

# Digital pen and paper prove to be the best prescription

## DID IT WORK?

**Kim Thomas looks at a surprising solution found by a leading drugs company to speed up deliveries**

Winthrop Pharmaceuticals, a division of Sanofi-Aventis specialising in generic drugs, faces an age-old problem.

Its 20-strong sales force is on the road all day, visiting community pharmacists and taking their orders, yet it promises its customers that their orders will be delivered within 48 hours.

Keeping that promise has not been easy. Until last year, Winthrop's sales representatives were writing each pharmacist's order down in a notebook. At the

end of the day, they would sit at home and copy all the orders into an Excel spreadsheet that they would then e-mail to the office – by which time everyone would have gone home.

"If you were the customer you'd think you'd placed an order with us at 9.30 on Monday morning," says Andy Clarke, general manager, Winthrop Pharmaceuticals UK. "From our perspective, we didn't think you'd ordered until 9.30 Tuesday morning. By trying to deliver within two days we were denying ourselves a day's notice."

That was not the only problem. At the end of the day, it was easy for a tired sales representative to make a mistake in copying his handwritten notes into the spreadsheet.

The relatively high rate of errors (estimated at up to 15 per cent) meant that the customer

service team spent a lot of time writing credit notes.

Winthrop tried different ways of tackling the problem.

One was to have the sales staff take a laptop out with them and enter the details into the spreadsheet as they sat in the car after each visit. That was unsuccessful, says Mr Clarke: "The practicalities of having a laptop in the car and working on your knee were a nightmare."

Another idea, adds Mr Clarke, was to have the sales representatives phone the orders in. That didn't work either: "The error level was phenomenal." A further rejected option was PDAs: the screens were too small.

However, a chance meeting led to Winthrop finding the answer: digital pen and paper from Inqology that enables Winthrop's sales team to write by hand their orders in the normal way and

transmit them wirelessly to the office.

Implementation of the project took less than three months, and by March last year, the whole sales team was using digital pens and paper. Because of the simplicity of the process, no training was needed other than a brief demonstration.

The "digital paper", provided by Anoto, is ordinary paper that has been covered with a tiny, almost invisible, pattern of dots. The Nokia digital pen looks and feels like an ordinary ballpoint, but it contains a digital camera and a microprocessor.

When the user writes on the digital paper, the camera takes repeated snapshots of the pattern. Every snapshot contains enough data to determine the exact position of the pen and what it is writing, including the time each pen stroke was made

and the particular paper form it is writing on.

This data is retained in the pen's memory as a series of co-ordinates. When the user ticks a box on the paper, the pen uses Bluetooth to connect to a mobile phone and transmit the co-ordinates to a server.

All the representative has to do is select a menu item on the phone, enter the customer's account number and click Send. The order is then transmitted wirelessly to a server hosted by Destiny Wireless, an Anoto partner. At that point, the customer data on the form (name, account number, order name and postcode) are checked automatically to see if they correspond to the information held by Destiny.

The data are converted into Excel format and the value of the order calculated. It is then forwarded to a Winthrop mailbox. If

the customer data appears to be incorrect, the order is sent through to an Errors mailbox for checking.

Winthrop receives both a copy of the handwritten file in PDF format and the Excel spreadsheet. A check is made on a sample of orders, to make sure the figures in the spreadsheet match the figures in the PDF file, and then the spreadsheet is uploaded into the SAP system so the order can be processed. Meanwhile, the sales representative receives a text message to say the order has been received.

The results have been striking, says Mr Clarke. Because the order is relayed within seconds or minutes of being taken, Winthrop has up to a day longer in which to process it.

The sales team, meanwhile, no longer has to spend an hour or more each evening entering

orders into a spreadsheet. The error rate on orders is down to 4.5 per cent, and customer services representatives are raising fewer credit notes and have been freed to do other work.

The technology has brought other benefits. The Information Services team has used the data to create a reporting system, so that Mr Clarke knows how many orders come in and when, and how many are outstanding.

He believes it will make resource planning easier: the working hours of the customer service team can be adjusted to correspond to peaks and troughs in the workload.

The Inqology solution proved simple and cheap to implement, says Mr Clarke. The answer to a seemingly intractable problem turned out to lie in a variant of the old-fashioned technology of pen and paper.