



Contra Costa County Library

Using self-service check-in to boost staff productivity

The Need

California's Contra Costa County Library serves a 756 square-mile territory near San Francisco Bay. Growth in the county's population—now nearly 1 million—has been matched by growth in the library's circulation, which has been increasing by approximately 15 percent annually and should hit 6 million items in 2008. The budget for the 25-community library system has not increased at a corresponding rate, however.

To maintain service in this high-growth, static-budget environment, the library's management has embraced innovative practices and new technologies to boost productivity. "We're not necessarily leading edge, but we're progressive," explained Cathy Sanford, Deputy County Librarian for Support Services. "We understand what our public wants and what constitutes good library service. And we'll move quickly to do what's needed to satisfy our customers."

As an example, Sanford pointed to the library's streamlined process for moving items among community libraries. "We make deliveries six days a week," she said. "We want to turn around books as quickly as possible and we don't want to punish our public by making them drive 40 miles to the community library that has an item they want." Contra Costa was also the first system in the country to allow residents to register for a library card online, which gives immediate access to the library's databases. To check out items, registered patrons only need to pick up their card at the circulation desk.

These were useful strategies but management wanted additional tools. In particular, they wanted to minimize the time librarians spent checking materials back into the library and reactivating security strips.

The Solution

An obvious solution was to install automated materials handling systems, using radio frequency identification technology (RFID) or barcodes to check items into the library and sort them for re-shelving. Unfortunately, the size of such systems made them impractical for use in existing facilities, where space was often at a premium. A more workable solution was found in the 3M SelfCheck™ System V-Series units that were equipped with check-in software. This system enables patrons to check-in materials on their own and then do a preliminary sort.

By the end of 2007, the Contra Costa library had installed a self-check-in system at five of its community libraries. When a customer sets an item in the check-in area and the system recognizes the item, the system immediately enters it back into the library inventory, reactivates the security component (magnetic strip, RFID or both), prints a receipt and gives instructions for placing the item in one of several color-coded slots.

Along with the installation of the kiosks, the five community libraries also redesigned their layouts to guide customers toward self-service. "It is something they want to do," Sanford said. "Our goal was to structure each building so it's a natural thing."

Create a More Human Library

The Result

By equipping customers so that they can make the initial sort of returned items, the library has increased the effectiveness and efficiency of its staff, according to Sanford: “In some of our community libraries, we’re now getting about a third of our items returned through the SelfCheck systems. That gives staff time to do the other things that can increase customer satisfaction.”

In fact, customer satisfaction has increased. “They like the receipt, which proves they’ve returned the materials. They also like the feeling that they are contributing to the success of their library. And the appeal of the system goes up once they see how easy it is to use and how much better it is than standing in line in at the circulation desk.”

The Future

“As we open our new libraries,” Sanford said, “they’ll be designed to support self-service.” The shape of that support will vary, however, depending on the cost and the available space at the facility. “We have two large new community libraries under construction, and in those locations we’ll likely have automated materials handling equipment to sort self-service check-ins.”

At existing facilities, however, she sees little opportunity for large-scale sorting equipment. “There’s a possibility that we’d try to fit one into an especially busy community library,” she said, “but for the others there’s really no hope.” At those facilities, self-service kiosks are a more attractive option.

Besides investing in additional self-service equipment, Contra Costa will likely put more resources into RFID tagging, Sanford predicted. “It’s all part of improving the overall service you provide. Circulation is extremely important, but patrons want outreach and support and they want us to be tied in with the arts. You can’t do all that with limited budgets. We need to be more productive, and that’s why these technologies are so important.”

February 2008



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