

# Library RFID: The First Ten Years

By Jeff Narver.

It is difficult to believe that library RFID is more than 10 years old, and that the first program was installed in the United States in 1999. To many, RFID still seems like a new technology, despite the fact that its non-library use goes back over 70 years. Looking back on the evolution of RFID technologies, applications and public perceptions, it is obvious that the changes in all three have been dramatic. RFID has evolved from its first, 1999, Stone Age library installation, full of fear and wonder, to 2011, in which RFID is just another productivity and security option, within the reach of most libraries. This shift in RFID technology, and public perception, during the past decade, has been nothing short of spectacular.

Today we are still in the early adoption stage of library RFID, but with more and more public and academic libraries converting, or investigating the conversion of their collections, the pace of change is accelerating. For those of us involved in libraries and RFID on a day-to-day basis, we tend to forget the important milestones of change that provided the foundations of our current position and the fuel for innovations to come.

In this article, I want to review some of these critical RFID milestones from the past 10 years, gleaned from interviews with librarians and RFID vendors. This short reflection will not only help us understand how and why RFID gained in popularity, but it may also give us clues to better select, adopt and understand the benefits of the many new library technologies which will be available in the coming years.

## Price reduction

The most radical, and perhaps welcome, change in library RFID was the dramatic reduction in the price of the tags. This price reduction, primarily a matter of economies of scale and new manufacturing techniques, opened up RFID as a possibility to small single branch and large multi-branch libraries alike. The reduction in the price of the tags, in some cases by as much as 80 per cent, has seriously reduced the most significant entry barrier to an RFID library.

## Standardization

Beginning early in 2008 the move to standardize the manufacturing and encoding of RFID tags has unlocked the world of interoperability. No longer is a

library limited to only one manufacturer's tags and equipment. Standardization of tags, has and will allow libraries to mix and match the tags and equipment that is best for their systems. With interoperability, another significant barrier to RFID entry has been reduced.

## User friendly

Self service certainly didn't start with RFID, self check units and sortation have been around for years, but RFID has made them easier and more user friendly. The speed of circulation and the ability to check out stacks of books have made RFID self check a great success in many libraries. The simplicity of not have to line up the barcode on the item under the scanner, or to ensure that the EM strip get desensitized, makes the customer experience, easier, faster and therefore more often used.

## Acceptance

The public and library staff understanding and acceptance of the benefits of RFID has been one of the greatest changes in the past decade. As with many new technologies, there are always a few early adopters, but the majority, generally, takes a wait and see attitude. Early concerns about personal privacy, and RFID vandalism, spread in articles and blog sites during the early years. No one wanted strangers, or orbiting satellites, to be able to identify what library customers were reading, or vandals, with hand held readers to randomly reprogram library RFID tags. Early privacy paranoia, which never really materialized in Canada, evaporated completely with the practice of programming only the barcode information on RFID tags.

Today, in many RFID libraries, the staff, far from being resistant to it, can't imagine getting along without the



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productivity gains of RFID. In the words of one senior librarian: "Ten years ago neither customers, nor staff wanted RFID self-service equipment. Now both complain if we don't have it."

### Improved productivity

In concert with the acceptance of the new RFID applications, is the reliance of many RFID libraries on the unique productivity gains associated with shelf management practices. The hand held inventory wands that can simultaneously, identify holds, weeds, lost items, and inventory, can be an enormous labour and money saver for libraries. The labour saved due to this and other productivity gains can, and has been, applied to the dozens of programs that libraries wished they had the resources to create.

### The future

Looking back ten years and seeing how far we've come with library RFID leaves me to wonder where we will be in the next ten years. E libraries, hand held workstations and new wireless RFID applications would speed the evolution, reduce labour, add measurable productivity and hopefully delight both library staff and customers. Who knows where libraries can take RFID, but as we reflect upon the progress of the past ten years, I'm reminded of the lyrics of a Grateful Dead song, "what a long strange trip it's been."

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