



# Create a more human library

## Emphasis on the Customer

*The Maricopa County Library District has embraced radio frequency identification (RFID)—adopting it early, using it extensively, searching out new ways to apply it to streamline processes—all in service to one goal: improving customer satisfaction.*

### The Library

In 2002, the librarians serving Arizona's Maricopa County found themselves in a dilemma shared by colleagues in other fast-growing districts. The county's population was up. Circulation in the district's 12 branch libraries was up. And yet the resources needed to maintain or add staff were holding steady. "We didn't have the funding to keep adding new staff," explained Vicki Terbovich, Chief Technology Officer, Maricopa County Library District (MCLD). "We needed something that would free our people up to provide the service our customers expect."

The library already had a history of boosting staff productivity through new technology. ("We were one of the first institutions in North America to install self-service machines," Terbovich said.) The adoption of RFID technology from 3M was a natural next step—and one that the county system undertook with enthusiasm.

Using several small teams, a pilot conversion of 80,000 items was completed in less than five weeks. The entire system, with 1.5 million items, was converted in six months. And as the system grew—four additional branches opened over the next five years—each new facility was equipped with RFID before it opened. Over the years, the district also added automated check-in and sortation systems at six branches, with a seventh installation planned for next year.

### Five Years of Experience

Today, with five years of experience to draw on, Terbovich is confident that the installation of a district-wide 3M™ RFID System was the right decision. The county's annual circulation of more than 5 million items is handled efficiently and customers are universally pleased with the system's reliability and ease of use.

That customer satisfaction has been a primary driver in the district's approach to all aspects of its operations, from staff allocation to the "look and feel" of the branch libraries. "We know we have to reach out to our customers," Terbovich said. "We have to merchandise ourselves." For example, MCLD customers have repeatedly indicated that they want an organization and sensibility that is similar to what they find in retail establishments. "We know that if we don't do this," she added starkly, "libraries are going to close. The retail stores will overshadow us."

RFID has helped the transition to a more customer-oriented system. Because of the technology, self-service checkouts account for approximately 85 percent of total circulation, with some branches reporting self-service as high as 98 percent of the total. A recently installed self-pay service lets customers take care of their fines without assistance. As a result, librarians spend less time on manual circulation and shelf-management chores and more time with customers. They become "walk-about" librarians, moving throughout the facility where they can help customers find specific material and can suggest additional books or other resources.

"The RFID system helps us achieve a very nice mix of high tech and high touch," Terbovich said.

She added that the automated check-in and sortation systems have been "wildly successful" and now handle about half of all returns (even though they are installed at only six of the district's 16 branches). "They've given us a great return on our investment," she said, "which is why we're about to install another one."

The obvious benefit of automated materials handling is speed: books move back to the shelves about four times faster than they do with manual check-in and sorting, “We’ve moved from days to hours,” Terbovich said. “With our manual system, it takes about 48 hours to reshelve an item. With the automated RFID system, it’s 10 to 12 hours.” And that speed translates into customer satisfaction: “It means less time waiting for popular materials.”

RFID’s impact on shelf management is another example of how the technology can improve customer satisfaction. MCLD staff uses the hand-held 3M™ Digital Library Assistant (DLA) to oversee the everyday maintenance of a branch’s collection, including the weeding of dated items. “Our customers want the latest nonfiction, for instance, so we use the DLA to weed out older material,” Terbovich said. “We also use it for confirming that we are accurately describing what’s on our shelves and where it is. It has become essential to our operations.”

The past five years have also validated the projected return on MCLD’s investment in RFID. As the community expands, the use of RFID can expand to accommodate it—and staffing costs are held in line. “It has been incorporated in the fabric of our organization,” Terbovich said. “It is a part of how we do business, how we continue to raise the bar on service.”

## A Pathway to the Future

Terbovich added that the system has done more than measure up to original expectations for productivity gains and customer service. 3M has also made regular upgrades to ensure that the system remains functional as the technology evolves and industry practices change.

When the MCLD system was initially installed, most RFID tags and readers were built around proprietary designs. The prospect of an “open systems environment”—when tags from one manufacturer could be read by equipment from another—seemed a long way off.

Today, that open systems environment seems much closer. The International Standards Organization (ISO) has already issued some global standards and more are expected in the next few years. The latest tags reflect these global standards, and the latest equipment and software are designed to accommodate new and older tags.

MCLD, like many other libraries, is undertaking a gradual transition to the next generation of RFID tags. 3M is doing its part to make that transition as smooth as possible. The company is offering tags that reflect the new ISO standards, and it is providing software upgrades so that MCLD’s existing equipment will be able to read the new tags as well as earlier versions (which will not need to be replaced).

“3M has given us an upgrade pathway,” Terbovich said. “They’ve provided a roadmap to the future, to an open systems environment. It’s good to know that with this system we won’t have to retag everything.”

October 2007