

MATERIAL MATTERS

UNIQUE MANAGEMENT SERVICES, INC.

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Library Specialists

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My Privilege

Nicole Atkins
CEO

As I enjoy the daily privilege of serving our many customers, my joy is tempered by the continuing, ominous news of the deepening global

recession, and its potential effect for so many libraries and patrons.

In that vein, I want to shout from the rooftop that this is one of the most important times I can recall to highlight the positive financial impact of our service for libraries. The international financial maelstrom creates urgency to re-visit the positive financial benefit of our service for our customers.

Virtually all of Unique Management's 1000-plus customers, around the world, enjoy increased revenues and reduced operating expenses as the direct result of our service. Quite simply, it is what we do.

Here are the facts:

- » The average UMS client recovers \$4 to \$7 for each \$1 invested in our service
- » The average rate of recovery for UMS clients is 50% to 60% of patrons processed
- » UMS saves library staff time through automation
- » Most UMS customers are eligible for our budget neutrality guarantee (to recover at least enough money to cover the full cost of our service—in addition to materials recovered).

The bottom line is that UMS' material recovery success is a solid investment for libraries on both sides of the accounting ledger. And, the multiplying benefit is that patrons return as customers in good standing, to use the library's services.

In Stephen R. Covey's "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" the Fourth Habit is "Think Win/Win" he says: "Win/Win means that agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial, mutually satisfying." Our service strives to incorporate that principle in our relationships with our customers so they habitually make positive financial gains as patrons resolve their obligations.

Here are comments typical among our customers:

"Our relationship with Unique Management Services has been great! Their "unique" approach to library collections has resulted in increased revenues to the Library System as well as the return of many long overdue items to our collection. We appreciate their help!"

- Mike Stoker, Finance and Operations Manager,
Salt Lake County (UT) Library System

"I am very satisfied with the service. It has been a real boost for our library system. It has been so helpful to get materials returned! And in tight budget years it proves our accountability to the public. Thanks a million."

- Emily Ferren, Director, Charles County (MD)
Public Library Salt Lake County (UT) Library System

Debbie Moss, Assistant Director of the Orange County Library System in Florida, has also written an excellent testimonial to the impact of our service for her library. See her article in this issue.

Also, in this issue are articles by our customer service specialists, Cary Luckert and LeAnn Harkins that offer more customer insights for maximizing the financial value of our service.

We're driving this point because it is real and it is timely.

I encourage all of you to closely examine how our service can best fit your library's needs. Are you sending accounts at an optimum minimum balance threshold (usually \$25)? Have you considered how our small balance program can gently recover significant amounts of unpaid fines and materials currently sitting dormant in your receivables database, waiting for gentle action to be recovered?

Please contact your UMS customer service specialist to examine these issues to insure maximum financial return for your library.

Blue skies are ahead, no doubt. In the meantime, it is my great privilege to navigate this storm with each and every one of you. We'll help in any way we can.



Are We Missing You?

Shannon M. Daley
Director of Operations

If you send files to UMS electronically, you have likely seen this email at least

once. UMS is committed to providing the best possible material recovery service to our library clients. A portion of that stellar service is to assure library patron records at UMS are as accurate as possible. Therefore, we keep close track of submission (new patrons) and update files we expect to receive.

Each of our electronic libraries are set up in our tracking system to expect files as their module is set to send them. Therefore, when we expect to receive a file and do not, we begin contacting the library with the above email. This email is a notice to the library that UMS did not receive the expected files. This allows the library to investigate the issue that may have caused us to miss the file.

UMS asks that the library respond to this email in one of three ways.

1. If there was no file generated, reply back to the email letting us know that.
2. If there was a file generated, forward it on to UMS immediately for processing.
3. If you are unsure what may have happened, call and speak to Jeremy Dubish.

Your timely response to the initial email will allow us to update our tracking system and/or process the missed files in the order they were generated at the library. It is important that UMS runs your update files in the order they were generated in order to keep the monthly reporting of recoveries accurate and maintain the integrity of patron accounts.

