of online retail customer experience—working with Akamai releases our team to concentrate on functional enhancements that will allow us to extend and evolve the online business further," continued Christie.

Scalability with Cost Avoidance

Akamai has enabled Marks & Spencer to successfully grow its online shopping business without having to make additional hardware infrastructure investment. The Akamai service causes a dramatic reduction in the number of requests to the company's Web servers, which instead flow through Akamai's servers.

"Before Akamai, we were facing the alternative of a costly, complex infrastructure build out—which would have left us with capacity that would have been largely redundant during low demand periods," explained Christie. "Akamai is a practical and effective solution to the issue of scalable capacity."

Fast, Pain Free Implementation

It took just two weeks to complete implementation of Akamai for Dynamic Site Accelerator. With the 2004 Christmas retail peak approaching, Marks & Spencer needed to capitalize on anticipated online retail spending surge. "We needed a solution, and we needed it quickly," said Christie. "Akamai didn't fail us and the results at the conclusion of the project were instantaneous," he concludes.

This success was repeated over the Christmas 2005 shopping period, which saw Marksandspencer.com achieve record sales and peaks in site traffic. "In 2005 we would not have been able to achieve what we did without Akamai. It is the cornerstone of our online business," concluded Christie.

About Marks & Spencer

With a group turnover of £7.3 billion Marks & Spencer is one of the UK's leading retailers of clothes, food, home products and financial services. Each week over 15 million people shop with Marks and Spencer, which operates 400 stores in the UK and 150 stores worldwide with a further 130 stores managed under franchise in 30 overseas territories. For more information visit www.marksandspencer.com.

About Akamai

Akamai® is the leading global service provider for accelerating content and business processes online. Thousands of organizations have formed trusted relationships with Akamai, improving their revenue and reducing costs by maximizing the performance of their online businesses. Leveraging the Akamai Edge Network, these organizations gain business advantage today, and have the foundation for the emerging Internet solutions of tomorrow. Akamai is "The Trusted Choice for Online Business." For more information, visit www.akamai.com.



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