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## REVENUE MANAGEMENT

- 4 A 6-Part Facility Audit
- 5 Building and Tracking Your Budget
- 6 Setting Rental Rates
- 8 Quick Price-Setting Tips
- 10 Tiered-Value Pricing
- 12 Proper Discounts and Specials
- 14 A Primer on Facility Fees
- 16 Ways to Control Rising Costs
- 17 Capital Expenditures
- 18 8 Money-Saving Tax Strategies
- 20 Tax Code and Your Cash Flow
- 21 Understanding Asset Depreciation
- 22 Optimizing Cash Flow
- 24 Preserving Business Revenue
- 25 Preventing Delinquency
- 27 Bad-Debt Collection Strategies
- 29 Better Online Auctions

## SALES & SERVICE

- 30 3 Commandments for Success
- 31 Capturing the New Consumer
- 32 How to Nurture and Convert Leads
- 34 Clearing Common Sales Hurdles
- 35 Listening Your Way to Better Sales
- 37 6 Sales Mistakes to Avoid
- 38 Standing Out From Competitors
- 39 Sharpening Your Service Skills
- 40 Service Slip-Ups and How to Fix Them
- 42 8 High-Touch Customer-Experience Tips
- 43 A Cross-Generational Approach to Service
- 45 Customer Service and the AI Chatbot
- 46 A Smoother Customer Experience
- 47 Resolving Conflict With Customers

## SITE MAINTENANCE

- 49 General Site Maintenance
- 50 Roof Repair and Care
- 51 The Risk of Water Infiltration
- 52 Upkeep for Facility Lighting
- 54 Door-Care Tips
- 56 Sign Maintenance
- 58 Asphalt Preservation and Repair
- 60 A Pest-Control Game Plan
- 62 A Luxurious Landscape
- 63 Supporting Your Security System
- 64 Gate Maintenance and Safety
- 65 Time for a Tech Check
- 67 Digital Decluttering
- 68 Site-Maintenance Tips for Boat/RV Storage

## SAFETY & SECURITY

- 69 Establishing a Safe Workplace
- 70 Safety Best Practices
- 71 Fire Prevention and Safety
- 72 A Plan for Fighting Crime
- 74 Employee Theft
- 75 A Cybersecurity Strategy
- 77 Crisis-Management Overview
- 78 Catastrophe Response and Prevention
- 80 Weathering Natural Disasters
- 81 Property Damage
- 83 The Pain of Personal Injury
- 84 Communicating in a Crisis
- 85 Is Your Security Up to Snuff?
- 87 Modern-Day Security Systems
- 88 Security Components: Operator Advice

## LEGAL & INSURANCE

- 90 5 Enduring Legal Issues
- 91 Rental-Agreement Review
- 93 The Dangers of Lien Sales
- 94 The 3 Tenant Ds
- 96 Dos and Don'ts of Tenant Bankruptcy
- 97 Search Warrants and Subpoenas
- 98 Issues of Physical and Digital Accessibility
- 99 Understanding State Laws
- 101 Data Privacy and Your Level of Risk
- 102 Consumer Collection Practices and You
- 103 The Corporate Transparency Act
- 104 A Refresher on Insurance Coverages
- 105 Understanding Captive Insurance Programs
- 107 Workers' Compensation
- 108 Tenant Insurance vs. Protection Plans

## STAFFING

- 110 A Shift in Leadership Philosophy
- 111 Workplace Trends to Watch
- 112 The New Hybrid Manager
- 114 Exploring a Remote-Work Model
- 115 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- 116 Hiring Top Talent
- 118 Essential Interview Tips
- 119 The Question of Compensation
- 121 Team Training: A Strategic Imperative
- 122 Learning Opportunities
- 124 Training for Middle Management
- 125 Understanding Work Culture
- 126 Clear, Effective Policies and Procedures
- 127 Motivation and Engagement
- 129 Ways to Support Staff
- 131 A Fresh Approach to Performance Reviews
- 133 Dealing With In-Team Disputes
- 135 Establishing a Disciplinary Policy
- 136 Why You Shouldn't Be Afraid to Fire

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT

- 138 Goal-Setting for Facility Managers
- 139 3 Ways to Advance Your Career
- 140 A Guide to Stress Management
- 143 Improving Your Communication Skills
- 145 4 Steps to Job-Search Success
- 146 Mastering the Online Interview