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Have you seen the following email?

RE: UMS MISSING FILE NOTIFICATION - PLEASE RESPOND

Body: This message is to inform you that UMS has not received a scheduled file. Below you will find information concerning each missing file, and when they were expected. Please forward the file to us, or let us know when we might expect to receive the file. If no file was generated for this date(s), please reply to this message and let us know. If you have any questions about this email, please call 800-879-5453 and ask for Jeremy Dubish. Thanks!



Orange County Library Experience

Debbie Moss
Assistant Director

The Orange County Library System (OCLS), Orlando, FL, has been using the services of Unique Management since 2002. At the time, we were seeking means through which to maximize the public's return on investment in library materials. We live in a community whose residents move frequently. With a number of these residents moving out of the local area we had no real leverage to bring materials or payment back to the tax payers of Orange County. We had to overcome a perception that we could be seen as "the Villain" if we took action that went beyond our standard internal notice system and beyond simply blocking a patron's future use of their account. We were now going to actively attempt to recover the materials or the money owed.

Once we secured board approval, we started the process of staff education. We had to inspire in staff the conviction that until *we* understood and took seriously the debt owed the library we could not expect the public to take it seriously. If we allowed balances to accumulate and did not proactively pursue them, it would send a contradictory message to the public. We began with a clear message that the Library wasn't initiating a negative action. Instead, the Library was reacting to the action (or failure to act) of the account holder.

The second phase was communication with the public regarding the engagement of collection agency services. Staff were provided with talking points regarding establishing this new practice and why we believe it was the responsible direction. Public reaction was largely positive. We emphasized the process as an incentive to make sure that materials were returned for use by others, and failing that, that materials could be replaced by payment of fees. As the majority of users are responsible and conscientious in the management of their library accounts, we found a lot of support for the implementation. We believe it built confidence on the part of the public for the oversight that we at the library provide for our resources.

We continue to get a sound return per dollar spent with UMS, even in tight economic times. One of the five goals in our

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Budget Cuts? How UMS Helps

Cary Luckert
Customer Service Specialist

No city, company, or organization is immune to the budget issues and challenges caused by the current economic downturn. This is especially true for libraries, as many rely mainly on public funding. When budgets are being squeezed, libraries, like all organizations, look for ‘expendable’ line items to save money. As detailed below, Unique Management Services is not that expendable service.

First, stated simply, UMS is a **revenue producer** for the library. While many services cost money, UMS helps collect fines and fees as part of our material recovery service. In almost every instance, this recovery is more than the amount invoiced to the library; *creating a profit*, not a budget strain. Even if the library does not directly receive the fines and fees, this revenue contributes to the general fund which supports long-term budget needs for the library. In most cases, UMS will guarantee in writing this promise of having a net positive effect on the budget. The library will never lose money by utilizing UMS’ service. (*Guarantee depends on library settings and method of referral.*)

Although the cash received is a definite benefit in these tough times, UMS’ main focus continues to be on **material recovery**. The materials UMS helps bring back are generally the most popular items that patrons are borrowing on a daily basis. Other patrons want and need these materials, but without the assistance of the third party leverage UMS provides, the materials will remain outstanding.

To get these materials back, UMS uses our *Gentle Nudge*® approach designed specifically for the needs of libraries. This service is not only effective, but **staff friendly** wherein the entire service can be automated with ILS technology due to our Strategic Partnerships with vendors. The ease of our service due to the use of automation frees staff from focusing on the labor-intensive long overdue material recovery process and makes them available for other, more important areas of service. Also, thanks to the material recovery UMS provides, staff does not have to spend time (or money) reordering and restocking materials as items are simply returned and recirculated with the UMS process allowing staff to be available for other library responsibilities.

Libraries also use UMS as **leverage** to encourage patrons to respond before the account is submitted. Once patrons realize that there are no repercussions to not returning items to the library, overdue rates will not stay flat, but will continue to rise to unprecedented levels. Once patrons realize there is a method of accounting for overdues, the overdue rate will decrease.

