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Marketing Must Do's

Planning for the year

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Happy New Year! What a wonderful time to refresh, review and plan a winning marketing strategy for 2007. Were you thrilled with your facility's performance in 2006? Did it make your heart sing all the way to the bank? If not, let's review marketing strategies that will make you dance for joy a year from today.

Your first resolution should always be continuous improvement in all areas of the operation. Look at past performance, the key indicators, and make plans to change any of the numbers you didn't like. Your marketing plans should specifically target each and every one. There are plenty of ways to achieve marketing success for 2007.

Makeover

Anything to enhance your street or curb appeal is money in the bank. At our facilities, drive-by traffic accounts for 40 percent to 80 percent of all annual leases.

Customers develop a perception of trust from a clean, well-manicured, beautifully landscaped and perfectly maintained site. Don't leave anything "questionable" in view of passersby: no weeds, broken or unlighted signs, broken gates or keypads, fading or streaked paint on unit doors. Don't give anyone reason to go elsewhere. Send a trusting message by looking professional.

Schedule repairs or replacements to keep things looking sharp. Winter is a great time for maintenance tasks before leasing season begins in March. Cleaning, painting, caulking and sealing are low-cost ways to improve the curb appeal.

If possible, consider adding a digital-display sign or time-and-temperature digital display to your existing signage for an attention-getting boost. Draw attention to your site regularly with balloons, weekend signs, directionals and outdoor displays proclaiming "We sell boxes." Change reader boards at least weekly so people always anticipate and look for your latest message.

Budget

Marketing and advertising costs for stabilized stores are usually 3 percent to 6 percent of actual income. Allocate appropriate funds for every piece of your marketing puzzle. For example, if you want managers to call on local attorneys, doctors, insurance agents, etc., to promote your climate-controlled spaces for records storage, make sure you have adequate money in the budget for promotional items, brochures, and business and referral cards to pass out to professionals in your area.

Be passionate about getting more referrals and repeats from existing and former customers. These are the lowest-cost rentals you can get. On the other end of the spectrum are the highest-cost per lease tenants—those garnered through Yellow Pages, newspaper and radio/TV ads.

Always measure and track the performance of each program or offering; evaluate if they are working, at what cost and if they're worth the price. Each expense to run the store should be listed in your monthly budget—"miscellaneous" and "other" should never be categories.

For new locations, plan approximately \$25,000 to \$50,000 for the first year's marketing and advertising programs for promotional items, printing and onsite events. Before opening, schedule what programs and events you'll run each month. And wait until you've been open for 45 days before mounting an event. This saves you from giving tours of an unfinished facility and spoiling first impressions.

Get Smart

Knowledge is power. Memorize unit sizes and what you have to sell. What is your message? Which groups will you target? Who will receive invitations for special events? What is your strategy for cold calls?

Tailor your efforts to the groups that are most likely to fill the type of units you have vacant; i.e., contractors for large drive-in units, and local retailers with excess inventory for the holidays who'll need your climate-controlled 10-by-10s.

You must also know why customers choose your facility, how far away they live, if they're homeowners or renters, their ages, gender, typical stored items and average length of stay. Answers to all of the above empower you to create bulls-eye marketing messages for the right prospects.

High-Speed Thrills

Don't skimp on your Internet. Get plugged into high-speed DSL or cable so you can download in a click. This may be your most useful marketing tool. The Internet provides a wealth of information about your community, competition,

mapping your closest target groups with names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mail and web addresses, and beyond the cost of the connection it's free!

Go online to either AOL.com, Googleearth.com or Yellowpages.com and find where your competition is located, see aerial photos of the market in detail (in most cities), get complete lists of apartments, real estate businesses, professional offices and more. Sort them by distance, mark them on a map and plan to hit all of them as soon as possible.

Go to your local chamber of commerce or city or county website for information on growth, permits, new developments and demographics. If your area has limited info, try demographic companies, also found on the Internet.

For tenants, make it happen for them online as well. Offer them the ability to rent and pay online. Respond to their emails promptly; send e-mail campaigns to groups and member organizations. Collect your customers' e-mail addresses for notices, invoices and announcements—saving you a bundle on mailing and postage costs.

Software Saves

Can you incur rent increases by evaluating one report? Can you review a management summary and determine exact priorities for your store? Can you customize the time period on this report to see yearly improvements? Do you collect marketing and demographic information at move-in and evaluate it regularly?

Software programs do this and more, saving you time, providing invaluable information and helping you maximize marketing dollars. Shop around for a reputable company that provides self-storage specific software and click your business into shape!

Be There

Web, live, on the phone or in person, you must be available for renters when they need you. Customers want instant answers. If they can rent and pay online at your web site 24/7, if they can reach you at least six days a week, they'll be satisfied and send more referrals.

Do you make it easy for tenants to make payment through automatic debit? Do you offer package-delivery acceptance? Are you there when they zip in during their lunch hour or right after work? Happy customers stay longer. Find out what they want and then provide it.

Visuals

Colors, textures and motion are key to reaching today's consumers. Do you have a color-coded model showing different sizes? Do your ads and website picture your store's offerings?

Many buyers won't even consider products or stores without seeing photos first. Photos provide some type of "proof" and assurance that a company is reputable and proud to be seen. The general public is highly visual, but shoppers are savvy. They don't want old-fashioned clip art. From Yellow Pages ads to fliers and postcards, say it with photos and win.

Post a photo gallery on your website and update it often. Photograph different seasons at the store; take shots of customers moving in; snap a few images of people buying boxes in the office. Use these for brochures, fliers, on the web, on magnets, in press releases, anything.

This "visual" concept takes on many forms. If you offer tenants trucks for move-in, why not let the truck act as a moving billboard for your business with photos and contact info on the sides? When you hand out fliers or other printed materials, make sure an ad promotional, like a business-card magnet, or a piece of candy is attached. It's surprising what a Tootsie Roll can do to draw attention to your message.

Try this idea: We use an emery board—with store name and number—taped to a marketing letter that states, "Your Files Are No Problem With Us" as the headline. This small low-cost item gets our message across in a memorable way.

Attitude Is Everything

You need customer-service focused, friendly professionals answering phones and helping customers. Find people with an open mind and great attitude. Previous experience is not always a plus—especially if you have to break bad habits and retrain.

Managers need versatile skills for maintenance, customer service, collections, reporting, web use, marketing and computer tasks. They need to be counselors, bookkeepers, sales experts, receptionists, package-delivery personnel and more. They can learn these skills but you can never train someone to have a sunny outlook on life.

Try any and all of these ideas and you'll be on the path to a successful 2007. Happy Marketing New Year!

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