

The Media Center: Organizing Stuff
We *are* going to clean out that cupboard—Sometime!

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“We really are going to get this cupboard in better shape— sometime!” How many times have I said that? Yet our software storage cupboard is never ideally organized. Media specialists and technology staff discuss how to manage networks, set up the servers, or configure computers, but do we don't seem to take much time to share ideas about how to organize the physical stuff that we need to create our cyber environments. Organizing resources -- software registration files, installation disks, manuals etc ---in an efficient manner is worth our time because in the end it saves time and helps us serve our customers better. Organizing tangible items saves our schools money, helps us be accountable for what we do, and it fits well into our role as program administrators. Most of us are trained organizers and we can be pretty good at it, especially with a few practical ideas to help us out day-to-day survival and efficiency.

I took my first computer course in the days of Holorith cards. My memory of the class is the instructor's premise is that if you have two of something in a media center it's time to index/catalog/organize it. Luckily some of our first microcomputer (remember that term?) databases and spreadsheets soon came along, making it possible for even a computer novice to get going. Since those basic beginnings I've relied on spreadsheets and databases to organize budgets, vendor information, media statistics, projector bulbs, I P numbers, software serial numbers, equipment and supply prices -- you name it --if I knew we'd need the information again it was entered into a database or spreadsheet. This has saved us time, frustration and money countless times.

We use our largest database—our automation system, to account for all technology in the building. All computer and audiovisual equipment, peripherals and software are tracked. Where is something? One click and we know. Should we repair a digital camera? The repair record recorded as part of the item's record in the system tells us. Is the computer that isn't working under warranty? The automation system helps again. Is there a unique glitch with a particular camera? A message attached to the camera in the automation system will explain. If this won't work for you try an idea submitted by Tony Doyle; “To keep track of warranties and upgrades, etc. on computers I place a sticker on the side of the CPU with date of purchase, vendor, P.O. #, and the computer specs. It is very handy when I need to call for service.”

What about tangible technology items? The stuff that multiplies like metal hangers and can be hard to find when we need it. Our favorite storage device is an old card catalog. It's ideal for

projector lamps and assorted cables. It's also a nice conversation piece. I miss the old metal banker's file card cabinet with small drawers that we didn't bring move from our old school.

Our computer labs have lots of cupboards, a wise architectural decision. They're handy storage for printer paper, spare cables, and software manuals. Deb Waugh says she keeps software manuals all together in one cabinet. "Some I keep in the boxes, others it's just the book. The biggest problem we've had with software is that the CD's get stolen. The best solution I've found is a three-ring binder with plastic inserts designed to hold the CD's. I can keep it in a secure file drawer at my desk." I also keep one of a kind, especially valuable installation cds locked in a desk drawer. Tracy Magin suggested storing all manuals (software, overheads) in a file cabinet. "It seems to work better than sorting by equipment type." We use this approach and keep the smaller manuals in red-robe folders with an easy to read in a hurry label on the outside. □

That still leaves all the CD's and installation software to deal with—the contents of the cupboard we never seem to get to. "Why bother when we can install most applications from the server or a hard drive image update from an image?" Servers can crash; the network can be temporarily down. There are those unique applications you need to run from a CD. We've use small plastic totes, large tote bins, small sets of drawers, lots of strong rubber bands and lots of huge labels. It's far from perfect and it needs purging. But. . .

We might need this some day. Sometime we really might need an older version of software. We recommend keeping at least one copy. Be sure to retain a copy of the older manual just in case. It's worthwhile to keep one of a kind adapter, cables or unique equipment. A music teacher searched a while to find someone who could transfer an old beta tape to a current digital format; he found someone in a neighboring town. If you have storage room it also might not hurt to keep some one of kind equipment. We've once retrieved a record player from our technology archives display case for a teacher who wanted to play a record. Now that Apple has released the Mac Mini we're regretting discarding some of our old monitors which would work just fine.

