

THOM Group Fashions a Sparkling Payments Success Story with Axepta BNP Paribas



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To maintain its aim of offering affordable, precious jewellery, Europe's THOM Group has invested in improving the efficiency of its treasury operations. A card-acquiring platform from Axepta BNP Paribas has transformed the payments experience for the THOM's treasury, sales staff and also the all-important customer.

As one of the leading jewellery retailers and distributors, THOM Group's (THOM) treasury is driven by a requirement for smooth and efficient payments. "At THOM, we view the purchase of a piece of jewellery as an opportunity for people to share precious moments, and the payment is clearly an important part of such a moment," says Jérémy Hugues, Group Treasury Director, Thom Group.

Thom has a large portfolio of multichannel brands and direct operations across seven countries in Europe and has six e-commerce platforms. The group also distributes third-party watch and jewellery brands in 3,000 stores across the Continent.

Hugues stresses that Thom is focused on making precious jewellery affordable, therefore efficiency in its treasury operations is a vital goal.

Four years ago, having created the group treasury department, Hugues launched an RFP for global cash management to optimise, centralise, and secure the group's cash, which is widely dispersed. "We wanted to optimise our cash flows. Adding card acquiring to the scope of our RFP was also a no-brainer," he says.

"Our target for this RFP was to improve our cost-effectiveness and to choose a card acquirer that would offer us a robust, innovative solution. Moreover, the acquirer also had to demonstrate that it would invest in the development of the platform for future means of payment."

The solution also had to deliver the same experience for THOM's operations across as many countries as possible. THOM opted for Axepta BNP Paribas, an end-to-end payment solution that researches, develops and promotes payment

systems for companies of all sizes. It guarantees a smooth and transparent customer experience (CX) and offers card acquiring services as well as payment terminals and online payment solutions.

A cross-border success

Established 15 years ago, Acepta BNP Paribas is a European platform, processing payments in 22 countries, including France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, the UK and Italy.

Karine Munoz, Head of Business Development, Acepta BNP Paribas, notes the bank's card acquiring solution covers all of THOM's countries of operation and is a "robust and scalable" solution. "We are also able to offer domestic schemes in France, Belgium, Italy and Germany. We are connected to many gateways including THOM partners, which is very helpful for the project its treasury had in mind," she says.

Hugues and Munoz agree that the commitment and expertise Acepta BNP Paribas brought to the table helped greatly during the project phase and afterwards. "I agree that is one of the great strengths of the solution," says Hugues. "From the beginning of this project, it was important to meet our targets and goals and this required a clear, strong commitment on everybody's part. That is what we achieved."

Emmanuelle François, Head of Acepta BNP Paribas says the bank is experienced in supporting all types of retailers both in France and in Europe as a whole and has a team of dedicated experts working on implementing complex projects such as that required by THOM. "Our solution processes more than 3.5 billion transactions per year, so we are confident we can support clients such as THOM," she states.

Working together when scoping out the project contributed greatly to its success, recalls Hugues. "In the RFP we had prepared a very detailed list of our specificities and BNP Paribas was able to explain exactly how it would deal with all of our requests. For example, we wanted a specific acceptance process that would enable us to receive only

one settlement flow from each store for both contact and contactless card transactions. This was an extremely important aspect for us and it was developed based on our exact specification."

Munoz adds: "We worked hard and we worked together on this scoping period, which is key to ensuring that all the specific needs of THOM were understood and considered. For example, we adapted the remittance process to THOM's store opening hours to fit in with its requirements in terms of settlement and to facilitate the reconciliation process, because this was so important to THOM."

Poised for action

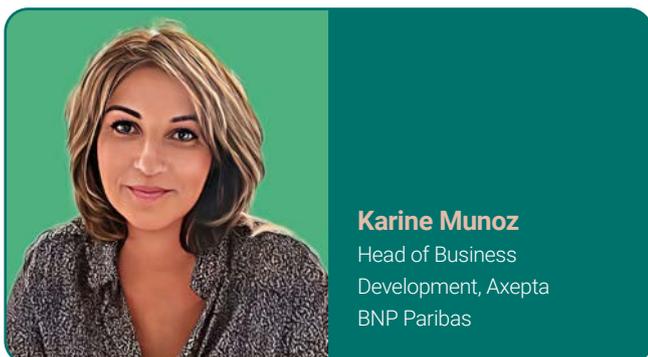
When it comes to moving from scoping to implementation, Hugues says the project team must be experienced, clearly identified and have a high level of expertise. "At each step, we could easily find the right person to work with at BNP Paribas, someone who was always focused on understanding our needs and finding the best solution."