A final fringe benefit of using UMS, is the Change of Address report provided to the library through our **skip tracing efforts**. By utilizing UMS, the library is able to continue to contact these otherwise missing patrons, secure recovery, and keep the library database up-to-date.

While budget cutting decisions are never easy, it is in the library’s best interest from a fiscal, staff, and fairness standpoint to not reduce or eliminate UMS’ highly effective material recovery service. Also, should the library be interested in easy, but effective ways for additional recovery to assist the library or city’s budget, please contact your Customer Service Specialist as there are many options to get the most out of your partnership with Unique Management Services.



Things You Can Do

LeAnn Harkins
Customer Service Specialist

As the U.S. continues to slug through an economic recession, it doesn’t take an expert to notice that we *are all* facing economic struggles. The housing market slump, fluctuating gas prices, the credit crises and the cost of war are taking its toll as large companies move production to foreign countries. These are issues that affect us all.

In response, some local and state governments have reduced property tax collections to ease individual burdens. These cuts may have the potential to slice away large chunks of operating revenue for public libraries. We already see these effects in Florida and Indiana, for example, where libraries have slimmed down operating hours, reduced or frozen staff positions, lowered collections budgets and put renovations/building projects on hold.

Experienced library staff members have lived through reductions before. According to Raymond Santiago, the director of Miami-Dade Public Library System, “Florida went through a housing bust in the 1980’s, and we were able to recover from that” (*Library Journal*, 3/1/08). Many affected libraries will attempt to put growth on hold and simply stay at status quo until the economy rebounds. Other libraries are proactively tapping into different programs offered by Unique Management Services (UMS) to maximize their material recovery and fines revenue.

Minimum Balance

In an effort to recover more materials, and help patrons resolve their accounts sooner, libraries are reducing the minimum balance at which they send patrons to UMS. We find that there are as many delinquent patrons with balances between \$25-50 as there are from \$50-100. We

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We hope you enjoy

MATERIAL MATTERS

A newsletter designed and produced for library professionals.



A Rookie Looks at Unique Management Services

Bruce Smith
Director of Market Development

“I never held a job. All I ever did was play baseball”

—Satchel Paige

Satchel Paige, the legendary pitcher who graduated to the Cleveland Indians from the Negro Leagues in 1948, and I, have a few things in common. First, I too, am a big baseball fan. Second, my Dad played against him in the decades of the 1930’s in New Jersey and New York. And third, like Paige, who became a Major League “rookie” in 1948 at the age of 42, I too became a “rookie” in the library industry later in life, when I joined Unique Management Services. His reference above to his vocation, which was really his avocation, speaks to the culture I discovered here at Unique regarding **Customer Service**.

Satchel Paige simply loved the game of baseball. It was not just a job to him, it was a way of life. He derived satisfaction just by being on the diamond – playing the game. So it is with the team I joined at Unique Management Services.

“Customer Service” is not merely a catchword to dress up a web site or promotional literature. It is woven through the entire fabric of this company and owned by every member of this team. This customer driven culture was given birth by the company’s owners at its inception and has remained its driving force ever since. It is a quest, not a chore. It is a valued camaraderie, not a forced, phony relationship. It stems from a servant’s heart, not from a checklist. It is, in a word...*unique!*

Since joining this team a year and half ago, I was placed in a terrific place to learn – from the veterans! If our execution gets sloppy, I’ll see it. Here’s what I do see, however. My physical position in this multi-cubical office places me in the hub of
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10 golden rules to improve your patrons’ collection experience