## MARKETING

- 148 Mass-Media Advertising
- 150 Better Marketing Through AI
- 152 A 5-Step Competitor Analysis
- 153 Playing Nice With Competitors
- 154 How to Master Target Marketing
- 156 Tracking Your Way to Success
- 158 4 Areas to Optimize
- 159 Pre-Launch Marketing
- 160 Reaching Millennials and Gen Z
- 162 Your Online Storefront
- 163 Learning Local SEO
- 164 The Changing Tides of SEO
- 165 Third-Party Cookies
- 167 Google Business Profile
- 168 Using Apple Business Connect and Maps
- 169 A Simple Social Strategy
- 171 Social Media Algorithms: A Primer
- 172 Pinterest Power
- 173 Content-Driven Marketing
- 174 The Art of Keyword Research
- 176 Video Marketing: Types and Tips
- 178 Drone-Based Content
- 180 The Power of Email
- 181 A QR-Code Boost
- 183 Paid Online Advertising
- 184 Why Google Ads?
- 186 Facebook Advertising
- 187 10 Steps to a Better Business Reputation

## TECHNOLOGY

- 190 Keeping Up With Industry Technology
- 191 Exploring Remote Management
- 193 Making Remote Work for You
- 194 A Hands-Off Management Model
- 195 Automation: Where and How to Use It
- 196 The Automation Impact on CX
- 198 The Next Level: Artificial Intelligence
- 200 Harnessing AI as a Competitive Edge
- 201 Choosing Management Software
- 202 More Software Advice
- 203 Wireless-Network Connectivity
- 205 Today's CRM Systems
- 206 The Positive Impact of a Mobile App
- 207 Smart-Lock Technology
- 208 Using Camera and Software Data
- 209 Using IoT in Site Maintenance
- 210 Balancing Tech With a Human Touch

## OUTSOURCING

- 211 Why Outsourcing Makes Sense
- 213 Working With Vendors and Contractors
- 214 The Ideal Management Partner
- 216 Hiring a Remote-Management Company
- 218 Help With Human Resources
- 219 Call-Center Integration
- 220 When It's Time to Hire a Trainer
- 221 Outsourcing Facility Maintenance
- 223 Digital-Marketing Support
- 225 Finding a Pest-Control Provider
- 227 The Professional Technology Evaluation

## ADD-ON SERVICES

- 228 Pursuing Add-On Profit
- 230 Exciting New Ancillaries
- 232 Your Retail One-Stop Shop
- 234 A Retail-Area Refresh
- 236 Time to Try Truck Rentals?
- 238 Operating Vehicle Storage
- 239 Boat/RV-Storage Amenities
- 240 Succeeding With Wine Storage
- 242 Tenant Insurance
- 243 The Psychology of Risk
- 244 Tenant-Protection Plans

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# A 6-Part Facility Audit

## If you want your self-storage

facility to run smoothly and efficiently, you need to conduct regular internal audits. While hiring a professional third party to handle this task on your behalf is ideal, not every owner can afford or wants to do so. The good news is you can manage the process yourself, and this article will explain how.

A self-storage audit is more than just a routine check; it's a powerful tool to understand your business, spot areas for improvement, set goals and reduce risks. When assessing your facility, cover the following five key areas. I recommend doing these reviews frequently in smaller increments to better manage workload and identify issues sooner. Aim for at least an annual inspection, with more common checks if possible.

## Leases: Keep Everything in Order

Your self-storage rental agreement is the backbone of your operation. Depending on your facility's size and tenant turnover, a monthly lease audit is a good practice. You're looking to ensure that all contracts are signed and that any requirements, such as proof of insurance, are met, with all documents properly stored. If you haven't already, consider switching to cloud-based software to avoid dealing with hard copies.

To audit your rental agreements, pull a move-in report at the end of each month. This makes it easy to review them quickly. For a more thorough analysis, consider inspecting all your leases quarterly to look for missing addresses, phone numbers, emails and signatures. Depending on your state, not having a signed lease on record could cost you hundreds or thousands in an unexpected lawsuit for something that only takes a few moments to prevent.

## Inventory: Track Merchandise

Most self-storage facilities sell moving and packing supplies. At the very least, you're probably selling door locks. Assuming that you log your retail products as they arrive, perform a monthly check to keep an accurate accounting. If you only need to track locks, a quarterly assessment can be sufficient.

