



Integrating Technology For Success How Managers Balance Today's Techy Tools With Their Daily Routines

BY RHONDA PASCHAL

No matter how you look at it, changing technology is a way of life. As a result, today's self-storage facilities often implement a variety of technological advancements in order to maintain a competitive edge. Hence, the industry is effectively wielding tools designed to promote seamless operations and make the business of storage more convenient for today's customers. The real question is, how are managers integrating these tools into their daily routines?

Tapping Into The Internet

The Internet has proven to be a particularly powerful tool in the self-storage operator's arsenal. Its at-your-fingertips convenience benefits customers and facility managers alike. "The Internet provides customers with the capability to surf the Web and learn about a facility's amenities, its convenient locations, and other features and benefits," says Ray McRae, vice president and director of operations for of Arizona-based Storage Solutions and Arizona Mini Storage Management Co. "The immediacy of this tool can result in a reservation via the Internet."

In an effort to help potential customers make an informed decision before they commit, Storage Solutions mails them a free information packet that includes a CD-ROM. "It is a multimedia CD that features a tour of the facility and units, and a presentation by the site manager," explains Storage Solutions Area Supervisor David Jones. "The CD gives the customer a view of the product they are buying. There is also a link to our Web site on the CD, where the customer can go and rent the unit they want."

McRae explains that using knowledge and sales skills, today's managers have an opportunity to keep customers from shopping any further once they make contact with the facility (and that cuts out the competition.) "The availability of the Internet can help managers do some forward planning and provide custom services to their clients," he says.

Jones agrees, saying, "Managers can have units ready, gate access codes available, and other tasks completed before the customer arrives. This enables managers to offer a higher level of customer service while being more efficient and improving their chances of renting units."

Seattle-based Shurgard is also taking advantage of online reservations and payment processes, which flows through the company's national sales center in Phoenix. "We have a Web master who monitors these transactions," explains Shurgard District Manager Debbie Kuhn. "The reservations are faxed to the specific location chosen by the customer and that information goes into our system and the unit is reserved. The benefit to the customer is the convenience of having the unit reserved and the peace of mind of knowing it is done."

The Kiosk Concept

Shurgard is also pushing the technological envelope with the use of kiosks—a tool that the company has been using for three years. The kiosks, which resemble automatic teller machines introduced by the banking industry years ago, are either stand-alone machines located outside a self-storage facility or built into the facility's structure.

"The kiosk is completely automated and allows customers to make a credit card payment, rent a unit, or transfer a unit. And an existing customer can get account information," Kuhn explains. "The kiosk provides customers with another option to rent with us. The more ways we have to reach the customer, the better. Just like the Internet and our national sales center, it makes the process easier and more convenient."

One Stop Does It All

Today's technology also serves to support the reality of a one-stop shop—a benefit offered by eMove, an affiliate of U-Haul International, which serves more than 12 million moving and storage customers. "The eMove platform offers multiple programs, but specifically offers the eMove Storage Affiliate Program for independent self-storage operators," says Srinivasan, eMove director. "The eMove Affiliate Program delivers a bundled package of benefits that include reservations, site management software, property insurance and online account management." Through the program, customers can reserve moving equipment and storage units, pay storage unit rent, and get help moving in or out of their unit...all online.

The Call Center Collaboration

Another tool fueled by technology is call centers. "The call center application prevents an operator from missing an opportunity to sell their facility to a potential customer," explains Stan Colona, who along with business partner Brad Boyd, owns XPS Services based in Richardson, Texas. "Several large operators already had call centers for years because they could afford the expense. The XPS Self-Storage Call Center was formed to work with multiple independent operators, which we grouped together so they could also afford the benefits of call center technology." Today, the XPS software interacts with Centershift's STORESM program in real time to support seamless call center integration and processes.

