Wireless Loan Service—One Year Out

You may remember a while back the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Information Services Division's Research Library in Gaithersburg, Maryland, launched a wireless loan program. We made available six wireless laptops for users to borrow at the Circulation Desk to use throughout the Library's three floors and on the patio outside. Those with company-owned laptops could borrow wireless LAN cards in the same way and request NIST IT support experts to configure them to work on the wireless LAN.

We drew up a business plan; formulated policy, hardware management and technical support; trained staff; and marketed the program.

Now that it's run for a year we thought we'd let you know how it's turned out.

The program was generally successful and attracted lots of positive attention to the library. In July 2004 an analysis of the first complete year's wireless usage showed the laptop program had built a small core of big fans across the organization. Laptops were checked out a total 145 times, and it was clear that those who'd checked them out had come back for more: 81% of all laptops checked out were to repeat customers.

Two "mega-users" borrowed laptops 14 and 17 times during the program's maiden year and the average borrower checked out a wireless laptop three times. By far the heaviest months of use were July and August. Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship students who routinely use wireless laptops during the course of their academic year may have contributed to the summer spikes.

Throughout the first year, customers told us they liked the wireless program. They were able to print wirelessly to a laser printer with a wireless print server also located in the library. They did comment that they'd like to be allowed to bring in and use their personal laptops from home on the wireless network, but strict security regulations currently do not permit this. During the first year's pilot, two users did check out wireless LAN cards and used them successfully to access the network with NIST-owned laptops.

Other customer comments at the program's outset: login IDs and passwords were hard to remember, and there was a delay at check-out while staff retrieved the laptops from a locked closet. We promptly streamlined logins and had locks installed on a cabinet behind the circulation desk. The program's recently received accolades from fans who've called it "convenient," "wonderful," and "fabulous."

Now in its second year, the program been promoted from a pilot to a standard library service. The wireless network and encryption have been upgraded from Wired Equivalent Privacy (WEP) to WiFi Protected Access (WPA). With the new, more secure system customers can log on to library laptops using their own NIST ID and password and save work directly to their desktop accounts. This is a very popular option. With the new WPA system they also can map over the network to print wirelessly either here in the library or to a printer in their own office.

One further benefit: we had originally purchased wireless Personal Digital Assistants back in 2003 hoping to lend them to customers, but later learned from our security advisors that network security would be too difficult to maintain. With the upgraded WPA network, however, use of PDAs may be possible and we now are looking into the feasibility of lending them to customers as well.