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THE ART OF MARKETING

Crafting 'Remote' Sales Strategies

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If you have remote self-storage facilities or plan to take the next step toward one, building solid systems is vital to your success. Fast-food franchises serve up a great example. Sample this ...

Once or twice a year I get in the mood for a Burger King Whopper. Immediately after eating one, I promise myself I'll never go back.

Having forgotten that promise a few weeks ago, I found myself placing an order at our local BK. While I was eating, I noticed something interesting: On the burger's wrapper were dotted lines in several shapes including a small circle, a bigger circle and an oblong shape. Curious, I asked the manager about the shapes. He informed me they're for employees who wrap the various sandwiches. "It takes a few seconds off each wrap and makes training new employees so much easier," he said.

He then proceeded to point out about a half-dozen other markers on my cup, fry container and throughout the store. Two lines on the outside of the cup tell the drink-filler how much ice to put in the cup, and so on. I was fascinated!

Burger King executives and other franchises are faced with a challenge similar to storage operators running remote facilities: They're trying to build a brand, increase sales and create a consistent experience for customers.

But, employee turnover is so high that it's almost impossible without impeccable systems for the smallest things, such as how much ice to put in cups and where to place the burger on the wrapper. Without these systems, the franchise business model wouldn't be nearly as successful.

On Solid Ground

If you have remote facilities or plan on them in the near future, building solid systems is vital to your success. Too many facility operators fly by the seat of their pants when it comes to sales and marketing strategies, rather than proactively creating systems that are profitable and fit into a business model. Many facilities are basically mimicking what advertising representatives tell them to do or are reacting to what the competitor is doing.

Below are five basic marketing and sales systems to build a solid business:

1. Lead-Generation Systems. how do you make your phone ring and generate walk-in traffic? how do you put your website in front of the right people to attract an e-mail inquiry? how much should you expect to pay for a lead from each advertising medium used?

Each of those questions should be answered as a part of your lead-generation system. every market is different in the self-storage business. Some facilities thrive by paying less than \$20 per lead; some pay upwards of \$200.

A combination of good management software and marketing-tracking efforts will produce the answers you need. Call your local phone company and inquire about marketing-tracking phone numbers. They give you an unbiased look at advertising mediums and help you determine what works and what doesn't.

In some markets, Yellow Pages advertising works exceptionally well; in others, it doesn't come close to even paying for itself. Creating this system will help you and your managers understand your marketing efforts much better.

2. Lead-Capturing Systems. Generating a lead is one thing, effectively capturing it is another. Many facilities miss a large percentage of leads they pay good money to generate. If you miss a phone call because your manager is out to lunch or busy with a customer, you've missed an opportunity. If you don't have managers check and appropriately respond to e-mail inquiries every day, you're missing opportunities. Consider contracting a call center to answer roll-over or after-hours phone calls.

If you pay \$100 to generate a lead possibly worth \$700, missing more than a few per month is a costly mistake. Make sure your staff checks facility e-mail everyday at lunch and before going home. Create a response-oriented template to use. This saves time and gives you control over what's written to prospects inquiring via e-mail.

Before spending another penny trying to increase responses, make sure you're capitalizing on all of your existing responses by creating a lead-capturing system. Designate phone-answering systems, e-mail reply systems and walk-in traffic systems. Capture as much information about people as you can and follow up with them as necessary.

3. Lead-Conversion Systems. Once you generate and capture a lead, you must turn it into a paying customer! What you say and how you say it are critical. At this point, many facility operators turn to scripts, but they can be impersonal and ineffective.

Rather than using a script, give managers an outline that covers call objectives and a process to follow. Instruct them to “make it their own” so they’re comfortable with the language and can talk to people personably. I guarantee your conversion ratio will go up and you’ll end up diffusing the sales pressure for managers and prospective customers.

If the lead comes in via e-mail, have a template with variable fields ready for storage, billing inquiries and customer inquiries—even complaints. Instruct your manager it’s OK to modify it if needed, but the important elements must remain unchanged.

Again, consider using an experienced self-storage call center. They typically have a higher conversion ratio than facilities on their own.

4. Lead Follow-Up Systems. A follow-up system for leads that don’t convert to sales is crucial. It’s proven that following up with people results in rentals. However, you must have systems in place to make this both effective and efficient for staff.

Create a multi-step system for following up with leads. If you capture phone numbers, postal and e-mail address, prepare marketing materials for all three mediums and respond.

Send a letter the same day a prospect stops by your facility. People will get the mailing within three days, so the timing will be perfect. Let them know you appreciate their visit and you’re ready to serve them with storage-related needs. Give them incentive to rent within 30 days.

Seven days after the visit, make a phone call, avoiding scripts while being conversational. The objective is to say thank you and provide a special offer to rent within the 30-day window.

Have an e-mail slated for 14 days after the visit with storage and organization tips included. This way, you’re not being pesky, but helpful. Finally, send a letter four weeks after the visit letting them know you’ll extend the offer to move in for another two weeks and hope to see them soon.

To do this, you need good management software with calendar and letter capabilities. The more you can automate the better.

5. Database Marketing Systems. You can increase the value of each customer by up-selling and cross-selling related products and services. Most facilities make sales during the original transaction, but few market to customer databases frequently enough. You should be mailing your existing customers at least every 30 days.

If you mail statements to tenants, include marketing materials in the envelope. You're already paying postage, why not enclose a letter telling them about tenant insurance to further protect their belongings? Also, every customer should be reminded of your tenant-referral program.

As part of your marketing and sales system, include a section on database marketing. have your staff send letters to customers every three or four weeks and provide the necessary materials. Take out the guesswork and you'll love the results.

If you have e-mail addresses, invest in an e-mail responder that automatically sends customers messages thanking them for their business and offering something else of value.

Just Do It

Even if you have only one facility, these systems will make you more money and eliminate stress.

Take the time to write down every system detail for your managers, including what postage to use, times to check e-mail, what kind of paper to use, who's authorized to contact advertising reps and so on. Print copies and place them in a nice binder. Require facility managers to study the systems closely and follow them perfectly.

Michael Gerber, renowned author of the *E-Myth*, put it best: "If your thinking is sloppy, your business will be sloppy. If you are disorganized, your business will be disorganized."

I promise you this: If you think accurately and critically about each of these systems, your self-storage business will be better run, more organized and, most important, make you more money with less hassle!

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