- 10 Inform us of any phone number or address changes via our Account interface, Infolink, so we can communicate with your patrons in time to recover the materials and fines. In turn, we advise you to use the Change of Address (COA) monthly report to update your database and ensure accurate contact once the patron is back in good standing with your library.
- 9 Most patrons assume that they have been credit reported when they are sent to a collection agency. If it is within the first 120 days after being sent to UMS, reassure the patrons they haven’t been and they won’t be if they resolve their accounts within that time frame.
- 8 Assign back up staff to handle the transfer of files to us so you can be assured that your records are updated promptly. When a file hasn’t been generated, inform our Technical Staff so we can mark it as “not coming” and proceed with subsequent files normally.
- 7 Use Infolink to obtain information about a patron’s collection status, phone and letter attempts, and contact information. The information available can strengthen the knowledge of your staff when handling patrons’ questions. Furthermore, your staff can suspend, resume, and print Paid in Full letters online.
- 6 Let your patrons know that it is a library policy to add long overdue fees to collection accounts. Patrons are less inclined to pay them if they believe them to be a collection fee, as opposed to a library fee. They want to be reassured that the cash goes back to their community library.
- 5 Inform your Customer Service Specialist when any change of address or phone number is made to any of your branches. Construction, new openings, closures, or renovation information will help us guide your patrons back to you correctly.
- 4 Should you decide to close an account permanently after a patron has paid it in full, make sure to wait until the update report has generated first. Deleting the account from your system before the collection module has had a chance pick up the transaction will not update the account at UMS because the collection flag will have been removed. This can put the debtor at risk of receiving further notices and calls or being credit reported.
- 3 Alert us of any Bankruptcy notifications and respond to all written dispute validation requests within 30 days. Whether the account is valid or not, our commitment is to follow up with the debtor in a short period of time, and within legal requirements.
- 2 Work with us as a team to resolve patron questions. We, at Unique, make it a goal to strengthen your relationships with patrons who have past due accounts. If you run into a difficult situation with a patron, do not hesitate to call our customer service department to collaborate on how best to respond to the patron. Our commitment to you is to be available to help you resolve potential patron issues quickly and effectively.
- 1 Train your staff on the Unique *Gentle Nudge*® collection process. It’s important for everyone who works at the library to recognize that our service is effective and does not alienate patron goodwill. Their support is just as vital as those in leadership positions. Contact your Customer Service Specialist if you need assistance or to obtain a copy of our training video.

Things You Can Do

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encourage libraries to run reports to see what is outstanding in this range. They will find that 50% of their delinquent patrons will owe \$25-50; materials may include paperbacks, magazines, juvenile items, lower priced hardbacks, CDs and DVDs.

Fines-Only

Libraries also benefit when they send accounts that reach the minimum balance without materials attached. These are patrons who are still blocked from using the libraries' services. Sending fines-only accounts to UMS enables us to use our Gentle Nudge® approach to encourage these patrons to open communication with the library and resolve their balances. This also results in increased revenue for the library, which can be used to supplement existing operating or material budgets.

"It was a fair amount of money that was owed to us – a little over \$400,000 from 2003-2008," said Martha Pitchford, Director of the Lakeland Library Cooperative (MI). The cooperative recently began submitting fines-only accounts, and has seen strong recovery thus far. "People may have completely forgotten it, and of course they can't use the library during that time," Pitchford continued. She further explained that patrons who had been blocked due to balances returned to the library after contact from UMS. They paid their balances and started utilizing the library again.

Small Balance

For those libraries that already send patrons to UMS at \$25, and include fines-only accounts, we offer an innovative program called "Small Balance." This is a newer service that enables libraries to recover materials and fines from patrons whose balances are between \$10 and \$24.99. The lower threshold can be higher than \$10, but the program stops at \$24.99. This program consists of an address check, a letter on library letterhead, and two collection letters for \$2.95. These accounts are not credit reported, but the program has been a tremendous success for those libraries currently using it.

"The small balance program has allowed us to recover fines and, more importantly, some of our less costly, but still valuable, materials while the balance is an amount easily handled by most customers," said Ginger Olson, Head of Circulation at Rochester Hills Public Library.

Unique Management Services is dedicated to helping libraries keep their doors open, their shelves stocked, and their buildings staffed. For optimal recovery, we recommend the tried-and-proven method of submitting patrons at \$25 and including fines-only accounts. We also strive to offer new programs, like Small Balance, that will meet libraries' individual needs.

