government

Suffolk County Clerk's Office — Turning a Challenge into a Revenue Stream

ABOUT THE CUSTOMER

The Suffolk County Clerk's office in Long Island, New York, provides a wide range of services for local constituents. One of the most important services is managing several centuries' worth of real estate transaction documents.

CHALLENGE

The Suffolk County Clerk's office is required by law to record and file a very large volume of public records, including mortgages, deeds, judgments, liens and other business-related documents. These documents go back as far as the 17th century, and include a variety of paper documents, microfilm and digital files, and they are accessed by an equally wide range of people, all of whom need to access these documents, make copies and send them via fax and email.

Eventually, the volume of this work became overwhelming. During the real estate boom of the mid-2000s, the office was processing documents representing nearly $50 billion in transactions annually. Multiple "power users" rented office space in the county building for more convenient document access and duplication, an activity that generated a very small revenue stream for the clerk's office. Despite this arrangement, the high volume of requests made it difficult for the office's staff to process documents (or in many cases, retrieve physical originals) efficiently.

The office needed a way to perform all these activities more easily while managing costs. Complicating the situation were two factors: the office faced a projected 15% staff reduction and had limited approved funds for new technology. At the same time, the office's building was undergoing remodeling. The clerk's office needed to decide whether to remodel the space it was leasing or come up with a better solution.

After much deliberation, the office decided to transform the headache into a revenue stream by forgoing the leased space and instead providing all the equipment necessary to copy and distribute documents — and charging a nominal fee per page. The estimated cost of the solution was much lower than the estimated cost of remodeling its leased space. The only challenge was developing a reliable, fully integrated solution for a unique environment.

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SOLUTION

Working with a variety of technology partners, the Suffolk County Clerk's office developed a one-of-a-kind solution to its problems — a combination of unattended debit card issuance, sophisticated document management and integrated payment tracking. Finding the right solution components, however, was difficult.

"From a technology standpoint, we needed copying, printing, faxing and email," said Peter Schlussler, Director, Optical Imaging for the Suffolk County Clerk's Office. "We also needed card swipers and a software solution that allowed us to establish hard cost limits, so that if you purchase a $10 debit card, you can only transact $10 worth of documents."

The software turned out to be Pharos Uniprint, one of many software solutions in the Ricoh/IKON portfolio. Originally designed for schools, where overcharges were deducted from student accounts, the software had to be modified to handle cost quotas. Other components included a freestanding debit card kiosk, an all-in-one MFP sourced from Ricoh/IKON and equipped for card-based payment, plus integration with the office's back-end systems.

"Ricoh/IKON was involved from the get-go helping us get the solution up and running," Schlussler said. "Kirk Adikes, our Solutions Consultant from Ricoh/IKON, served as project manager. He understood that what we were trying to do was unique, and he facilitated the entire solution. It took a lot of technical expertise."

Suffolk County Clerk Judith Pascale said "As the Suffolk County Clerk it has been my ongoing goal to form partnerships with the business community, make government more accessible to the people while simultaneously reducing taxpayer cost. The implementation of this system has not only achieved this goal but has generated new a new revenue stream for the taxpayers.

RESULTS

The ultimate solution, called the Unified Land Record Retrieval Kiosk, continues to be a stellar success. It offers much faster access to critical documents with an integrated payment system that makes life much easier on the office's staff. Citizens and other users can find what they need, make a copy, distribute it by fax or email and pay for their transactions — all from a single, easy-to-use system. More important, the solution has transformed what had been a constant challenge for the office into a strong and growing revenue stream.

"We thought the solution would bring in $500,000 to $600,000 per year for our office," Schlussler said. "In the first year, it generated $780,000. We achieved complete ROI in a matter of months. We just completed our third full year and revenues are almost at $1 million."

Part of the solution's appeal is its ease of use. According to Schlussler, it appeals to all of the county's constituents, from first-time users to more tech-savvy citizens. It also supports the local real estate market, allowing interested parties to complete tasks in a few hours that would normally have taken days or weeks with the previous system. A strong, collaborative relationship with Ricoh/IKON was critical to the solution's success as well.

"You have to have a strong partnership with your vendor or it doesn't work," Schlussler said. "Everyone has to understand the strategic goals so we can succeed."

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