

## Parking Management: From Pen to Stylus

By Gregory A. Jordan

Before I entered the parking industry, I honestly wondered how hard it could be. Parking enforcement seemed so simple that it was hard to believe technology could help.

My first week on the job as the manager of parking and transit at the University of Wyoming was move-in week. We were swamped with lines of people filling out forms for new permits. We ran cashier stations in three separate locations just to handle the volume. The weeks after were spent filing forms and entering data into a homemade database. Hundreds of man-hours were spent entering information into the database each year. In short, we had the data but were unable to use it effectively from year to year. So, we had to rely on our customers to provide the same information, year after year.

Our first look at an automated parking management system gave us reason to expect a six-figure cost the first year. While poor customer service is one reason to make a change, it was not sufficient in itself to warrant that great of an expense. So, we continued onward, running into more inefficiencies as time progressed.

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Then, two things happened almost simultaneously to help change my mind about a new parking management system. The first was a continuing problem with issuing citations to one-time visitors. In one case, a visitor from a foundation was dropping off a large donation and was understandably upset to find a citation upon his return. While we were able to deal with the issue, I began to wonder how many other VIP visitors we had ticketed without knowing. Without information at the time of the citation, an officer simply had no way of knowing if the citation was being issued to a scofflaw or the governor.



The second thing that helped change my mind was a new product that allowed for Internet-based parking management. It removed significant costs of ownership, including hosting, hardware and licenses. And, the product fell within the department's price range. As we began the bid process and planned for the transition, the best reason of all surfaced.

While reviewing the specifications of a new parking management system we learned this system could manage the collection process, which had always been handled by the university accounts receivable office. The accounts receivable office dedicated a staff person to manually file each hard copy of a ticket and link each citation amount manually to either a student or faculty/staff member's account. The relationship between the vehicle and the person was established only if the person had purchased a permit or in some other way admitted he/she was the driver of the vehicle. Vehicles for which owner information was not available or that could not be identified easily were not billed. As a result, those who refused to buy permits and routinely parked in violation of the regulations were getting away.

The new collection process, though, would allow the worst offenders to get billed. The handheld

ticket system provides the means to identify the worst offenders for enforcement. The automated system would also eventually communicate with state motor vehicle records to update the database with owner information.

The next few months, during the final purchase agreement and installation process, were spent analyzing and updating current processes to assure that they would fit well with the technology. The decision had been made to include a point of sale system with the parking management system. This meant that every process from the design and purchase of permits through the sale of permits to the eventual enforcement of parking all required modification.

Installation and training for the new processes proceeded smoothly, and it was little more than a month before we had finished entering the new permit sales for the year.

Once the permit sales were all entered, we immediately began to see results. Citations issued to vehicles already in the system became easier to write from the field since many fields were pre-populated. Each day, the database had more data to make future transactions easier. Soon, there were enough unpaid balances to begin our first billing. For the first time in the history of our department, registered owners were billed for citations. While we received a lot of phone calls requiring explanation, we found that opening a dialogue helped resolve a number of issues before they became too large to resolve.

The new system also allowed the statements to be sent via e-mail if an e-mail address was provided at registration. Our first e-mail batch yielded a telephone response within 10 minutes of being sent, and the phone continued ringing throughout the day. These phone calls resulted in a number of successful resolutions to delinquent accounts — payments we might never have received.

Responses also began to pour in from the letters we sent to registered owners, with many resulting in payment or other citation resolutions. Within a month of sending our first statements, we had a

system in place that allowed for smooth operation and minimal manpower. Collection percentages increased each month statements were sent. After two months, an insert advising of vehicle immobilization was added to the statement. We also found that the parking management system provided an excellent inventory control.

After the purchase of a safe and a sign-out sheet, we soon had complete control over parking permits. With the inventory entered into the database and allocated for sale, we could easily locate any individual number. We noticed that citations written per hour by each officer began to increase dramatically. While there was a learning curve for the new handheld technology, the number of citations per hour soon surpassed previous highs. The handheld system automatically downloads data from citations along with the photos taken. This means a significant reduction in man-hours required to process citations.

In short, we are hooked. We have leaned heavily on the system, and it has held up. Our customers appreciate the improved service and our accountant appreciates the increased efficiency. What surprises everyone we tell is that with increased efficiency in collections and enforcement, we are likely to recover the costs of implementation within our first year. Certainly, it has produced a more professional, efficient and effective parking program that is worth the cost.

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