The venerable 3-ring binder is practical and popular. Doyle suggested storing "all of the original CDs in a large CD binder organized by type of software and manufacturer (e.g. all HP printer disks together). I was going to buy inserts for a three ring binder but they were more expensive than buying a large CD holder (holds about 200 cds).□□□also write any software keys (serial numbers) on the disk and on the pocket. Sue Broberg is experimenting with a new approach "instead of the former cupboard approach. For specialty equipment (cameras, digicams, projectors, etc) I've started using a notebook with clear pocket inserts (page sized, open from top). Each is labeled with the name of the device and date. I put everything in there, from serial # to tech support and install, directions, even CDs. Important info facing out, when possible. When I make up directions for using the items, I'll put hard copies w/ file name in an adjoining folder." We occasionally need actual physical records of financial transactions. We use separate 3-ringbinders to store paper copies of purchase orders and packing slips for capital items. They are separate from run of the mill purchase orders for books, resources and routine supplies, which we don't keep as long.

The procedures book occupies another three ring binder and we couldn't manage without it. It's an ongoing project which sections for topics such as circulation, opening and closing the media center volunteers, shelving and storage tech tips, software installation procedures, tech tips serial numbers we refer to often (written in larger type.) and much more. We have electronic copies of documents we create from scratch and each document is dated. But, the "book" is essential for quick reference and to help other staff or volunteers,. Its value is still "priceless."

Loss control

Remote controls are often is placed. We've tried Velcro—one strip on the back on the remote; the other on the TV—not quite right. Someone jokingly suggested a very long string and one of our teachers (who had two in her desk) thought they should come with pagers like a portable phone. Anyone care to invent that?

We use a small laminating machine to create business card sized identifications tags that are attached to the case of each piece of portable and shared equipment or its carrying case. The tag includes the item's bar code number , a list of the items that belong in the case, and our phone and address. When one of our laptops somehow ended up in a school maintenance van the driver knew exactly where to return it.

Missing cables are another annoyance. It is not unknown for one to fall out of the case or accidentally end up in the computer case of a guest speaker. One of our solutions for dealing with the more specialized cables is to attach a school identification label to each. Extra long or extra durable video, coax and Ethernet cables that people tend to covet are bar coded and locked up; they are checked out just like anything else. When there are multiple units of a similar item, for example, digital cameras or video projectors, we color code every piece. For example, all the cables and pieces that go with unit 1 have a half inch red dot; all the cables and pieces that belong to set 2 have a green dot etc. We try to account for all the pieces each time an item is checked out or in.

A successful innovations is our AV cart units with a video projector, laptop, and VCR/DVD player. With everything in one place it's much easier to take equipment to a classroom and appreciated by teachers who don't have to be concerned about hooking stuff up. This simple approach helps encourage the use of data projectors and helps prevent mix-ups. We use strong plastic ties to fasten the equipment case to the cart.

The stuff we keep in our heads. How do we handle all the tech tips that we learn at workshops or just acquire through sheer experience? Broberg anticipates the day when technology " will take out thoughts and store them for others to use? (So we can retire in peace?)" Meanwhile, I keep all the tips and information we receive from tech support in specific web mail folders labeled "labs", "classrooms," "servers" and so on. I print out important tips that al media center staff may have a reason to use are printed out for the procedures book. I highlight the topic and date so we can spot it quickly. Betty Winslow suggested making one document for each type of

tip but said what she does is make a separate Microsoft Word document for each tip she wants to remember. She creates a keyword or two for each edit, e-mail, document, security, scanner, camera, etc.). “To find the needed tip, use your "find" function in the edit pull-down menu. It will take you to each tip for that keyword, one at a time. Works for me!”

When I posted a target about organizing stuff on LM_NET media specialists from several states responded. Many more said, “Please post a hit.” If you have great ideas for organizing stuff I’d love to hear from you. Media specialists *do* know how to organize.

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