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A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians

BOOK

Wireless Networking

Louise E. Alcorn and Maryellen Mott Allen

In the March 2003 issue of *Computers in Libraries*, Nancy Allmang wrote an excellent article on her library's process for implementing a wireless laptop loan service as part of a larger wireless project. Her experience, as excerpted in the following "User Experience," presents good items and issues to consider when purchasing wireless devices for circulation.

We knew what we were after—convenience for our customers. A recent survey had shown that, above all, our customers clamored for additional electronic resources. . . . So we decided on a program that would enable library users to borrow equipment to access the wireless LAN. We planned to allow researchers and guests to check out hardware (wireless laptops or wireless PC cards, and Pocket PCs with expansion packs and wireless CompactFlash, or CF, cards) at the circulation desk for 2 hours at a time.

We outlined what this would mean for our customers and staff. Then we listed the wireless equipment we already had:

- Six Dell laptops with built-in wireless capability
- Four wireless LAN PC cards (for laptops that are not wireless)
- Five iPAQ H3970 Pocket PCs (PDAs with Windows-type operating systems)
- Five Socket wireless LAN CF cards
- Three FlyJacket wireless presentation devices
(<http://www.lifeview.com.tw/eng/pro%5fia%5fflyjacket.html>)
- One secure locking cabinet

And then we considered the peripherals we might want to consider buying: portable keyboards and pen text scanners. A short time later we purchased expansion packs to fit around the iPAQs to provide slots for the wireless CF LAN cards.

. . . Here's where we spelled out the details for putting our program into action. Policy and Procedures: First of all, our cataloging staff would catalog all hardware using our Sirsi integrated library system, and then affix bar code stickers. We outlined procedures that our circulation staff would then follow:

- Scan equipment bar codes into the Sirsi system. (This would make it easy to track usage of the equipment.)
- Give out a printed quickstart guide with each piece of hardware borrowed.

- Have the user leave a driver's license or passport at the circulation desk.
- Have the user sign a responsibility form with these caveats: Users 1) will not use the equipment for any malicious purpose, 2) understand the (stated) value of the borrowed hardware, 3) will keep it in the library, and 4) agree to cover the equipment's cost if they're unable to return it.
- Circulation staff will briefly show the user how to sign onto the network using the equipment. A user desiring further help will take the device to the reference desk for librarian assistance.

Later, when laptops were returned, circulation staff would put them aside for re-imaging procedures by our technical support people. (Allmang 2003, 20)

Authors' Note—In 2005, she wrote back in to the magazine, and gave an update on their experience with this service:

You may remember an article a while back ("Our Plan for a Wireless Loan Service." CIL vol. 23, # 3, March 2003) about plans of the Research Library of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Information Services Division in Gaithersburg, Maryland, to launch a wireless laptop loan program. We wanted to offer six wireless laptops for customers to borrow at the circulation desk to use throughout the library's three floors and on the patio outside. Those with NIST-owned laptops could borrow wireless LAN cards in the same way and request NIST IT support experts to configure them to work on the wireless LAN.

... Now that the program's run for over a year we thought we'd let you know how it turned out. The program was generally successful and attracted lots of positive attention to the library. In July 2004, an analysis of the first complete year's wireless usage showed the laptop program had built a small core of big fans across the organization. Laptops were checked out a total of 145 times, and it was clear that those who'd checked them out had come back for more: 81 percent of all laptops checked out were to repeat customers ... Two "mega-users" borrowed laptops 14 and 17 times during the program's maiden year and the average borrower checked out a wireless laptop three times ...

Throughout the first year, customers told us they liked the wireless program. They were able to print to a laser printer equipped with a wireless print server, also located in the library. They did

comment that they'd like to be [sic] allowed to bring in and use their personal laptops from home on the wireless network, but strict security regulations prohibit this. During the first year's pilot, two users did check out wireless LAN cards and used them successfully to access the network with NIST-owned laptops.

Now in its second year, the program's been promoted from a pilot to a standard library service. The wireless network's encryption has been upgraded from Wired Equivalent Privacy (WEP) to WPA Protected Access (WPA). With the new, more secure system, customers can log on to library laptops using their own NIST ID and password and save work directly to their desktop accounts. This is a very popular option. Using the new WPA network, they also can map over the network to print wirelessly either in the library or in their offices. (Allmang 2005: 52)