

Librarians Focus on RFID

RFID was one of the hot topics at the Public Library Association's recent convention in Seattle.

March 15, 2004—Your local librarian may be more wise to RFID than you realize. More than 8,000 librarians and library staff members attended the Public Library Association's annual convention in Seattle recently. While RFID was not the centerpiece of the program, it was clearly a hot topic. Some 375 people attended an RFID session.

RFID has been used in libraries for several years. It was originally implemented as a security solution, but now the technology is being used for inventory management, self-checkout and automated return systems. Some libraries are even using RFID to automate materials handling. The Eugene Public Library in Oregon, for instance, has sorters and conveyer belt systems that deposit returned books into specified bins that are linked through an RFID number to specific sections of the library.

The two largest vendors of RFID products for libraries are Checkpoint Systems and 3M. Systems are also available from Bibliotheca, ID Systems, Tech Logic, Vernon Library Supplies and VTLS.

3M announced at the convention that it has a new offering that integrates the security aspect of checkout into the RFID chip. Until now, 3M had insisted that this was an inferior solution. The company had required the installation of both an RFID chip for library management and an additional electromagnetic tag for handling security checkout. While 3M has not abandoned its "two-tag" solution, the new offering demonstrates the recent pressure coming from large libraries to provide a complete RFID solution.

The frequency used in libraries is 13.56 MHz and the read ranges are limited—usually to around 1 foot or less, except at security gates where increased power in the readers allows for a slightly longer read range.

Counter to what you may be reading and hearing in the general media, RFID privacy issues were not a pressing concern for most librarians at the conference (their focus was on the Child Internet Privacy Act). Most librarians understand the limitations of RFID read ranges in libraries—the government is unlikely to track what people are reading if it has to get to within a foot of someone to scan a tag. They also understand that information on customers and the materials they have checked-out is stored in the library software systems, so the threat to privacy isn't about the misuse of RFID but the potential abuse of the Patriot Act to get access to those records.

According Venture Development, a Natick, Mass.-based technology research company, the library RFID market will see a compound annual growth rate of 31 percent through 2006. The biggest factor limiting the use of RFID in libraries is tag costs, which range from 50 to 70 cents each.

There is little doubt that RFID usage in libraries is becoming a necessity. There is pressure on both public and academic libraries to increase productivity and become more like "for profit" institutions and to do more with smaller budgets. It's estimated that nearly 60 percent of all current librarians in the United States will retire in 12 to 15 years, so the timing is right to increase the usage of RFID technology to automate many library processes.

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