

The MOST Important Person in the Self Storage Industry

This is going to come as a shock to some owners, district managers and corporate officers: YOU are not the most important person in your business. That distinction clearly belongs to the facility manager.

There are very few businesses that are as manager-centric as the self-storage business. Typically, multi-million dollar assets are in the hands of only one or two people and the day-to-day success, or lack thereof, of that asset falls squarely on the backs of those managers. (Compare that staffing plan with that of a fast food restaurant being in the hands of 50 16-year-olds and you quickly see one of the great advantages of the self-storage business model!)

Owners have for many years taken for granted the importance of the site manager and for many years the self-storage business was 'good enough' and 'easy enough' that the quality of the site manager mattered little to the success of the facility. But the 'easy' days are over. No longer can the most important person in the self-storage business be given the least amount of consideration. More thought must go into hiring the very best manager than goes into making sure the website has no spelling errors.

The realities of the 21st Century now demand that self-storage operators employ the highest quality managers and insure that their training and professionalism are of the highest quality. No longer can owners expect their new (or old) facilities to magically fill up (and remain so) despite the lack of sales ability in their manager. The 'Build it and they will come' days are long since over. Today's managers have to take a more active role in the success of their facility.

A new staffing paradigm exists for the 21st Century and the best and brightest operators are rapidly embracing this shift and creating a chasm between themselves and their competitors that still have their proverbial heads still stuck in the sand. Those making these changes have chosen to thrive and not merely survive.

What are the 'thrivers' doing that the 'survivors' refuse to do?

- **They get over their ego.** True professionals don't feel they have to be the smartest persons in the room. The 'thrivers' are reaching out, looking for good ideas, better ideas. They don't feel like they have to have all the answers. They clearly recognize that 'how it's always been done' is no longer working and changes have to be made. 'Thrivers' recognize that it takes effort to make changes and they're willing to make that effort.
- **They are hiring different people.** Self-storage has become far too competitive and capital intensive to keep hiring mom-and-pop babysitters. The past staffing model included hiring people with some management experience. What exactly are they managing? The 21st Century self-storage manager must have sales

skills. Self-storage is a sales environment and the competitive landscape dictates that managers know how to effectively answer the phone, turn those calls into site visits and turn those visits into renters. 90% of prospects looking for storage end up renting storage. If a manager can only rent to 2 or 3 out of every 10 prospects, they're losing 6 or 7 to the competitors. Marketing to get the phones to ring costs far too much to allow this to be acceptable.

And what do these new 21st Century managers look like:

- **They have a personality.** If a manager cannot answer the phone with a smile and engage customers with rapport, you're risking your business to a crouch. Why would you do that?
- **They are professional.** They are clean cut, dress neatly and represent your valuable asset as it should be. The site manager is the primary conduit between the prospective tenant and their money. Torn shirts, bad teeth, and wild hair might not be the best representative for your business.
- **They are smart.** Your business has several moving parts and you need someone that understands that. A self-storage manager must know how to read the management summary reports, realize that discounting rent hurts the asset value and recognize rent increase opportunities.
- **They are training their managers.** Sadly, many owners spend more on their yearly treks to the conventions than they do on training their managers. When self-storage was easy, frankly, training didn't seem that important. But it's just not easy anymore. Managers have to be professionally trained on how to sell and how to collect. 'Here's the keys and good luck' is no longer working and owner's are scratching their collective heads and wondering 'what happened?' as they see occupancies dropping and past dues increasing.
- **They and their managers are undergoing operational tune-ups.** Do you ever step back and take time to 'see' what your customers see? Is your facility tired and worn or shiny and exciting? Does your operation use 'horse-and-buggy' systems or 21st Century technology? The competitive landscape demands that you take a hard look and make your manager's sales job easier.
 - **Drive-up curb appeal.** Customers oftentimes make a decision about renting from you based on the curb appeal. Are the parking stripes fresh and clear? Is there trash in the bushes? Is there any parking (or are your managers taking up most of the spaces)? Is the dumpster located right at the front gate? Does the office door have hand-made signs and multiple VISA/MC signs?
 - **Sales office.** Is your merchandise display full or does it look like you're going out of business? Is the counter cluttered? Does the manager have a company shirt? Are the camera monitors working? Are the restrooms clean and odor-free?

- **Web-based software.** Are you still using a DOS system or have you upgraded to a web-based system? Are you using a revenue management tool? Is the software manager friendly?
- **Marketing.** When's the last time you changed your yellow page ad? Do you have a website? Does it work? Are there any misspelled words? Are you using a call center or trusting your business to an answering machine? Does your manager have business cards with their name or do they have to scratch out the old manager's name?
- **Manager-friendly.** Do you have a goofy unit mix or is it streamlined to make sales easier? Do you insist on any unnecessary reports or use any unnecessary forms? **Does your manager understand that they have two priorities, renting and collecting, and that anything else is secondary?**

Owner-operators are attending seminars, reading magazines and paying high-priced gurus to try and figure out how to survive the current downturn and get their operations turned around. Sadly, most miss the most obvious 'silver bullet' in the industry: the Great Self Storage Manager. All the gizmos and gadgets, programs and parties, bells and whistles, won't make a difference in your self-storage operation if your manager can't pull it off. The most important person in the self-storage business, the site manager, deserves the utmost consideration. They deserve to be highly trained and have clearly defined priorities. Site managers with self-confidence and self-motivation are the key to self-storage success.