You'd be surprised by how much inventory loss can occur. It can happen through theft or even from giving away too much to customers through promotions or discounts. Keeping track of your inventory not only prevents this shrinkage, it ensures you have the right amount of product on hand at all times.

## Documents: Ensure Compliance

Document audits are crucial for maintaining legal compliance and accuracy. This includes verifying that business and sales-tax licenses are on record and posted as per local laws, and that all records and self-storage maintenance contracts are up to date. Most documents should be reviewed annually or semi-annually, ideally around common renewal dates for your operation. This timing aligns well with license renewals and year-end accounting.

## Site Condition: Keeping Things in Good Shape

Site visits are essential for keeping your self-storage facility in top shape. Regular inspections help catch issues like failing components, landscaping overgrowth and pests before they become major problems. Examine the curb appeal and look for items that should be refreshed or replaced. In addition, address any customer concerns promptly, and adjust your procedures accordingly to be proactive rather than reactive.

## Lien Documentation: Navigate the Complexities

This can be one of the most challenging aspects of a facility audit. It's often time-consuming and requires familiarity with self-storage auctions. To ensure everything is handled correctly, consider having an independent review of your lien procedures by an attorney.

When conducting lien sales, it's critical to follow all state laws, including advertising mandates and the retention of documents. Store this information in the self-storage tenant's file. Proper documentation is crucial to avoid legal issues, such as those arising from wrongful sale.

For instance, a lawsuit that's becoming more common involves self-storage facilities that violate the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, which protects active-duty military personnel. Any operator holding a lien on a servicemember's property in storage must obtain a court order prior to selling or otherwise disposing of the goods. Even when tenants didn't provide proper notice of their active status, courts have awarded them based on reasonable assumptions the facility staff should've made. To mitigate such risks, frequent and clear documentation is key.

## Staff: Monitor Performance and Integrity

Managing staff performance through regular reviews is vital to protect your self-storage business. This is especially important for core team members who play a key role in facility operation.

Evaluate employees on clear metrics such as the number of move-ins, five-star reviews, occupancy and cash handling. If your facility accepts cash payments, review transactions closely to prevent and spot

money mishandling. Staff often have access to valuable customer belongings, too, so conducting rigorous audits and ensuring they're aware of being monitored helps prevent internal theft and promotes efficiency.

### Make Them Count

Your self-storage operation should have clear, published policies and procedures on

all of the above, and staff should be able to access them at any time. Also, consider tying your facility audits to team performance reviews for potential commissions or bonuses. That which is measured will improve. By aligning site assessments with employee reviews, you can ensure that each key area of focus becomes a top priority for everyone who works at the facility.

While the specifics of your audit process may vary based on property size, number of staff, and your specific policies and procedures, regular inspections are critical. They help maximize efficiency, increase profit and, most importantly, reduce legal and financial risk. **ISS**

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*"Money isn't everything, but it's right up there with oxygen!"*

—American Author Zig Ziglar

**As a self-storage operator,** you're likely fond of money. I know I am! And there's no better way to ensure that more cash flows into your business than out of it than to build a solid budget. This financial compass not only helps you track income and expenses, it provides essential information that allows you make smart spending decisions throughout the year. You can use it to handle your funds more efficiently and track your asset's performance. Perhaps the biggest advantage of sticking to a budget is it forces you to closely monitor your business goals, so can achieve your short- and long-term objectives.

Financial planning is crucial to ensure your self-storage facility is profitable, now and in the long run. It does, however, require careful attention. So, let's look at how to build an operations budget. I'll address what it should include, how to track progress, and why it's important to be flexible.

### What Your Budget Must Include

As you start building your self-storage budget, you'll focus on revenue *and* expenses. This exercise can be straightforward or complex. Accounting isn't my first language, so when I look at a budget, I see it from an

operator's purview, not that of a CPA. Just make sure that your budget works for you.

Self-storage rental income is the main source of revenue for your business, but you likely have other sources, too. Make sure you include administration and late fees, tenant-insurance and -protection programs, and other profit centers such as retail sales, truck rentals, wine storage and anything else that contributes to your bottom line. (Quick tip: I estimate late fees for the year as 6% of monthly rental income.)

