



Marks & Spencer is set to launch its first gift card this year

Rewards in store

Innovation and new technology mean that there are more ways than ever to use vouchers and cards to reward staff and customers. **Mark Ludmon** reports

Marks & Spencer - which started accepting all credit cards only seven years ago - is now about to be at the forefront of plastic this autumn: it is set to join the small but growing number of retailers who are offering stored-value gift cards. As one of the best-known high-street names, this is likely to bring plastic to a wider audience. "This is a landmark that I believe will be of great significance to the industry as a whole," predicts Andrew Johnson, director general of the VA, the trade body for vouchers, gift cards and stored-value solutions.

It follows the arrival of "gift card malls", or "gift card centres", on Britain's high streets after their success in the US. Since December, shoppers have been able to go into a WH Smith or a Sainsbury's and buy gift cards not just from the retailer they are in but from a whole range of others. "This has opened the way for others to start looking at the possibility of opening their own gift card mall," Johnson says. "Many

retailers are watching closely and gauging consumer reaction to the first in-store malls in the UK."

Several other major high street retailers will be launching their own gift cards into the market and, while many of these may be targeted initially only at consumers, they will make the public more accepting of plastic cards as a reward product in the corporate market.

"The introduction of the Gift Card Shop in Sainsbury's stores has been a great success and has given us the conviction to press ahead with the launch of our own consumer gift card by the end of the year," says Yvonne West, manager of Sainsbury's Business Direct.

"The fact that gift cards are out in the consumer arena and are being bought and used more than ever indicates that people are confident and happy to use them. They will definitely have an impact on the business-to-business market in the coming years, as companies who are buying for staff are ultimately buying for consumers and so will



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