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The Science of Marketing

Experiment to find what works best for your facility

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Many operators realize it takes more to attract new customers than it did a few years ago. A Yellow Pages ad is mandatory to lure tenants, but we can't rely exclusively on the book anymore. Nowadays, ingenuity, creativity and science play equal roles in self-storage marketing success.

Marketing by definition is a long-term proposition. It requires a strong time commitment, energy and expense. It's also an ongoing experiment that requires constant supervision.

The Grand Plan

Boiled down, all marketing programs should follow the same procedures:

- Design a plan
- Set goals
- Provide funds
- Track your efforts
- Evaluate and adjust

The first step is to develop a marketing plan. Without one, you'll go unnoticed. Or, you may end up reacting to the competition, spending extra dollars to play catch up using a one-time expensive media promotion. Planning now for the new year let's you calculate well in advance what monies will be spent and what expectations may be realized.

Start with a goal. What are your business aspirations for 2007? Do you want more commercial tenants? Do you have an overload of 10-by-10s and hope to rent them through special promotions? No matter the goal, it's usually obtainable through hard work, commitment and funds.

Next, research costs. With a budget, you'll pre-establish expenses for outside marketing all year long. Hunt down the best rates to get the most bang for your buck.

Take your time and organize a daily, weekly and monthly marketing schedule to keep you focused on reaching your goals. Don't forget to pencil in "shoe-leather

marketing” time each month, visiting businesses in your area to distribute brochures about your facility and services, asking if you can fulfill any of their storage needs. Remind commercial prospects you offer a solution for inventory or file storage. Let them know you accept deliveries for business clients.

Remember, marketing is a program of consistency: You can't do it once and expect a return. In real estate, this continuous marketing is called “farming”: You plant the seeds of interest and they will grow. By keeping your face and name in the public eye, when a business owner needs storage, you'll be the one they call.

Plant the seed of initial contact and follow up regularly. Find a reason to visit again—maybe with a special promotional flier, a new business card, announcement of security enhancement, extended hours, anything! A little ingenuity goes a long way.

Design a checklist to keep track of whom you visited and when. List names, addresses, phone numbers, date of visit and what marketing item you used. Also write in a date for your next follow up.

For residential tenants, plan now for a direct-mail drop in March or April—just in time for spring cleaning—informing them of your “extra” garage space. Send another in the fall to let them know you provide RV and boat storage during the off season. Keep your marketing calendar stocked with similar ideas year round.

I personally shy away from expensive direct-mail advertising, such as the pieces included in packets of glossy four-color coupons sent in the mail. Plus, if you create and send your own postcards, you're not competing with all the other coupons in the envelope. Recipients see your postcard and your name alone.

Experiment and Evaluate

Tracking might be the most important tool for any marketing program. When someone rents a unit, ask how they heard about your facility. You need to know what efforts work and which don't. Otherwise, you could be throwing money away senselessly.

In a large metropolitan area like San Diego or Dallas, for example, facilities shell out \$250,000 annually for full-page Yellow Pages ads in two or more directories. If your site is advertised in more than one, habitually ask callers, “How did you hear about us?” Train employees to do the same. If callers answer, “Yellow Pages,” ask which directory. If they aren't sure which book they're using, ask for a page number and figure it out (chances are you're not on the same page for all directories).

No one likes to throw money away on advertising that doesn't produce revenue. If one directory works significantly better than another for you, ditch the other.

Consider adding a little more money to your existing ad by increasing the size or adding color.

If you're using other forms of advertising such as coupons in your newspaper, PennySaver or other print media, include a code on each. Ask callers to recite the number and keep track of which ads or coupons work, which don't, and adjust accordingly.

Another tip: If you hand deliver fliers or send direct-mail postcards, have them printed on different-colored paper or cardstock. Decide beforehand what color goes where, such as orange goes to apartments, yellow to mobile home parks, blue to doctors, green to attorneys.

When you ask callers those six important words, "How did you hear about us?" and they answer "a flier" or "postcard," be ready to ask, "What color?" Keep track of colors and soon you'll see a pattern identifying what works.

Custom design a sheet listing all your marketing categories and keep it by the phone to remind managers to track all calls. At the end of each week and month, review the tracking sheet, evaluating as you go. A clear picture should begin to emerge allowing you to fine tune your marketing plan and allocate dollars wisely. Don't forget: If after the 90 to 120 days lapses without a considerable response, you know it's time to move onto another form of marketing.

Marketing, like all science, is an ongoing experiment. Keep trying new methods and tracking what works for your business. Alter the mix periodically, evaluate and move onto the next phase. Over time, you'll have the procedures down pat.

Pamela Alton-Truitt is the owner of Mini- Management, a nationwide manager-placement service. The company also offers full-service and operations-only facility management, training manuals, inspections and audits, feasibility studies, consulting and training seminars. For more information, call 800.646.4648.

