

The Natural Grocery Store grows in clicks and bricks

“The launch of our website was inextricably linked with the growth of our physical high-street presence. Without the website funding, we may not have gone ahead with our shop expansion.”

***Paul Lewis
Co-owner, The Natural Grocery Store***

The Natural Grocery Store is not only good for your health – but multi-award winning too. Since the store first opened in Leckhampton in 1998 the business has gone from being a 1,000 sq ft store with a small street frontage to more than double the size with a huge street presence and an on-line store.

Unlike many other ‘natural food’ shops, The Natural Grocery Store is light and airy with shelves groaning with things people want to eat, rather than little brown things in packets they think they should.

It was evident to owners Paul Lewis and Mike Fisher almost as soon as they had opened in 1998 that they were going to need a bigger store, but it took them almost six years to find suitable premises, and make the significant financial commitment to achieve their ambitions – and they might not have made the leap at all if it hadn’t been for a recommendation by a Business Link adviser that they take advantage of a local website funding initiative called Catalyst, through Connect.glos.

“We were at a point in the development of our business where we needed to make some serious decisions,” said Paul. “To move into new premises just up the road from our original store was going to cost money, and we were keen to develop a website to extend our retail reach. We had read about the £millions increasingly being spent through the internet each year and we wanted to reach a wider audience. Thanks to advice from our business adviser, the funding we received from Connect.glos through Catalyst was enough to help us make the decision to expand – without that funding it would have been a much riskier decision.”

Paul & Mike commissioned a Connect.glos accredited web development company, Urban Element, to build the site, but weren’t quite happy with the first designs and asked them to go back and think again. This was part of the service and Urban Element soon came back to us with a fresh set of designs.

“We wanted a website which reflected our ethos, but didn’t portray us as hippies or do-gooders. We don’t use our environment credentials as a marketing tool; we simply believe that a smaller footprint makes a better world. We asked Urban Element to look at websites that worked – such as those of some of the multinational supermarkets and other retailers. They are clean, businesslike and effective. That is what we aspired to, and that’s what Urban Element successfully delivered.”

At the same time as commissioning the website, The Natural Grocery Store acquired a warehouse at nearby Andoversford and promoted a part-time member of staff to a full-time internet manager – responsible for photographing and uploading all product information and arranging order fulfilment. They also took on another member of staff to man the warehouse.

“We also use the warehouse to house goods for the store, which releases space at the store and makes for a much better relationship with our neighbours in Leckhampton,” says Paul.

After another visit from Connect.glos to make sure that the website was functioning properly, it went live in September 2006 and over the last few months the orders have started to come in, with little marketing investment from Paul and Mike.

“We want to start slow and grow – rather than rush into a high-profile advertising campaign and then not be able to deliver,” he explained. Nevertheless, on-line orders have been more than doubling month on month and January 2007 was their best month yet.

“We pay £100 to Google each month to push our website up the listings, and we’re adding to our database of customers every week. We also issue a monthly on-line newsletter encouraging them to buy,” explained Paul. However the team are stepping up their advertising with a full-page advertisement in The Ecologist next month.

They also put a leaflet by the store tills inviting people to register and Paul reports that these go especially fast at weekends, when the tourists visit Cheltenham.

“Our orders come from all over the UK, from Scotland, Cornwall and we’ve had a flurry of orders from Sussex over the last few weeks,” he said.

What has surprised the business is the type of goods most often ordered on-line. “Our most popular on-line purchases are organic dog and cat food,” said Paul. “Our second is Tyrrells’ chips. It’s a good thing we made the decision to grow the on-line store slowly, we would never have guessed on the type of products our customers wished to order.”

www.naturalgrocery.co.uk

The Natural Grocery Store received £2000 of funding towards the website design through the Connect.glos project, funded by SWRDA through Gloucestershire First and delivered by Business Link Gloucestershire. Connect.Glos offers expert advice and funding to help companies make the most of new technologies to boost their business performance. For more information contact Charles Bray, Connect.glos programme manager at charles.bray@blgl.co.uk.