Alliance Library System

Case Study

The Alliance Library System utilizes multi-tier licensing and a slew of SirsiDynix products to serve each of its diverse libraries at their respective budget levels.

"Holds have been insanely popular... The first year [on the Symphony® ILS] the number of items the system delivered was up a couple hundred percent. The year after that, it's a couple hundred more."

— Kendal Orrison

Alliance Library System Director

All the tools a consortium needs

The Alliance Library System covers 14,000 square miles and serves 260 libraries in central and west central Illinois. As a resource-sharing alliance for public libraries large and small, numerous K-12 schools, colleges and a historical society, to name a few, the Alliance consortium has a lot of requirements to account for. Alliance Director Kendal Orrison puts it simply.

"Basically, we have the problem of being a very large consortium," Orrison said. "Our libraries want to operate separately regarding day-to-day policies, and we don't force them to share circs, fines, to catalog the same way and so on."

As Orrison explained, each library within the consortium needs its flexibility. With everything from mid-sized public and special libraries to tiny un-automated sites under the same umbrella, the consortium needed a solution that could bend and flex to accommodate rules, settings, authority controls and policies for 198 very different sites. Furthermore, whatever solution they selected would need to meet both the functionality requirements of the large libraries and price points of the small ones – no small order.

But this "problem," so to speak, presented a unique opportunity for Alliance, and for SirsiDynix, in meeting the varied and diverse needs of the large consortium.

Challenge Overcome:
Pricing and Features for All Shapes and Sizes

One of the biggest challenges for Alliance initially was pricing. Formerly a CARL system consortium, Alliance knew its price constraints but was weary of being the biggest fish in a small pond, as it had been with its previous ILS provider. Many of the Alliance libraries "have just terrible bandwidth issues," Orrison explained, which made its previous system less than functional. That was a barrier. With another ILS provider they looked into, allowing each library to have its own webpage, circulation rules and authority controls wasn't an option.

"We really needed a system that could handle our size and allow us the flexibility to let our libraries do their own thing," Orrison said. "That's very important to us and how we've always done it."

In 2006, after a careful and thorough examination of its needs and options, Alliance selected SirsiDynix. Upon reviewing its needs with the SirsiDynix team, Alliance and SirsiDynix created special multi-tier licensing levels within the system to account for the large libraries, such as Peoria Public, which serves 150,000 patrons at seven branch locations, and the small, rural libraries within the consortium, 100 of which weren't even automated at the time.

"The contract was set up at a price that made it very attractive for us to automate those small libraries," Orrison said. "More than half of those 100 small libraries are automated now, and the only way that was made possible was that [the SirsiDynix team] was kind enough to write a contract where we could have full license for some libraries and partial license for others."

Alliance on the SirsiDynix Symphony® ILS

Now, after three years on SirsiDynix technology, Orrison says his libraries are getting the tools they need at the prices they want, and Alliance as a whole has access to "pretty much all the products that SirsiDynix offers." The big libraries are equipped with the full suite of tools and patron-friendly add-ons, while the small libraries are taken care of with cataloging, searching, holds and basic automation functionality at a more affordable price point.

Some of the most popular features of the new system have been holds, reporting tools, and patron search and discovery through e-Library™, SirsiDynix Enterprise® and add-on LibraryThing, which is installed on its e-Library page(s) so users can use tag-browse searching. But holds, particularly, have been "insanely popular," Orrison said.

"Our hold line has gone absolutely through the roof," Orrison said. "The first year [on the Symphony® ILS] the number of items the system delivered was up a couple hundred percent. The year after that it's a couple hundred more. Each time we keep adding."

On its previous system, most of the Alliance libraries had some hold functionality, but patrons were unable to place holds on materials from other libraries. For Colchester Public, one of the smallest libraries in the consortium, its 1,200-patron community is 45 minutes to an hour away from the next closest library, so "the ability to place a hold on something is paramount." Now the whole system can share and serve patrons better with access to exponentially more information.

"Patrons had been asking for that ability, and we couldn't provide it [before moving to SirsiDynix]," Orrison said. "They would actually send a fax saying 'I want this book.' Now it's all automated and the patron can do it all at home, and that is just quite popular."

Meanwhile, the industry-leading SirsiDynix Symphony® demand management capabilities enable each library to maintain control over how, if and when their materials are accessed. For the K-12 student writing a report about cloning, that means she can access cutting-edge research from a nursing school in the consortia on terms that are appropriate for both.

At the end of the day, however, for the Alliance system and the diverse libraries and communities it supports, it's making the library users happy that counts. And through their new SirsiDynix technology, it has been able to make this priority a reality.

"The patrons really like the system," Orrison said. "And most patrons can find a way to find a book."

JAW-DROPPING REPORTING TOOLS

The in-depth Director's Station® reporting suite has been "very helpful" for the larger libraries interested in collection management and tracking detailed information. Orrison says the libraries can run a report on everything in the library in under a minute – and "that is huge." But for day-to-day library management, Orrison's favorite tool is Web Reporter™.

Recently Orrison – using Web Reporter™, a free font and a modified metric – showed some of his libraries how to change the status of an item type from "new book" to "book," a status change that occurs after an item has been in the collection four months and allows the book to be accessed by everyone, not just the local library customers. Pulling open Web Reporter™, with a few clicks Orrison ran a report (scheduled to automatically run at the first of the month) of all the items ready to be moved to "book" status.

"It spit out a list of title numbers and barcodes – you don't even have to touch the books. It takes five minutes to change the status of 50 items," Orrison raved. "When I showed it to people their jaws dropped on the floor."

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