From Start

Choosing, buying, and implementing a new university parking system can be a long, rough road. Drexel University found that teamwork and patience were key.

CASE STUDY

To Finish

How did we navigate to the best-fit parking permit management system for our unique and diverse university? It's a little like shooting skeet (a moving target) while reloading or finding your glasses when you need glasses to find them. Needless to say, there were a number of bumps in the road. Hitting a moving target is difficult with ever-changing technology, internal policies, and regulations. But we at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pa., successfully navigated the process and found the perfect system for us, and our experience is as valuable as the result—the system we successfully implemented.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the process is defining what you want. We wanted efficiency, better customer service, and higher revenue margins, but those may not be on your wish list. So the first step is figuring out what it really boils down to for your unique organization. At Drexel, priorities were taking control of the process to simplify customer transactions and the permit-purchasing experience.

By David C. Jost, CAPP

Identify the Challenges

Embarking on a process such as this presents six challenges any parking organization will have to overcome:

1. Selling the concept to stakeholders.
2. Hurdling policies/guidelines.
3. Investigating the options before, during, and after the search.
4. Building a team to move forward.
5. Making the best choice for your unique situation.
6. Speeding ahead toward installation and roll-out.

Stakeholders

Who will be affected and how? Who does the new system help, and whose help do you need? Will your stakeholders be affected positively, negatively, or not at all? Our analysis clearly benchmarked who uses an online permit management system, which systems they use, and how existing systems were performing from the customer and university perspective.

Drexel has a large information technology (IT) department with the clout to support or resist a software system purchase. The university administration sets the priorities for projects to be reviewed by IT. But IT cannot help you if your project is not in the queue. In our case, just getting a hearing was a major challenge. Parking service's operational needs are subordinate to a host of academic priorities, and we learned it's important to find out where you are in line for IT's resources.

University stakeholders need to be made aware of the initial need and then have their concerns satisfied before a purchase is made, and it's important to ensure you are prepared to list how an online parking permit management system will benefit nearly every department. Prepare your RFP and purchase request as a living document that's ready to be released to acquire bids on short notice. It never hurts to have a survey of what the students want and why e-commerce for permit parking makes sense.

If you're working with other departments on the project, be sure you know what they're thinking along the way. Is your IT department leaning toward hosted or self-hosted servers running the system? Who can offer one or both options, and how do they affect total cost? Is there a procurement process or legal, risk-management, or business services review? Does IT review and recommend, or is the choice a collaborative effort between departments? What is the flow process for completing a purchase from A to Z? Our legal department had much to weigh in on concerning the electronic security of data, PCI compliance, software contract language, and web-based customer electronic agreements. Other departments' timelines may not be your timeline, so preparing each contact well in advance is critical in moving the project forward.

Picking Tech

If you are reading this, I will wager that you are a member of IPI and have attended one or more IPI Conference & Expos, where you found many companies offering technology. These companies are changing, evolving, improving, acquiring, and launching new services and products every year. I recommend leaping as far forward with technology as you can. Investigating that technology and understanding how it will bring your operation into the present and prepare for the future is key to presenting the choices to stakeholders. Set your goals and timeline. You may need more time than a few months—even up to a year or two. Pare down options to those that are both financially feasible and include the high-priority objectives.

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The one thing Drexel Parking Services needed was an e-commerce website to sell permits. To re-deploy staff for operations, we needed to be more cutting-edge. We had to have a system that would serve our biggest and most labor-intensive revenue source: permit sales to students and staff.

Understanding the Budget

Understand the budget requirements as far in advance as possible and secure the resource funding for an initial purchase. Be aware of recurring support costs and expanding services or capabilities the system may offer. Knowing my window of opportunity opened and closed on a tight fiscal schedule was critical to the timing of the purchase, which was on the order of a 16-month process.

Understanding the Process

A special technology committee oversees all projects and sets the priority levels. To put the request on the agenda, we first made our case to the university administrator who oversees the committee. We needed to demonstrate the concept and business plan and why it should make it to the IT Committee agenda for consideration. Winning the first battle included benchmarking, by noting the university life experience improvements that were tied to the mission of educating students.

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and visitors). The technology committee put my project on the agenda and assigned a subcommittee to review all the systems researched.

Vetting the various sales presentations and compatibility with Drexel's IT infrastructure was a three-month process. Drexel IT required a hosted software platform, to reduce the internal demands on the university's IT infrastructure. IT then followed up with technical questions with the leading vendor candidates. The subcommittee determined a timeline it could realistically meet for setting forth a final recommendation to purchase a system. We then focused on the vendors with most promise to determine:

- The number of high-priority capabilities we wanted.
- Hosting options.
- Software navigation ease for parking staff.
- Customer website navigation and customization.
- Backend administration software.
- Levels of IT support offered by the vendor.
- Costs.
- Flexibility, future capabilities, and options.
- Level of in-house IT support required.

The Drexel Technology Committee may source a purchase as the best fit based on the IT subcommittee's recommendations, because getting apples-to-apples comparisons for software is an arduous and nearly impossible process. After qualifying four companies, the subcommittee found one to be the most compatible, simple, and intuitive product for our purposes. Significant research had to be conducted with site visits to other universities using that system to determine their satisfaction levels. All the companies we considered had systems we could have used; it was a matter of finding the best fit and living with that decision as all software has its limitations.

After those reviews, legal had to review the software terms and conditions and hammer out any changes. Once the final contract was completed, we were able to submit the request to purchase and concentrate on funding that purchase. Simultaneously, we prepared the terms and conditions customers must agree to for online purchases, where agreements are signed electronically.

After the Purchase

When decisions were made and the purchase was initiated, we immediately began preparing the software, customizing and configuring it to the Drexel Parking Services sales process. We worked on IT requirements for a single sign-on process and held training sessions for staff.

It took about four months to move into pre-production test mode and start meaningful training for the staff to use the software. We were able to successfully test our new ParkDrexel system using invited students and staff prior to launching to identify any issues customers might encounter and then announce the system with an initial roll-out directed at the University City Campus.

In March 2015, we went into full production for spring semester parking permit sales at the University City Campus. We used our university email list for the announcement, and then we used the software system to send customers communications about ParkDrexel. As with any new system software launch, most people do not read directions. However, within one week, we were able resolve nearly every issue successfully with little or no IT support.

We are now set up and ready to handle future sales online. We will continue to discover the power the software has to offer, creating new reports, communication letters, and additional services online.

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