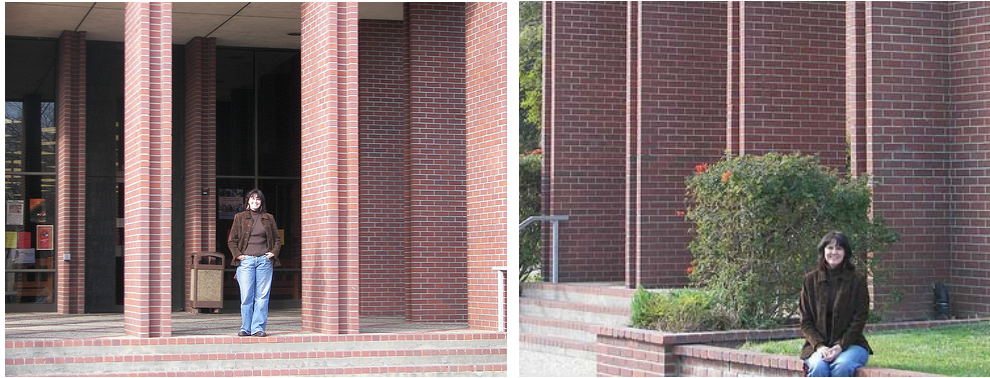


A Swedish Book Kiosk Travels to Rural California

As Reported by Loren McCrory, Yuba County Library Director



Finally it looks as if we have a working book dispenser. For months we have been running back and forth to “the machine” -- every day, or every other day, or sometimes more than once a day -- to troubleshoot technical problems. Our patrons in Wheatland have more or less given up on the thing and we are now starting from scratch in terms of generating public interest. But hey, that's why they call it beta testing.

A Cutting-Edge Solution to an Age-Old Problem

With a service area of over 600 square miles, and a service population of just over 70,000, [Yuba County Library System](#) needed help. Yuba County's single facility in Marysville, even with a 32-foot bookmobile, is grossly under-resourced for meeting the needs of all county residents. Because of ongoing budget constraints, we had been searching for a technological solution to our problem as a way to keep overhead costs to a minimum. The *cybrary* concept is the template we use when considering appropriate uses for our local impact fees.

So, when the [California State Library \(CSL\)](#) asked us to be involved in testing a \$100,000 automated book dispenser that supposedly required very little money or staff time to maintain, we enthusiastically agreed. Installation and maintenance weren't quite as simple as advertised; but in the end we learned some invaluable lessons, acquired new skills, and came out the other side with an ILS upgrade and a working book dispenser that holds 450 books at a time!

[Contra Costa County Library \(CCCL\)](#) submitted the original grant proposal after a former staff member saw one of the dispensers during a visit to Stockholm, and CSL funded it with money from the Library Systems and Technologies Act (LSTA). The California State Librarian,

Susan Hildreth, suggested they bring in a rural library to beta test the dispenser alongside the more urban/suburban Contra Costa System. [Distec](#), the Swedish manufacturer, originally created the Bokomaten book dispenser for the European market, and only recently began marketing it in the states under the name GoLibrary.

For those who've never seen one, an automated book dispenser is a vending machine for books, or a biblio-ATM if you will. Patrons just walk up to the dispenser, swipe their library card, and choose from the 450 books that the dispenser holds at that moment. The machine spits out the items and they're due back on the same schedule as an item checked out of our main branch. Patrons can return the books to the dispenser itself, our main branch, or our bookmobile.

Two Projects in One

Because of our determination and commitment to the project, we decided to fold in an ILS system migration and upgrade into our already ambitious plans. Actually, to be honest, we didn't have much choice. The upgrade was an essential piece of the puzzle, as our library had been piggybacking on the local community college's outdated ILS since we first automated in 2000 and their software wasn't SIP2 compliant (a requirement for integration with GoLibrary). In order to minimize the costs, we stayed with the college's ILS vendor, SIRSI, and became one of the first libraries in California to take advantage of their new Software as a Service (SaaS). In other words, our ILS is now hosted on a SIRSI server and running the enhanced version of SIRSI.net, IBistro. The enhanced version was essential for patrons searching and browsing at the machine, since without it the dispenser's touch screen interface would have lacked the visual reinforcement of book covers and the enriched summaries.

