



Create a more human library

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and it’s the way the world works today.”

Looking to increase staff efficiency, Florida’s Orange County Library System chose a self-service system based on radio frequency identification (RFID). It’s easier to use than competing systems, staff members say, and it represents the future of information technology in libraries.

The Need

Central Florida’s fast-growing Orange County takes its name from the acres of orange groves that once covered the landscape. While some groves remain, the county has undergone a dramatic transformation since the 1970s. Agriculture is being replaced by residential developments and tourist destinations such as Walt Disney World. The rapid increase in population, now more than 1 million, has been matched by an increased demand for library services.

The Orange County Library System (OCLS) has responded by building an extensive organization, with 15 locations and 2 million items. Annual circulation has hit 8.5 million items and continues to grow.

The community has enthusiastically supported the library’s expansion, but OCLS staff has been mindful about exploiting all opportunities for increasing their efficiency and maintaining a high level of customer satisfaction. An obvious strategy for achieving these goals was the acquisition of equipment that would allow customers to check out items on their own.

“For staff, the process of checking out is rote and repetitive,” explained Branch Administrator Sally Fry. “We realized that if we went to a self-service system, the staff would then have the time to work directly with customers on tasks that require human interaction, such as answering research questions and explaining how to use the computers.”

Most customers were ready to make the transition, added Branch Administrator Wendy Bost. “Self-service keeps people moving,” she said, “and it’s the way the world works today.”

The Solution

The staff began to explore available technologies in 2001 and eventually decided to acquire a radio frequency identification (RFID) system. “We looked at using a barcode system, but it can be difficult for some people,” Bost explained. “We thought that RFID was the future and it gave us the option of additional security.”

The OCLS chose the RFID system from 3M, which included a 3M™ SelfCheck™ System for self-checkout. “We were already a 3M customer,” Fry said. “We were using 3M security strips and gates and we knew the company had a good reputation for self-service and security.” Staff talked with other vendors but stuck with 3M because, Fry said, “they have a proven track record. Most other RFID vendors don’t have 3M’s longevity, and its ability to support the system. We saw some things that we liked with other vendors, but we knew 3M would remain a reliable supplier. We were making a long term commitment to this technology, and we knew they were also in it for the long term.”

The Result

The OCLS has taken a deliberate approach to implementing RFID, explained Branch Administrator Craig Wilkins. Since 2002, it has opened one new branch with RFID technology in place, and it has converted seven other branches. “At our existing locations, we analyze and weed the collection as we go and we take the time to redesign and rewire the circulation desk. This way, we never have to close a library to make the transition to RFID.”

Customers have been uniformly pleased with the system. “One of the first things we learned,” Fry said, “is that if you give people a choice, they want self-service.” Today, at most of the RFID-equipped OCLS locations, about 90 percent of the items are checked out using the 3M SelfCheck System. “Acceptance has been very, very strong,” Fry noted, pointing out that in a recent survey, nearly 90 percent of customers rated the system “satisfactory” or “extremely satisfactory.” Comments have been positive and customers are asking the staff to begin converting the branches that don’t yet have the 3M™ RFID System.

One benefit of the system is the increased confidentiality that self-checkout provides. Several items can be placed on the SelfCheck System and the check-out is instantaneous. “It’s done and there’s no one around you,” Fry said. No staff member handles the item and observes the subject matter.

Staff members have been just as satisfied as customers, according to Bost. “If we told the staff that we were taking away the SelfCheck System, the majority of them would freak out. They would have a nervous breakdown. The acceptance of the system has been overwhelming.”

RFID conversions are planned for the system’s remaining branches and OCLS continues to seek out new technology to increase staff efficiency. In September 2007, for example, it installed its first 3M SelfCheck System C-Series, an automated materials handling system to receive and sort returns. Additional installations are expected as funding becomes available.

July 2008