

Ventura County Library – Library Express Hours

Overview:

Using innovative technology called “Open+ (plus)” the Ventura County Library has expanded access to library services at the Hill Road Library during “Express Hours” by opening to the public before the library is officially staffed.

Challenge:

Because of limited funding for staff when the new library opened, administration looked for various options to increase access to collections and services. The library had moved to self-service checkout a few years earlier. The library also had instituted self-service laptop kiosk dispensers and self-service scan/fax service. Wireless printing allowed persons to send their print jobs to a printer and pay for copies without staff intervention. With the focus on patron- empowerment, the question centered on the level of staff involvement and identifying what services could be offered to the public without staff involvement. However, giving access to the building when staff was not around was a hurdle.

Innovative Solution:

Library staff met with a vendor offering the Open+ technology for libraries and settled on this innovative approach to public service. It is a turnkey system that controls the schedule when patrons can use the library when not staffed. The technology ties into the library’s integrated library system containing the patron database, and allows patrons who are 18 and over who have signed up for this value-added service to scan their library card at a reader panel outside the front door and input their PIN. The front door unlocks for their entry. There are numerous security cameras throughout the building as part of this integrated system, and the cameras can be monitored remotely. The system also allows for turning on and off the library’s alarm system, and will eventually offer “people counters” to monitor use of the building. Now patrons may enter the library on their own, browse and check out collections, check out laptop computers for use in the library, use the wifi, use the library meeting rooms, purchase used books, pick up holds, and more without staff being present.

Originality

Ventura County Library is the first library on the West Coast to use this vendor’s “Open+” solution for patron access to the when not staffed, and was only the third library in the United States to use it. The technology has been successfully in use for over 10 years in Europe, but the Ventura County Library is truly an early adopter for use in the United States. Additionally, the Ventura County Library’s Hill Road Library is the first library in the United States to use this technology in a facility that has no staff in the building at all, and allows patrons access to the entire library facility. The other two libraries using the Open+ technology either have library staff in administrative offices in the same building during Open+ hours, or allow access to only a portion of the library for pickup of holds.

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Cost Effectiveness:

The implementation of the Open+ system resulted in a 30% increase in total hours of operation at the Hill Road Library. The annual cost for the Open+ service at the Hill Road Library is \$11,100 which equates to approximately \$17.79 per hour for the anticipated 12 Express Hours per week. Using the approximate \$43.95/hourly rate for salary and benefits for a Librarian position, the Open+ technology increases access to basic library services at almost a 60% discount for the Library compared to traditional costs for staffed operations, with the ability to expand Express Hours at any time on an unlimited basis at no additional annual charge to the Library.

Results:

Patrons have responded positively to the program. In the first two months, over 115 patrons signed up for the service. These extra Express Hours are currently in the morning for two hours from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. before the library officially opens. During this time, Express Hours users range from senior citizens to parents with small children. At many times during Express Hours, one can find parents reading to children in the children's section of the library, people reading newspapers and magazines, small groups using the library's study rooms, people using the libraries laptop computers, and much more. In an article in the Ventura County Star newspaper on March 10, 2018, a young mother was quoted as saying that the system was "pretty simple" and convenient. She also added that the early bird schedule suits her because she can stop by after taking her second-grader to school. She said, "After I drop her off, I am going to study and spend quite time for myself."

When patrons opt in for the Express Hours service, they receive a special orientation from library staff about acceptable use of the library and use of the system. Since implementation, library staff members have discovered the technology not only allows increased access to library services, but also allows staff more time for outreach in the community. Through the ability to remotely monitor cameras and the eventual ability to collect library use data, the technology has also added new functionality for library management and operations to staff.

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