According to Distec, all we needed to get started was a location for the dispenser, a dedicated high-speed Internet connection, a SIP2-compliant ILS, and RFID tags on the books to be circulated from the machine. Unfortunately, no one in our library system had experience with SIP2 or RFID, but eventually, we were able to cobble together a crash course for ourselves with CCCL's gracious tech support. If you aren't up on recent developments in library automation, SIP2 is a protocol that facilitates communication between a circulation system, or the circulation module of an ILS, and automated circulation equipment, such as patron self-check devices and book dispensers. RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) stores information about an item on an integrated circuit (also known as a "tag") attached to that item. In the library context RFID facilitates shelving, inventory, circulation, security and other functions.

Communicating with Vendors

In our innocence, which is always a good excuse for not knowing, we didn't realize how long it would take to complete the requirements for the SIP2 agreement. Our SIP2 clause was straightforward and SIRSI added it onto our migration contract, but Distec did not yet have a third-party SIP2 agreement with SIRSI, or any vendors in the country for that matter; so we found ourselves helping to negotiate theirs as well as ours. In this and other ways Distec was quite dependent on us for help with facilitation. Unfortunately, there were limits to the help we could offer, because we were so green ourselves when it came to communicating with an ILS vendor.

On the other hand, some interactions went very smoothly, thanks largely to CALIFA, a membership-based library consortium, which was assigned by the State Library to negotiate the contract and deal with shipping the machine from Europe, both huge undertakings. And, as I've mentioned already, Contra Costa Library's knowledgeable Deputy Director, Cathy Sanford, and her IT staff were very gracious in taking time to explain many of the fundamentals to their less sophisticated grant partner.

Communicating with IT

I found it fascinating that, in many ways, it was no easier communicating with our own IT department down the street than it was with Distec's IT staff on the other side of the world. Though our IT staff were charmed with the whole idea of an automated book dispenser, and were ready and willing to put it on the fast track for us, time zone differences and other demands on their time made it difficult to get the two groups of tech specialists to communicate directly. My lack of technical expertise may have worsened the bottleneck, since I had only a very simplistic understanding of the concepts behind the data I was passing between the two groups. I should also mention here that we initially pitched the grant to local decision-makers as a project that would require minimal County resources. So anything requiring time from our County IT department was monitored very closely and had to be kept to a minimum.

In spite of the communication headaches, this project instilled in me tremendous respect for those working on the tech side of things and I now have an inkling of the pressure they feel every day. Our project was all-engulfing for over a year and timing for everything had to be at warp speed. I've heard that this is known in techie land as "a death-march project." If you deal with tech projects often then you're probably familiar with these insane expectations and deadlines.

Unexpected Challenges

One problem that surprised both Yuba County and CCCL was the book size limitation. With a European market in mind, Distec designed the GoLibrary's book slots for standard European publishing sizes. The American publishing industry, on the other hand, employs a much wider range of book sizes. Doing

collection development according to size of book is certainly not something our professors recommended in library school.

Furthermore, we determined that having the book cover, a summary, and other enriched record fields would be critical for engaging patrons and enticing them to check out books. Small independent press titles or titles with older publication dates are examples of the kinds of materials that might not have enhanced content available. We learned the hard way to check for the enhanced content before selecting a book to add. We were forced to de-select many items, initially prepared for the machine, because we did not want anything in the book dispenser to be represented by a text-only record. In some instances we resorted to showing a picture of an edition of the book other than the one that was actually in the machine.

Communication is Key

Communication was definitely the key factor at every stage of this project, and communication between techies and non-techies has become a pet area of research for me as a result. Since completing the grant project, I've learned that miscommunication is a problem in organizations of every size and description. Techs admit that explaining the whys and wherefores, and teaching someone to use the products they've created are the least-liked aspects of their jobs. I am learning more everyday about the growing need for specially-trained individuals to function as messengers between the two worlds. Millions of dollars are wasted annually due to this "communication disconnect".

Library tech staff or librarians with strong tech backgrounds could well be the knowledge-management experts of the 21st century. In order to acquire this expertise, we'll need to develop a set of standards and best practices for tearing down the tech-nontech language barrier. In the meantime though, please add "learning tech-speak" to your list of things to do. We, as librarians, are in a unique position to translate between the literate few and the "illiterate" or "still learning" masses.

For more information on California's GoLibrary project, visit the [vendor's Web Site](#) or the [CALIFA GoLibrary Project page](#) which links to photos and videos of the Yuba County dispenser.

About the Author:

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