

## An Experiment With Electronic Pagers

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High technology and libraries—we immediately envision automated catalogs, optical bar code checkout, CD-ROM indexes, telefacsimile machines, online databases, etc. This paper is a report of one library's usage of yet another product of technology which originated outside the library world but which might have a place in it. At Krannert Memorial Library of the University of Indianapolis we have experimented with an electronic paging system for over a year and are in a position to comment on its installation and effectiveness.

Our background scenario was simple (and typical)—a library with too few staff and too many hours and librarians harboring a deep-seated service attitude trying desperately to find ways to overcome the former problems. Our small library has only one reference librarian who, obviously, cannot work every hour during the long academic week. Even when she is on duty, it is impossible for her always to be at the

reference desk due to collection development and interlibrary loan responsibilities, not to mention the frequent need to take patrons to find books in the reference stacks or to help them use library equipment. At these times, other patrons needing reference assistance gravitate to the circulation desk where the staff are put in the awkward position of trying to locate the Reference Librarian themselves or, if unsuccessful, to find another professional to deal with the patron.

In order to maximize reference service to a campus constituency becoming increasingly library and information oriented, the other three professionals join the Reference Librarian in working late shifts Monday through Thursday evenings. All staff members participate in a rotation of weekend hours and provide reference assistance to the best of their abilities. However, while on duty during evening or weekend hours, staff members must balance the need to do their own

work at their regular desk with the need to be available for a reference call.

The problem, then, was twofold: how to keep the Reference Librarian apprised of patron needs during her time away from the public desk; and how to provide backup reference assistance when she was busy or at times when she was not in the library. The makeshift system, as outlined above, which had grown up to meet these needs consisted of a physical search for the Reference Librarian if she was in the building followed by a search for another professional if she could not be found. The basic goal of finding an answer to a reference question was usually met, but the frequent slowness in finding a reference person to work with the patron became the impetus to try something new.

One day, when the problem of locating a reference person was being informally discussed, someone jokingly suggested that we needed a "beeper." My immediate reaction was that librarians would probably consider such a device unprofessional or a nuisance. However, the more I thought about it, the more I wondered if perhaps an electronic pager might, indeed, be a solution, not only to the reference dilemma but also to problems my staff sometimes have in finding me, the Library Director, when I am "roving" about in various departments and not in my office.

I visited my local Radio Shack store and decided to purchase an inexpensive paging system to see

whether the concept would work.

Not wanting the monthly expense or inconvenience of a telephone paging service, I selected the Realistic brand PG-80 "8-Channel Digital Paging System" which retails for \$99.95.

The basic set-up includes a base unit and one pager receiver, and I purchased an additional receiver for \$29.95. The base unit is a radio-sized box (6 1/2" x 4 1/2" x 1 1/2") with a large, extension antenna, and it has eight buttons on top for paging up to eight different receivers. In addition, there is an "All Paging" button, a "Store" button (for programming codes), and a "Paging" light which blinks when a receiver button has been pushed. The pager receiver unit which is a matte black plastic is lightweight and compact (4" x 2" x 3/4"), and it has a large clip for fastening to belts, pockets, etc. When the codes between the base unit and the receivers have been coordinated (a five minute job), pushing a base unit button causes the pager to beep and a light on it to flash. The beeping and flashing are canceled with the touch of a button on the pager, or in the event of an unattended pager they will cease after a minute or so.

The system is advertised to have a range up to two miles, but within our library building its extent is two floors. The third floor which is accessible only by elevator or stairwell is not within range of the base unit on the circulation desk, but the second floor and basement can be reached by the pager. The base unit plugs into an ordinary electrical

outlet, and the receivers use three AAA batteries each. I was initially concerned about having to replace batteries frequently but experience has shown that we get several months of service from a single set. The possible longer term solution of purchasing rechargeable batteries and a recharger unit does not really seem necessary.

The electronic paging system has permitted more flexibility of movement by both myself and whichever staff member is covering reference responsibilities. I find that I can move about the library without being out of touch for telephone calls or unexpected visitors who need me personally. Likewise, the Reference Librarian can move about the reference collection or in and out of our technical services area and still be reached for a patron who has asked for help at the circulation desk. In the evening and weekend hours, the staff members on call for reference questions can work at their own desks and still be available when needed. I believe that the quicker response for patrons encourages them to ask for help more often than when they knew they would have to wait for assistance. Another advantage of the reference pager is that when the Reference Librarian is not in the library, or is leaving for the day, the "torch" of reference responsibility is tangibly passed on to another staff member by the transfer of the paging receiver instead of verbal notification alone. We have a rule that the reference librarian's pager will always be in someone's

hands, and that person is, essentially, "on-call" to help patrons. Thus, from the circulation staff's perspective, a simple push of the button will summon a reference person, whomever that might be at the time. In addition, we have adopted a backup procedure in case the "Reference Librarian" button does not get assistance quickly. At these times, the circulation staff member can push my button so that I can come to help the patron. This situation might occur if the Reference Librarian were already busy with a patron or otherwise too occupied to respond to the call.

Another important benefit of the electronic paging system is that the circulation desk person does not have to physically leave the desk area to search for assistance, as he or she did in the past. Leaving the desk unattended is a violation of a cardinal rule of the library, but it was sometimes necessary when other circulation staff were away from the desk (e.g. shelving or servicing equipment.) The pager permits a discreet call for assistance while keeping the desk covered. This electronic connection to assistance is also a benefit for student workers at the circulation desk who may have lost track of where their supervisor has gone just at the time when some dilemma arises which they cannot handle.

It would be incorrect to imply that we have not had some problems with the implementation of an electronic paging system. When we first installed it, we discovered that pushing

a paging button not only sounded the pager but also set off our circulation security alarm system. After experimentation, I found that plugging the base unit into an outlet on a different electrical circuit from the security system stopped this annoyance. The other problems with the paging system have been due to human factors, especially failure to pass the pager to another librarian when going off duty or failure to keep the pager on one's person while on duty. It is true that the receiver unit, while small, is still somewhat of a bother to keep about one's clothing. I find that it fits well in my sport coat pocket, but my female librarian colleagues have a harder time finding a pocket or belt on which to place it. However, when these problems are overcome, the system works well.

Paging systems are becoming increasingly popular in business for executives and other people with whom immediate contact is required—why not librarians? We are bringing technological developments into the library in other areas, such as computers, optical data storage, telecommunication linkages—why not borrow the electronic pager too?