Of course, no self-storage operator wants to think about operating expenses, but we must. We all have them. Many are out of our control, but we're often able to manage small expenditures here and there. Regularly examine everything you spend as part of your business and determine whether any costs can be reduced or eliminated. If they're essential, they must be in your budget, so you can get a clear picture. To begin, you've got your heavy hitters:

- Debt service
- Property mortgage and taxes
- Staff salaries and benefits
- Business insurance

Next, you've got your basic operating expenses, in other words, the day-to-day costs of running your self-storage business. These include but are not limited to:

- Property maintenance and repairs
- Utilities (electricity, internet, phone, trash, water)
- Administrative costs (office supplies, professional fees)
- Outsourced services (call center, marketing, landscaping, snow removal, pest control)
- Travel expenses (food, fuel)

Make note of whether each expense is a one-time cost or ongoing. If the latter, is it annual, quarterly, monthly or weekly?

Include subcategories for each expense, too. Take marketing, for example. This category might include website hosting, website maintenance, search engine optimization, pay-per-click advertising, reputation management, social media, printed collaterals (business cards, brochures and fliers), and online aggregators. You can get as detailed as you like. Personally, I catalog more than is really necessary, since every little cost matters, and the nickels and dimes add up.

### Frequently Missed Budget Items

As I've reviewed operating budgets for other self-storage operators, I've noticed there are a few items that are often missed. First, there are staff costs. Most people will add salaries and even benefits but forget to include payroll processing, taxes, workers' compensation, mileage reimbursements, or employee gifts and bonuses. For example, do

you host a holiday party or treat staff to pizza a few times a year? You need to account for these expenditures.

Next are legal and other professional services and fees. For example, do you pay an attorney to review your self-storage rental agreement each year? Do you pay for live or online auction services? What about dues for national and state associations, or other professional memberships such as the chamber of commerce?

Finally, many self-storage operators forget to adjust their budget for rising costs. We love giving our customers rate increases but despise it when it happens to us. I get it! I hate seeing software costs go up or insurance premiums increase. However, these items will rise over time. Be sure to build these variances into your annual financial plan.

### Tracking and Updating Your Budget

Creating your self-storage operating budget is just the first step. Tracking and adapting it as needed is crucial for long-term business success.

I speak with a lot of facility operators who are so hyper-focused on the budget that they forget to come up for air and pay attention to what's happening in the world. They think of their financial plan as a quasi-divine decree, like Moses himself brought it down

from Mt. Sinai. It's important to understand that new competitors can always enter your market, causing rates or occupancies to drop. Sometimes units simply don't fill up. *It happens.*

To help counteract these market shifts and effectively manage your self-storage budget:

- **Review your financial statements and property performance at least monthly.** This helps you identify variances, so you can address issues promptly.
- **Compare actual revenue and expenses against what was budgeted.** If there's a difference, positive or negative, understand the reason behind it.
- **Be flexible.** Again, understand the *why*. Don't spend your time navel-gazing. You need to know what's impacting your numbers and be willing to adapt.

Again, it's *your budget*, so it must work for you and your business. Just make sure your operational house is clean. You can have the best financial plan in the world, but if you drop the ball on facility performance, you might as well smoke it.

### Your Roadmap to Success

Self-storage is a very different beast than it was 10, five or even a year ago, and your operations budget needs to reflect this. You

must be informed. Keep up to date with industry trends and best practices. Attend conferences, join professional associations and network with other facility owners. You need to keep up with how the business is evolving.

When deciding where and how to spend your hard-earned money, invest in items that'll provide the most return. Self-storage is becoming flooded with new technology and services. While they may be great, be selective about what can move the needle and what's just the latest shiny object. A great rule of thumb is to ask, "Will this give me more rentals or revenue?" If not, it isn't worth the cost.

Budgeting isn't just a financial exercise; it's an essential strategy that provides you with a roadmap for facility success. It helps you control expenses, make informed decisions, efficiently allocate resources and plan for the future. Ultimately, it'll lead to a more prosperous and profitable self-storage business.

Remember: Tracking and adapting your budget to what suits your operation is equally important as building one on the first place. Stay vigilant, be flexible and always prioritize investments that drive growth and efficiency. **ISS**

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# Setting Rental Rates



**Revenue is the lifeblood** of any self-storage facility, and an operator's ability to maximize and manage it plays a critical role in the health of the business. Most income in this industry originates as rent from tenants. The more you charge and the more units you fill, the more money you make. If you can avoid diverting too much of your cash to expenses, your operation will be profitable. It's an extremely simple concept.

Yet there are still self-storage operators who struggle with setting their unit prices for new and existing customers, which undermines their business, according to Rick Beal, cofounder of Atomic Storage Group, a self-storage management firm that oversees more than 120 facilities nationwide. In fact, he sees it all the time.