Brad North, president of Advantage Business Consulting in Ohio, also realizes the call center benefit. "The main objective of a call center is to set an appointment, create a visit to the facility, and ultimately rent a unit," he says. "Instead of being an eight- or nine-hour a day operation, with a call center you become a 16- or 17-hour operation. The longer hours of operation and presentation by a live person give you a better opportunity to create a visit to your facility."

Taking the Mystery Out of Success

Enhanced mystery shopping programs have also merged with technology. Offered by Telemeasure, (a subsidiary of Arizona Mini Storage Management Co.) one such program sends a mystery shopper to a location where the process is videotaped then placed on a CD-ROM with hyper links to various parts of the shopper's experience. "We use the information as a training tool to help managers improve in certain areas," says McRae, "and also to praise managers for their efforts."

Shurgard is also utilizing the cutting-edge of mystery shopping technology. "We take the results of the mystery shopping report and upload the information on the company's Intranet," says Kuhn. "This allows us to look at other Shurgard markets to see what other locations with the same issues are doing to overcome them."

Kuhn acknowledges that the information is crucial to the company's commitment to provide exemplary customer service. "It's feedback coming directly from a consumer and is critical to us because it allows us to see why a customer may not have rented from us. By making the information available in other markets, we can share ideas to make sure the shopping experience is perfect for our customers."

Software To Get The Job Done

“Managers need to understand that it is essential to have software programs that are written specifically for the self-storage industry,” says Michael Richards, president of Hi-Tech Smart Systems, Inc. in Hawaii. “Attempting to adapt another type of program to self-storage is a recipe for disaster. Most self-storage software programs provide automation to help ensure compliance with laws, and can handle the volume and recurring charges associated with a self-storage facility.”

Markus Hecker, president of SMD Software, Inc. in North Carolina, explains that there is software designed to facilitate daily tasks and teach managers about their customers, as well as software that can track marketing data. “This type of software has the capability to show how clients heard about a store; how far away customers live; what they are storing; reasons for storing, etc.,” he says, adding that there is software available that works with a facility’s management program to control numerous vital functions including access to a facility. “Most management programs work with most keypad entry systems. Unlike the DOS days, Windows-based programs and entry systems are stable and most software systems work with most security systems.”

Cued reminders are also part of today’s technological advancements. “Users can have their software create a list of [customers] who are five days past due,” Hecker explains. “Reminders also help with the collections process because they automate tasks such as e-mailing letters, assessing fees, helping with combined delinquency tasks, e-mailing invoices to clients, and printing notices on postcards.”

Technology That Pays

Thanks to changing technology, alternative payment methods are also available to self-storage customers, including electronic and credit card payments. According to Claudia Miller, president of Texas-based C&A Solutions, which specializes in electronic cash flow acceleration, there are numerous benefits of this type of technology. “For decades the self-storage industry has accepted payments in the familiar form of personal paper checks that must be processed, documented and physically taken to the bank,” she says. “By expanding your business’ electronic payment options, you’re offering your customers credit card-style convenience founded on a well-established preference for checking.” She explains that C&A Solutions’ e-Pay Manager, a Web-based payment gateway that includes a virtual terminal for processing customer payments, gives users the ability to add payment options anywhere on their Web site for customers to use for both one-time and recurring transactions.

Oregon-based SafePak Corp. also supports alternative payment methods with its PayStation system, which accepts checks, credit card payments, cash, or any combination of the two. Mounted outside the facility, PayStation is there anytime a manager isn’t available to collect a tenant’s rental payment. “Customers using the system simply enter their gate access code, select the method of payment and the system prompts them through the process,” says Buzz Siler, SafePak’s president and CEO. “Once the process is completed, the system provides a paper receipt.”

Balancing The Tools

With these types of innovative technological advances, the self-storage industry is no doubt set to continue in a positive direction. With that in mind, an invaluable piece of advice experts offer is to balance all the tools and welcome future advancements. XPS’ Colona sums it up best, “It’s about using all the tools in harmony like the instruments played in a symphony. Balancing all the tools effectively is what makes a manager successful.”

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