

# A force for good



As a leading manufacturer of dried fruits, nuts and seeds snacks, Whitworths is a prime example of a business that saw its main routes to consumers greatly affected by Covid-19 and the lockdown restrictions.

While Whitworths' overall sales figures have actually been positively impacted by the pandemic, Commercial Director Phil Gowland explains that there has been a big shift in channel activity – resulting in a growing reliance on D2C sales and other online channels.

“As we are heavily weighted towards grocery retail, we’ve overtraded in that area during the pandemic – partly because we produce healthier snacks and, if anything, the pandemic has increased many people’s focus on healthy eating. Grocery sales via supermarkets’ online channels are around double what they were before Covid-19 – running at about 15% of total grocery sales.

“However, we’ve seen other areas of the business and other channels affected quite drastically. Our high street channels have been negatively impacted to a considerable degree, and certain areas of our portfolio have been affected too. A number of our products are aimed at children’s and adult lunchboxes, so during that first prolonged period of lockdown we saw a considerable reduction in demand.”

In response to the reduction in high street activity, Whitworths has made a concerted effort to increase D2C sales. Having launched a “fully integrated and fully functioning” ecommerce platform just prior to the pandemic, Phil says it has been “highly beneficial” in enabling customers to order and receive goods direct to their homes.

And he says the D2C platform has delivered several additional business benefits also.

“Our D2C platform has enabled us to get much closer to our customers with more relevant content and more tailored solutions.”

“It’s helped us to get much closer to our customers with more relevant content and more tailored goods,” he says. “Towards the end of lockdown, for example, we launched back-to-school and back to work snacking sets through the D2C channel. D2C has also enabled us to gain insights from customers around their snacking habits during lockdown, so we could adapt our product offering accordingly, adding more healthy options.”

The channel has also been used to convert Whitworths’ marketing activities into sales during the pandemic, Phil adds: “A lot of our marketing activity comes from social media influencers celebrating the quality of our goods and sharing them with others. Now we have a direct sales platform, they can include a link or add a simple ‘swipe up’ to their posts and stories, making conversion to purchase an immediate and simple process. That’s enabling us to reach new customers.”

The direct sales platform is helping the business reach new customers in other ways also. Customers looking to make small bulk orders, such as cafés, schools or smaller retail outlets, can do so through the platform, speeding up the process and removing some supplier costs.

## Sustainable impact

The shift in consumer activity, moving from the high street and traditional supermarkets to online and direct sales, creates the potential for increased environmental impact – something Phil says Whitworths is acutely aware of.

## Case study

“Our brand proposition, ‘Good by nature’, places sustainability high on the agenda,” he explains. “Our products are healthier and derived from nature – and we want to be good to those natural sources we rely on.

“There are two core elements to that. One is how we source and use the raw materials that make our products – and we work hard to ensure they are produced in a very sustainable and ethical manner.

“The second element is packaging, which is on consumers’ radars far more at the moment,” he continues “in response, we’ve developed a packaging policy laying out our commitments, particularly as we see an increase in products being packaged and distributed directly.”

“I think consumer habits shifted a great deal during the pandemic and, while some customers will of course revert to how they did things before, many will stick with the new ways of doing things.”

That policy is currently being rolled out to the company’s core range of products and includes reducing the use of plastics and transitioning as quickly as possible to using only recyclable products.

Moving forward, Phil is confident that more effective ecommerce platforms, consumer demand for direct sales, and companies’ willingness to offset any environmental impact will see D2C activity increase further.

