



## Maintaining High Satisfaction at a Lower Cost

Faced with skyrocketing circulation increases and a hiring cap, Douglas County Libraries turned to Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology. The result: lower costs, while still meeting customers' high expectations.

### The Need

In recent years, Douglas County, Colorado has been among the fastest growing counties in the United States. Located south of Denver along the front range of the Rockies, the county has seen its population (now at 280,000) increase more than 50 percent since 2000. It is also among the country's wealthiest counties, with affluent citizens who have high expectations, especially for service.

Not surprisingly, the skyrocketing population has had repercussions for the seven-branch Douglas County Libraries. Demand for library services and materials has surged, with annual circulation increasing by 20 percent several years in a row. With circulation doubling in four years from 3.5 million items to 7 million items, the library system found itself in a "typical pattern" according to Bob Pasicznyuk, Associate Director of Virtual Services. "Our board capped hiring. We couldn't bring in more people and, even if we did, we didn't have room for them in the building. We needed a new way to handle the volume."

### The Solution

The staff turned to RFID technology because of its benefits to both "front and back office operations," explained Pasicznyuk. "We thought we could get to 90 percent self-service." Achieving that level of customer participation would translate to the significant increase in productivity that the libraries needed.

At the same time, staff could foresee that the easy-to-use technology would impress their customers. "We wanted to provide a startling patron experience," Pasicznyuk said. "We thought they'd leave saying, 'Wow. That was cool.'"

After researching the technology and talking to colleagues who had already installed RFID, Douglas County Libraries opted for a system from 3M that included an RFID-equipped self-service checkout and an automated materials handling system for returns. A self-pay credit card feature for fines and fees was added later.

### The Result

The first part of the changeover—converting 750,000 items to RFID in just five months—might sound like a daunting and disruptive task, but Pasicznyuk said customers found the transition virtually seamless. Some customers were skeptical at first, he said, "but we've had no complaints about the conversion or the system. None. In fact, customers have written to us saying that it was easier than they dreamed it could be."

And many customers have been wowed by the experience. "Over a year later, I still watch them at the circulation desk, and they find it amazing," Pasicznyuk said. "They put down a stack of items and they are instantly checked out. There's no retail experience like it. Before, if we were busy, they might wait in line five to seven minutes. With RFID, it's not even one minute. It provides patrons with an ideal self-service experience."



# Create a More Human Library

The library board is similarly delighted, although for different reasons: the system easily achieved its goal of 90 percent self-service for checkout and return of materials. The increased productivity has meant that service has gone up while staffing costs have eased (due to attrition). As a result, the library's CFO expects the system to pay for itself in just two years.

The self-pay credit card feature for fines and fees has also contributed to the financial benefits: collections are up nearly 50 percent in the first year of operation. "Customers enjoy using the SelfCheck System, and once we added the payments option, it became very convenient to make payments when they don't have the cash with them," Pasicznyuk said. "Another factor might be the impersonal nature of dealing with a machine for fines and fees. Some customers are more comfortable that way."

## Tips for Libraries Considering RFID

Pasicznyuk offered a number of tips for libraries that are thinking about switching to RFID technology. First, he recommended that libraries perform a "deep weeding" of materials before converting to the new technology. (Douglas County removed roughly 9 percent of its collection before tagging began.)

Second, even in an RFID-equipped library, remember that customer service is still critical. Some customers—mothers with young children, for example, or first-time visitors who are new to RFID—will still need assistance.

Next, libraries that want to increase self-service need to focus on eliminating any rules that slow people down. "We don't ask for a PIN. We don't make them review their account. We don't make them pay fines until they get over \$20. We looked at all the rules and asked ourselves how many people were being inconvenienced for a rule that applied to only a few people."

Finally, he counseled library directors to be patient as their staffs change roles. In Douglas County, the opportunities presented by the technology have required a significant shift in the way staff members look at their jobs. "We have spent more time adjusting our culture, workflow, and library expectations to the benefits of RFID than we have adjusting our expectations about what the product can do."

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## 3M Library Systems

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