



Case In Point

The High-Tech, High-Touch Solution of 3M Digital MFM



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—Dr. Harvey Varnet, director, Phillips Memorial Library, Providence College

The Library

The Phillips Memorial Library supports the information, research and curriculum needs of approximately 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students, and 250 faculty on the campus of Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island. In addition to its academic patrons, Phillips Memorial serves the greater community in its role as depository for federal and state documents. Thirty-five full-time and part-time employees manage a 30,000- to 40,000-book circulation among a collection of more than 360,000 books and bound periodicals and 1,650 current print periodicals. Phillips Memorial also participates in the Higher Education Library Information Network (HELIN), a nine-member consortium of Rhode Island academic libraries that share a union catalog.

The Need

In 2001, Library Director Harvey Varnet promised his staff that the last time they manually inventoried the library's collection would, in fact, be the last time. That year the process took the entire staff (working during library hours) one full year to complete.

“Inventory is a dreadful, boring, but essential task of shelf-reading, verifying and weeding that libraries must conduct to keep collections fresh and user-friendly,” says Varnet. “Doing so while keeping patron service a priority is even more time-consuming. As trite as it sounds, we needed a ‘high-tech, high-touch’ solution.”

Varnet began looking for remedies even before the inventory project was complete.

The Solution

Varnet's initial encounter with 3M RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) and library applications of the technology took place during a 3M demonstration at a 2000 ALA Conference.

“I immediately saw the tremendous impact this technology and equipment could make on using library staff efficiently, particularly through the 3M Digital Library Assistant's speed, accuracy and ease-of-use,” says Varnet. “RFID has been around for a while, but library applications are a real breakthrough.”

After getting a better sense of the potential fit for Phillips Memorial and researching other RFID technology providers, Varnet sought out 3M Library Systems Sales Consultant Jeanne Davis at the Mid-Winter ALA Conference. He asked her to pull together a needs and cost assessment for 3M RFID equipment and supplies, including a new security system for their collection. Says Varnet, “There really were no other systems out there like 3M's; they have competitors who really can't compete.”

Varnet applied for and received a grant for the project from the Champlin Foundation, Rhode Island's biggest grant-provider for libraries, which enabled the library to install equipment in May of 2002 and begin the conversion to RFID technology. All together, the Phillips Memorial Library purchased 150,000 3M™ RFID Tags; 150,000 3M™ Tattle-Tape™ R2 Security Strips and Application System; two 3M™ Staff Workstations; one 3M™ Digital Library Assistant, and one direct-mount 3M™ Detection System Model 3802.

The Future

“The staff workstation's backward compatibility with our existing databases and our automation vendor ‘Innovative Interfaces’ leave us free to choose what and when to convert,” says Varnet. Apparently “what and when” means “100 percent and now,” because the library staff is currently busy converting the library's entire collection.

And now, instead of once every ten years, Varnet's staff can use this high-tech answer to inventory the stacks regularly. Or enlist student assistants to complete the task in an estimated—and previously unfathomable—two weeks, allowing these academic librarians to continue practicing the “high-touch” tradition of serving the patrons of Phillips Memorial Library.

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