Pricing affects profits. Though earnings are only part of the revenue-management

equation, which must factor in money spent as well as received, they're crucial. And even small changes can make a significant impact, Beal says.

Let's look at strategies for managing self-storage unit pricing, both street rates for new customers and increases for existing tenants. I've included observations and advice from several industry experts.

## Digital vs. Manual

The big rental-rate question on the minds of most self-storage operators these days is whether they should adjust their pricing manually or allow technology to do it. Bob Copper, owner of consulting and management firm Self Storage 101 and Copper Storage Management (CSM), favors relying on software, as manual pricing tends to be too subjective. For example, an operator might offer a lower rate to a “special customer” or a tenant who’s struggling financially. A manual process might even be influenced by racism, sexism and ageism.

“The tech-driven systems remove a lot of those issues. Either everyone gets a raise, or no one gets a raise—no picking and choosing,” Copper says.

Furthermore, digital pricing is scheduled and consistent. It depends on data-driven decisions rather than those based on emotion or relationships, says Gary Edmonds, who owns 22 self-storage facilities in Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Minnesota and Wisconsin and manages 25 more for other owners.

There are many companies in the industry that offer software and other tools designed to help self-storage operators set their unit pricing. In fact, advancements in artificial intelligence are providing a critical edge, according to Bret Schobel, director of revenue management for Storage Asset Management, which oversees nearly 600 facilities nationwide.

“The rising costs of taxes, utilities and insurance are making it more important than ever to manage your incoming and existing rates with a correct pulse on the market,” Schobel says. “A failure to do so could heavily minimize the profit potential of your asset.”

If manual pricing is still your method, don’t fret. With the right strategy, it’s still viable. For example, SAM recently adjusted rates by hand for several facilities in areas that were hit hard by natural disasters. “One of the pros of manual pricing is the ability to quickly react to ground-level changes at your store or in your market,” Schobel says.

## Street-Rate Savvy

When self-storage operators talk about rents, many focus on street rates, the advertised prices for new customers. These have recently dropped in many markets. Key factors in this decline include high interest rates, weak home sales and shifts in moving patterns. As of May 2024, the national average same-store street rate fell 4.5% compared with the same period a year earlier, according to a July 2024 report from data provider Yardi Matrix.

## PRICE TIP: Analyze Street Rates

One way to ensure your self-storage units are priced correctly is to conduct a weekly survey of street rates in your market, which will also help you understand current demand. If a study shows that the average price of a 10-by-20 is \$225, but you’re the only facility with that size available, you could push your rate to \$250. Taking small risks and knowing your competitors’ rates and inventory is key to making the most money, even in times of inflation.

*Source: [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), “Setting Your Street Rates: Pricing Units for New Self-Storage Customers in an Inflationary Environment,” by Steven Minkus*

To counteract dampened demand and depressed street rates, SAM has been aggressively promoting specials for new customers, such as first month free or the first three months at 50% off, while keeping street rates relatively high. Once the promotional rate ends, in-place rates sit even higher than market rates.

To set street rates, first determine your facility’s position in the self-storage market, Edmonds advises. Is it an older site that sits two blocks from a newer one or the new kid on the block? Does it offer amenities and services that are unique in the area? If so, you may be able to charge more.

Beal agrees that market differentiators play an important role. Does your facility offer smart entry and locks, high-quality security or regular pest control? “Considering your unique offerings can help you identify additional value that you can provide to attract more customers at a higher rate,” he says.

You must also decide whether you want your rates to be at, above or below the market average. “That can vary based on facility occupancy or even unit-type occupancy. And it can vary often,” Edmonds says.

Beal adds that it’s critical to assess storage demand in your region. For example, if you’re consistently renting out all your 10-by-10 units, this might justify higher rates for that size.

Setting appropriate street rates will maximize your business income and even boost property value. “And sometimes maximizing the income means having to lower your street rates when market conditions deteriorate due to various factors. Some rent is better than the unit sitting empty for a long period of time,” says Kraig Haviland, cofounder of Haviland Storage Services, a consulting firm that also manages 13 properties in five states.

Furthermore, your street rates can affect not only your facility but the entire self-storage market. “Other properties will be looking at what you’re charging and will base their rates according to their property’s age, condition, occupancy and amenities as compared to yours,” Haviland says. “If yours is the shiniest nickel in the area, then you should be the

rate leader because enough customers will perceive extra value at your location and will be willing to pay at least 10% more.”