Munoz explains that Acepta BNP Paribas has a dedicated team for card acquiring with project managers who take over a project as soon as the bank receives the "green light" from a client. "Implementation is split into three stages: scope, build, and roll-out. It is vital to define the roll-out plan in line with a client's overall strategy," she says.

In THOM's case, roll-out was on a country-by-country basis with multiple phases per country. "This enabled THOM to be fully confident about the continuity of its business as the project was developed," she adds.

In addition, to ensure a perfect roll-out, Acepta BNP Paribas' team included a dedicated 'captain of quality', who provided servicing and monitoring of the solution, including overseeing the processing of flows for THOM Group. This person is the contact point for THOM Group whenever it has a query about the solution.

As one of the drivers of the project was to improve the working method and achieve cost efficiencies, new



technologies came to the fore. THOM adopted the software point-of-sale (SoftPOS) solution, which has had a positive impact on CX and satisfaction, enabling merchants to accept card payments directly on their phones or other devices.

"The use of SoftPOS is very recent and we are happy with the implementation. Thom's aim was to deploy mobility in stores so staff can scan the barcodes on the pieces of jewellery, speeding up checkout. All our sales staff have been equipped with mobile checkouts and the associated tools," Hugues explains.

Initially, the plan was to start with a card-based system integrated into the mobile device but with the arrival of SoftPOS in mid-2022, THOM contacted BNP Paribas and was able to roll out the new, more direct technology in France in time for the 2023 Christmas shopping season.

The main added value of SoftPOS, explains Hugues, is during peak periods such as Mothers' Day, Valentine's Day and Christmas. SoftPOS accounts for around 50% of card transactions during that period. "We didn't face any barriers to this new method from our customers and, in fact, the reactions have been positive. Customers appreciated using the new technology."

The technology has encouraged store sales staff to use the mobile devices. "Now we have the confirmation of the importance of the payment in the sales experience, and the new technologies are completely linked with that," enthuses Hugues.

Reducing queuing, increasing satisfaction

François says the key to SoftPOS is that it enables merchants to turn mobile devices into payment terminals. "This means that merchants no longer need specific POS devices anymore and can implement this solution immediately," she explains. "With such solutions, we can help merchants to improve the customer experience."

For example, a merchant can collect from cards "on the move", reducing queuing at a counter, while also having the

backup system of the traditional cash register and payment terminal. François adds: "A merchant can now implement this solution immediately and significantly improve the customer experience at the same time."

In launching a new service such as SoftPOS there are of course a few challenges as well, admits, François. "For example, we had to implement a new protocol along with SoftPOS, which allows the customer to tap on the device, and for that device – such as a mobile phone – to make the payment is innovative and very different to what we are all used to."

Another challenge, she adds, is on the accreditation side: "Where you use a new protocol, you need a specific, new accreditation. It is always a difficult part of the procedure to execute and requires piloting and a lot of testing. It was a long process, but ultimately a fantastic success."

The next phase of the SoftPOS implementation will be to expand it beyond stores in France and into Belgium, Luxembourg and beyond. "Axepta BNP Paribas is currently working on implementing the SoftPOS solution in its European platform, as it has for its French platform. As such, we are in regular discussions about this and we plan to roll it out further, when possible," concludes Hugues.

The development of new means of payments is happening swiftly, notes Hugues and THOM will keep an eye on the market, as well as closely monitoring any changes in customer behaviour. "It is obviously right that we should always keep an eye on the market and be open to study any new means of payment."

Munoz says BNP Paribas is working on a unified portal that will enable clients to access all their data in a single portal for both POS terminal and card acquiring. Due to be released in the coming months, this will give users a global view of all their payments activity, which she describes as "very, very useful indeed for our clients." In addition, BNP Paribas is working on integrating Wero, a European digital wallet, into its online acceptance solution.



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