

Powell's Books Rewrites a Successful Composable Story

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The Snapshot

Powell's Books set out to migrate from a homegrown platform to a modern tech stack. Their objectives were to support their complex data structure with SaaS-hosted solutions and capitalize on a hybrid implementation process, resulting in full ownership of their site operations post-launch. After an unsteady start with another consulting firm, Powell's partnered with Aries Solutions to smooth the runway for accomplishing these goals in only a few months. With their new platform live and in their control, Powell's Books is set up for success.



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– Patrick Bassett, CEO, Powell's Books

Meet the Client

Powell's Books has been in business since 1971 and is the world's largest independent bookstore. Originally founded in Chicago by Michael Powell, it has been headquartered in Portland, Oregon, since 1979. Four decades later, Powell's is still in the family with Emily Powell as the President and Owner. Through their online presence and five storefronts, they aim to "...take a different approach by offering the full expression of the printed word," says Emily. "We want you to think for yourself. And you can't do that if your bookstore is curating what's available to you. We're doing that at a much bigger scale than anyone else."



Powell's Books is headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

Goals

- 1. Modernize the Tech Stack:** Powell's Books had previously relied on homegrown technology due to its intricate business model. Finding and implementing a SaaS-hosted solution to modernize their capabilities without compromising their business was key.
- 2. Support a Complex Data Structure:** With a SKU count upwards of 10 million and a uniquely complex product data map, they needed composable vendors that could not only handle that amount of information but also allow custom situations such as pre-ordering books.
- 3. Own the Site Operations:** Powell's aimed to enable its business to operate and run its site.

Plotting Success with the Right Co-Authors

Aries Solutions

"We had a very out-of-date internally built system," explains Emily. "Our challenge, for many years, in the ecommerce space has been our SKU count; nothing out there in terms of out-of-the-box or even customizable software platforms could handle it before. So we built and adapted our own platform to suit our needs. Even that became untenable, partially because we are not a technology company. And, as the landscape outside our company kept shifting and evolving, integrating our work with industry partners became harder and harder to accomplish successfully. We knew, at that point, we needed to make a big change. We also knew we wanted to maintain as much adaptability and flexibility as possible on a new system, and to own our own future."

Patrick Bassett, CEO of Powell's Books, expands on this, saying, *"We were previously working with a consultancy we had a lot of confidence in. But as timelines continued to slip and budgets continued to extend upwards of a year past what was contracted, we lost faith in their ability to deliver the project and ended our partnership with them. After a handful of months of struggling to create a cohesive plan, we went back to our core vendors and asked if they could make any suggestions. They all independently recommended Aries Solutions. In a very short period of time, they [Aries] were able to understand the issues we were facing, put together a roadmap for addressing our challenges, and get our teams aligned on the work. In only a handful of months, we launched. It was pretty amazing."*

Adyen + Algolia + commercetools + Contentstack

Powell's had contracts in place with their core vendors before Aries joined them to get the implementation back on track and live. Tim Steele, CTO at Aries Solutions, recalls the discovery period with Powell's saying, *"About 80% of the work was mostly done by the time we showed up. But I always say that building 80% of a commerce platform isn't hard. Building 20% of a commerce platform is very hard."*

The challenge Powell's faced wasn't an issue with the vendors; it was how to use their vendors in a way that met Powell's needs. Aries set out to help validate Powell's Books' direction and provide valuable guidance on integrations.



"Our previous implementation partner had made recommendations on how to configure the vendor platforms in a way that wasn't working," adds Patrick. "But on our first call with Aries, they tactfully pointed out that part of the reason was because one vendor was being used in a way that wasn't an appropriate fit for our business's needs. That was a huge paradigm shift in our thinking and was the fundamental component of the challenges we were facing; we lacked a robust PIM in order to absorb, edit, and manage our large catalog. Aries understands the tools and the ecosystem to make concise, precise recommendations that turned our ship around on a dime."

Emily agrees, stating, "We were struggling to build a roadmap of how to take what we had and turn it into something usable. Aries has a grounded, level-headed approach to assessing the situation and translating that into a common-sense approach for how to untangle the hairball."

Turning the Page

Since its launch, Powell's Books has reached all three of its goals and seen double-digit revenue growth year-over-year every month. The launch gave them a modern, SaaS-hosted tech stack without sacrificing any aspects of their business model. Their uniquely complex data structure is fully supported by commercetools, Algolia, and Contentstack; something that felt nearly impossible before Powell's partnered with Aries. *"To give you an idea of how complex the data is here, when we did the first (unoptimized) product load, the system showed it would take 20 days to get all the products onto the platform," Tim laughs. "On the surface, you'd think, oh, books are easy! But ISBN has only been around since the 70s, and humankind has been writing books for millennia. You also have to keep in mind that it's not a one-to-one ISBN-to-book ratio. There are about 130 ISBNs for the book Dune alone, and there isn't an industry standard identifier for all the published editions of a single book. When a customer searches for Dune, they don't want 130 results back. They want to see one Dune, and then click into it to see all the different options and editions to choose from. Then you have to layer in things like pre-orders, where you likely don't have all the book data yet, but you still need your platform to be able to take an order for that book. There's a massive amount of variables to account for."*

Aries was able to help correct the product model and successfully load all of Powell's 10 million-plus SKUs into commercetools. And with the capabilities of their other composable vendors, they are now able to filter and facet product data in a way that makes sense and gives their clients the exact information they're seeking, whether it's a recent publication of *Dune* in hardcover or a first edition of the book *Of Mice and Men*.

Additionally, the site operations and maintenance are now fully owned by the Powell's Books team. Tim elaborates on this, saying, *"One of my favorite parts about this project is that they're now running and operating the site on their own. I enjoyed walking them through sessions about how to create product detail pages, pricing, promos, etc. Seeing those processes click into place was wonderful. It's exactly why our hybrid approach to implementations exists: to have you learn alongside our teams so we can step away, and you're not paying us indefinitely to maintain things. You're completely empowered."*

A New Chapter: Powell's Books Today

"The responsiveness of Aries has been exceptional throughout the project," says Patrick. "I know they have other engagements they're working on, but they always hit our timelines and deliver. They've been extremely collaborative. We have some unique elements, and one of the things I have appreciated about working with Tim, Jake, and the team is that they tactfully push back when there's something we need to reconsider to get us moving in the right direction."

Emily adds, *"A replatforming effort is an intense experience for internal teams. I was always impressed with how the Aries folks are unflappable in high-stress situations. To be able to bring the temperature down and get us moving forward was exactly what we needed in a partner."*

After a long-awaited launch and just a few months after joining forces with Aries, Powell's Books was able to reap the benefits of composable commerce, including modernizing their tech stack, properly mapping out their complex data structure, and taking control of their site operations. Powell's Books empowered its internal teams with a library full of new tools and capabilities, and its customers can find exactly what they're looking for in store and online.

Patrick reveals he was a Powell's Books customer for 20 years before being hired at the company five years ago. *"One of the things I've loved about Powell's is it's not a place that tells you what you should think,"* he says. *"It's a place that offers you the content to research, explore, and make up your own mind. We don't censor. We don't limit. And I think that's fundamental to our brand."* Both the Powell's Books team and their loyal customers can now leverage composable commerce to continue those ideals and their legacy.