

More than Books

Check out self-check

Self-service options abound, from gas stations to grocery stores, for operations that aim to satisfy an increasingly independent consumer. Libraries are no exception. I would argue that, with their card catalog of the past and today's online catalog of materials, libraries have been in the vanguard of enabling customers to find what they want on their own.

Freeport Library instituted automated booking of computer time a couple of years ago. Self-scheduling of computer time receives a thumbs up from me for its unique benefit of taking library staff out of the role of computer police.

Our public computers are heavily used and an important service to the community, but as we were able to add computers, thanks to the Frances Woodhouse bequest, we found that staff were spending more and more of their time getting people on and off the public computers and refereeing disputes. The automatic booking frees up staff to assist with reference and readers' advisory services. Determining who is next and whether or not extra time is available on a machine is settled fairly and decisively with automated scheduling.

Starting earlier this month, the public has another option for self-service, a 3M SelfCheck terminal, which has been installed in the library's spacious circulation desk. It will handle straightforward transactions, checking out a variety of materials and eliminating some of the bottleneck at busy times at the desk.

If you're standing behind a family who is checking out a week's worth of reading and viewing or if the person ahead of you is applying for a new card and you just have a couple of items to borrow, you may find self-check a convenience. The SelfCheck terminal is pretty straightforward, but staff is also available and happy to demonstrate how it works.

My enthusiasm for the self-check option goes beyond its convenience, however. I am a big advocate of the confidentiality people receive from self-service. In addition to giving customers a way to circumvent lines, it provides an additional level of privacy for individuals wishing to borrow materials of a sensitive or personal nature. If I'm borrowing "Bankruptcy for Dummies," the last thing I want is face-to-face time with even the friendliest and most accommodating of staff.

Food for Fines Update

I could be wrong, but it looks to me like we may have a record collection this year of food for fines, and there is still a week to go.

If you read this column, you already know that, during the month of February, the library offers the public an opportunity to clear up any of those annoying library fines by bringing in canned

food or other non-perishable food items. Bring in a can of tuna, for example, and we'll "forgive" up to \$1 in fines. Two cans get \$2 off your record. All food collected stays in the community and will be divided at the end of the month between the Salvation Army and Freeport Area Church Cooperative (FACC).

This is a chance to clear up some overdue fines and help the less fortunate at the same time. If the truth be known, however, our automated circulation system, PrairieCat, provides really good inventory control, so fines are down, and that's a good thing. What I want to do is remind you that you don't have to have fines to donate to the drive. Consider the library a convenient collection point for a post-holiday community food drive.

Suggestions for the drive, beyond above mentioned tuna, include vegetables, chili, canned meats, jars of baby food or baby formula, and the ever-popular peanut butter.