Library management systems?

Ian McCallum

Libraries Alive! Pty Ltd

They don't, of course. Manage libraries. People do that. But they do control the inventory, and increasingly, access to in-house resources and external networked services. They also represent the single largest purchase most libraries are likely to make — with the possible exception of a fully optioned mobile library.

With initial software licence costs ranging from five to seven figures, and annual maintenance charges at ten to fifteen per cent of the purchase price, there's money in them thar systems. Nine of the twenty-four advertisers in the October *inCite* are paying ALIA to deliver their marketing message about library software of some type. There's international market spread as well: seven of the nine companies have their development centres beyond this land girt by sea.

A brief history
Must be something to them, then. Where did they come from? In the beginning (1970s), widespread acceptance of the MARC interchange format prompted the development of cataloguing and searching software. Using the unit record concept (use the same data as often as possible), additional functionality for purchasing and lending was offered to an eager market. Early systems with green screens ran on mainframe computers housed in purpose-built shrines. They cost lots of money and were only affordable by the biggest libraries.

Then in the early 1980s personal computers arrived; the cost of computing plummeted, and the screens got colour and movement. It didn't take long for multiple personal computers to be connected into networks, and for client/server computing models to evolve to the point where processing was distributed across networks and shared between visible personal computers and invisible servers. Now, with library management systems being installed in practically all libraries, it became very important for developers to offer an interface which could be readily comprehended and effectively used by people who lacked the unique distinction of library training.

But wait, there's more. The World Wide Web. This ubiquitous interface has been with us since 1991 [Naughton, John. *A brief history of the future: the origins of the internet*. London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999. This is a great book] and has already transformed the way libraries interact with their customers — in person and digitally, and the way people find information — hit and miss, hunt and peck. Library system suppliers have been quick to recognise new opportunities by re-positioning their products as web-based information management systems, and as specialised tools for controlling access to the information organisations generate in the normal course of their activities.

These days, practically every library wants a library system, and can afford to buy one.

Buying a library system: what to watch out for
Here are some tips to maximise the pleasure and minimise the pain of your new system purchase.

1. *Be aware of why you want it, and why your customers need it.* What will you be able to do with the new system that you can not do with your current system? Make sure that you get the functionality you need, and that you do not have to pay for functionality that you can't use. Ask your customers what they would like (yes, I know that's radical). Tell potential suppliers as much as you can about your requirements and your budget.

2. *Buy from someone you trust.* You are about to enter a long-term commercial relationship, perhaps ten years. You had better like the style and the corporate culture of the people you are dealing with, as well as their development plans for the software. Support the companies that support our profession.

3. *Check with other customers.* Your best source of pre-purchase information is colleagues who have already purchased. Ask for reference sites, but find your own as well.

4. *Be aware of all the costs.* Over the life of the system, the initial software licensing, training and set-up costs are likely to be much less than the cumulated annual support and maintenance charges.

5. *After-sales service.* How good is the training and documentation? Where does support come from? Locally, or on the other side of the world? What qualifications and experience do supplier personnel hold? Who listens when you want to talk about enhancements? What commitments are there on responses to problems? Is there an active user group? With regular meetings in exotic locations?

6. *Watch for show-stoppers.* Make sure your new system is compatible with your organisation's current and planned computer networks, and that public access across the internet can be safely provided. And in these days of outsourced computing platforms where external suppliers are paranoid about supporting application software that doesn't come from Microsoft or Oracle, it is as well to be able to support your new system with your own people.

7. *Make sure you can get your current data into the new system, and, years down the track, your loaded data out.* Supplier support for public domain standards is a good indicator of the flexibility of your intended system.

8. *Agree your acceptance testing procedures before signing the contract.* Use your own data and involve as many of your staff and customers as possible.

Do all this and you can't go wrong. See you at knowledge management module launch at the next users' meeting on Bedarra.

Ian McCallum is a director of the library consulting company Libraries Alive! Pty Ltd. He has developed, sold and bought library management systems over many years