

The River Forest Public Library Experience with the Kindle

BLAISE DIERKS

The River Forest Public Library serves the 12,000 residents of River Forest, Illinois, a suburban community near Chicago. The library began circulating the Amazon Kindle in July 2008 after three first-generation Kindles were donated. Once the library staff had the opportunity to explore the devices, the next step was getting them to the patrons, but there were several challenges. To purchase and download content, the Kindle was linked to the library's Amazon account, but the Kindles could not circulate with the ability to purchase content to be charged to the library. Several questions had to be answered: What content should be loaded? How should the device be cataloged? What type of case should it circulate in? What should the lending rules and fines entail? Additionally, Amazon's terms of service made the legality of lending the device ambiguous. Despite all of these questions and issues, the library proceeded.

The adult services, technical services, and circulation departments at River Forest worked together to answer these questions and get the Kindles circulating. The questions of content and circulation went hand in hand. The library decided that each Kindle would circulate with preselected themed content. The first three themes were popular fiction, popular nonfiction, and mystery and suspense, for which \$180 was spent on the initial content download. Once the Kindles were loaded, they were deregistered from the library's Amazon account, allowing the patron to read content currently on the device without downloading new content. Staff worried about selecting the deregister option the first time around; who knew what would happen? Fortunately, all content remained on the device, and it was possible to reconnect it to the library account later. This fixed-content solution was the easiest for River Forest at the time, but certainly it is not the only solution. Another option is to download content each time, thus taking advantage of Amazon's wireless delivery of content. River Forest chose the fixed-content option because of the need to deregister and reregister otherwise.

River Forest cataloged each Kindle as a single item attached to one bibliographic record, and titles on the devices were not cataloged. This was a reflection of how the library initially saw the lending of the Kindles. It was less about the content on the device and more about the actual device. Staff felt that patrons just

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wanted to try one out. Other libraries that circulate e-book devices catalog them differently and may include titles on separate bibliographic records. This would be a valuable way of providing patrons the choice and control over what they can read on the Kindle.

Certainly one question that has plagued libraries is the legality of lending Kindles. Although Amazon's ambiguous terms of service and inconsistent responses to inquiries on the lending of Kindles did not clarify the matter, River Forest decided to move forward and began lending the Kindles without contacting Amazon first. Should the library be told to stop lending them, it will.

News of the Kindles spread fast, and holds began to pile up quickly, particularly during the holiday season when patrons wanted the "try it before you buy it" option. After circulating the Kindles for nearly a year, the library added two second-generation Kindles to the circulating collection and an in-house Kindle for use in the library without waiting for holds. Holds have consistently been high, even with five devices in circulation. On average there are ten holds per device, with a total of fifty to seventy patrons waiting for all five Kindles. Holds cannot be placed on the in-house Kindle. The Kindles are circulated to patrons for three weeks at a time with no renewals. They are not sent out through interlibrary loan or used in place of traditional print interlibrary loan for patron requests.

The Kindles have held up well during circulation. They are housed in a zippered bag with a leather case and a charger. Minor problems with the devices were resolved, including the inability to turn the device on or off and deleting all content. Amazon provided troubleshooting assistance in both situations. Luckily, once a device is reregistered, the content previously purchased can be downloaded to the device again. Overall, the Kindles have been surprisingly durable during circulation.

No formal evaluation has been done to obtain patron feedback, but comments provided by patrons returning the devices have largely been positive. They are impressed that the library already has e-book readers and happy to have the opportunity to use one without buying it first. Moreover, patrons feel the Kindle is easy to use and handy for commuting. Conversely, patrons do want to download their own content and dislike some of the Kindle screen features.

Overall, the Kindle lending project at River Forest Public Library has been very positive. The staff learned from the experiment and will continue to develop the program on the basis of their experience and that of other public libraries. Moving forward, River Forest will reevaluate its Kindle lending policies and investigate the lending of other e-book reading devices in order to be innovative in providing devices and content for its patrons. ■