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Seattle Public Library Patron Notice Improvements

The Information Technology Department of the Seattle Public Library has taken several steps over recent years to communicate more efficiently with our users, realizing paper and cost savings at the same time. The PaperCuts Team thought we would share these, hoping other agencies might find these strategies helpful.

In years past, the library notified borrowers of reserved books available (holds) and past due items (over dues) via pin-feed mailers purchased from commercial vendors. These mailers included carbon inserts between two sheets of paper with tear offs on the edges to open them. Each mailer could display information for five to six items, and notices for holds and over dues were sent separately. In 2003, the library sent 17,000 notices per month.

Meanwhile, the library installed its TeleCirc system which notifies library borrowers via automated telephone messages of holds waiting for pick-up and of items past due to be returned. In 2001, Seattle Public Library started sending notices via email to users able to accept them that way. Email notices advise borrowers not only of holds pending and over dues accruing fines, but also of items approaching the end of their loan period.

In fall of 2007, the Library IT department installed a new system for preparing borrower notices. Commercial pin-feed mailers, generating carbon into the waste stream, were replaced by 100% recycled paper from City Warehousing Services. Use of Harbor 100 letter-size paper, the City's standard, allows the Library to print twenty-five items on a sheet, for both holds and over dues together, compared with the 5 – 6 on the old mailers. The Library sends approximately 12,500 of the new notices per month, about 74% of the volume sent in 2003.

In the old system, when Library users moved, their notices would come back for an address change. Replacement notices were printed and they were mailed again. SPL IT's new system checks for incorrect addresses before mailing and prints the notices after the addresses have been corrected. This adds to the savings in paper and also in postage costs.

Ironically, the paper from City Warehousing Services consumed in preparation of library borrower notices is now visible in the City's paper use statistics, whereas the quantities and cost of the old carbon mailers were not. Use of standard Harbor 100 paper for notices may be increasing the Library's use statistics by 5% annually. But IT's new methods have reduced mailers to about 75% of their 2003 level, have improved service to our customers, and have saved paper, postage, and waste overall.

PaperCuts provides this overview in hopes that some of these techniques may be useful in other departments' applications where the City needs to communicate regularly with a large customer clientele.

Kudos go to Library Information Technology Director Marilyn Sheck and her staff for envisioning and implementing these creative methods. Staff in other Seattle agencies and elsewhere may contact Library IT for follow-on questions about these improvements. Marilyn Sheck's address is marilyn.scheck@spl.org; her phone number is 206/386-4637.