Public libraries are the most valuable resource we have in our local communities. In times of economic stress, communities need the resources and refuge found at our local libraries. However, by gently nudging the delinquent to act, we can help preserve these privileges for all.

A Rookie...

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customer service activity. Low dividers enable me to regularly sample the client phone conversations, the chitchat among my colleagues about our library clients, and the fielding of numerous daily patron phone calls. Without question, there is a consistent, sincere, positive approach to every client and patron we interact with. It is indeed, remarkable!

Becky Phelps, our receptionist, fields all the incoming calls – most from patrons. She sits not far off my left shoulder and she rarely, if ever, commits an error. In front of me, separated by a mere 24 inches of cubicle, sits our "infield" consisting of LeAnn, Teri Lynn, Kent and Cary, names familiar to many and ably coached by veterans Andy Harp and Melissa Fenton. To my left is our Sales Department, adroitly bringing new "fans" (libraries) into our ballpark on a regular basis. Across the aisle, Operations and Quality Assurance keep things running smoothly to ensure predictable, successful results. Finally, this customer driven mentality can be found solidly entrenched in a Technical Department, at a level much higher than one would see among their peers in like organizations.

A small blue sign sitting at the entrance to our Call Center reads:

"Always treat people the way you want to be treated; professionally, respectfully and gently. Then they can never hold anything against the Library or us."

As I have opportunities now to visit libraries and discuss their needs, I go with the confidence that the greatest team in the "Library League" is behind me. I could not do it any other way. Although I am a self-described "rookie" in this particular industry, I have circled the bases many times elsewhere, in other industries. I would be hard pressed to tag any other company I have associated with which treats customer service with the sincerity and finesse of Unique Management Services.

If you could visit us here in Jeffersonville, I would walk you down a short hallway to a small conference room - #102. A large, framed dramatic picture of a scene, possibly drawn from the coastline of Maine shows a tempest-tossed sea; ominous dark skies and waves heaving relentlessly against the rocks below a sturdy lighthouse. The title of the picture is "Customer Service". Its message:

"The sea of change can pull customers in many directions. It is our responsibility to light the way and take care of them...before the competition does."

The perpetuation of this customer-oriented spirit is under girded annually with a "customer survey" designed to keep our finger on the pulse of every library we are privileged to serve. Survey results are voluminously returned, shared and analyzed carefully. Nothing is taken for granted. These surveys literally stoke our efforts to constantly improve on behalf of every library in our orbit. Again...this is our quest.

After all – we don't just want "customers" – we want fans!
PLAY BALL!

Are We Missing You?

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One small note: the email will reference the type of file and the day it was expected. Depending on your system and when your module generates the files, the date in the email may not be the date the file generated on your system. For example, if your system generates files at 10 pm on Mondays, UMS will expect to receive the files on Tuesday morning. Therefore, the email will request a file for a Tuesday, but the date of the file on your end will be on a Monday.

You may receive this email several days until you respond to UMS. If UMS does not get a response from you within three or four days, Jeremy Dubish will begin calling to investigate the issue and attempt to find the file.

It is important to UMS to keep patron records accurate and up-to-date. That is why we go through these measures to assure we are not missing any files. We thank our clients for their cooperation in helping us maintain the records of their patrons.

Orange County Library Experience

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strategic plan is to provide the public with a good return on their investment through sound financial practices. Our use of UMS services is a significant step toward that assurance. Here in Florida, as throughout the nation, libraries are facing increased utilization of our services accompanied by diminished funding. In recent memory, we haven't faced a time when it was as important as it is now for us to demonstrate to our constituents our responsible management of the resources of which we are custodians. At OCLS, we believe that holding those borrowers who are not responsible to the highest level accountability available communicates a clear message of responsibility and respect for all district tax payers. It demonstrates that we are not willing to ignore abuses in the use of the library and will take action to recover materials and/or dollars to protect the investment that the tax payers have made in their public library.

If you have comments, suggestions, questions or if you would like to be added to our mailing list, please contact us! We look forward to hearing from you.



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