## Rent Raises for Current Customers

Another aspect of rate management you must consider is raising rates for existing self-storage tenants. This is a delicate process, as you can easily bump them too little or too much.

“Raising the rent for existing customers is more art than science,” says Haviland, who managed rate increases at San Diego Self Storage for 15 years before rejoining his family business. When going through the price-setting process, his goal was always to avoid losing tenants. “But we also knew customers were inclined to stay at a facility where they had enjoyed a positive storage experience rather than go through the hassle of moving to another,” he says.

To ease the blow for his customers, Haviland only pushed increases annually. “Our company

## PRICE TIP: Watch the Variance

When determining whether to raise a tenant’s rent, start by analyzing the variance between their current rate and today’s street rates. You want to avoid increasing existing tenants beyond current prices (this is particularly risky if nearby facilities are renting at or below your rates). Next, use the variance percentage to increase the rent proportionately. You can also take unit-type occupancy, tenant tenure, competitor rates, etc., into account. Standard increase percentages can range from 8% to 15% per customer.

*Source: [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), “Rent-Increase Refresher: When to Raise Rates for Existing Tenants, By How Much, and How to Tell Them,” by Mike Scott*

benefited from our competitors who did rent increases multiple times per year, because those raises were too frequent for many customers; they got fed up and looked for alternative solutions," he says.

Beal says there's "no magic formula" for raising rates on existing tenants. Schobel says you shouldn't hesitate to increase, even if it puts your renters' rates above street rates. "Remember that your street rate should be dynamic, so that what might seem like an aggressive increase today could become a bargain tomorrow," Schobel adds.

At facilities operated by CSM, rate increases for existing customers happen every nine months, Copper notes. These follow facility-by-facility and market-by-market analyses, along with studies of occupancy levels and rate trends. Whatever the data shows, CSM imposes "very minimal" rate hikes on existing tenants so they're less likely to vacate their units when the bigger bills arrive.

Regardless of how often you bump up rates, "it's important to always clearly communicate your pricing to your customers, including any fees or additional charges. It'll help build trust and establish you as a reliable business," notes Beal.

### Economic Occupancy

If you've been in the self-storage business long enough, you know about economic occupancy. It's the share of total potential

income being collected from your units, shown as a percentage. "It takes into account the maximum market rate that could be charged for each space vs. the amount of rent actually being collected," wrote Scott Krone, founder of Coda Management Group, in a 2022 article published by **Inside Self-Storage**.

For the sake of simplicity, let's say you have 100 self-storage units, and they all rent for the current street rate, which is \$100 per month. If you rent every unit at full price, your facility is at 100% economic occupancy. But that's rare in this industry. Vacancies and discounts are nearly always in play. So, now let's say 10 of your units are vacant, and 10 have been discounted by 20%. Instead of generating \$10K per month, your facility now earns \$8,800 per month. That drops economic occupancy to 88%.

But what happens when street rates outpace your pricing for current tenants? It significantly changes the picture, as your units are no longer generating as much money as they could. Economic occupancy gets turned on its ear.

"In an environment where rental rates are increasing, it's hard to maintain economic occupancy," Edmonds says. "When street rates are falling, economic occupancy can look a lot better because you have occupied units above the current market rate. I do not place a lot of emphasis on economic occupancy since it is heavily impacted by outside factors."

### A Positive Outlook? It Depends

Overall, this year's self-storage rental rates appear to be more solid than they were in 2023 when post-pandemic demand began to slip, Edmonds says. But there seems to be a decent amount of variation between markets, he adds.

SAM is also seeing market-to-market pricing fluctuations. In most communities the company serves, rates have gone through normal seasonal shifts, growing over last year. But in the Southeast, it continues to notice softening, with some areas "still trending backward during traditional high-rental months," Schobel says.

"Last year, rates were a bloodbath," Beal says. "The REITs directly led this slaughter, affecting every self-storage operator in their market. This year, we're seeing a slight increase in rates, and hopefully, they will begin to rise."

A report released earlier this year by commercial real estate services provider Marcus & Millichap neatly put this year's rate picture into perspective. "Rents will be the primary plane of competition among storage operators this year. Many major firms are employing dynamic pricing models that maneuver asking rates to more favorably meet market demand, while in-place rents hold steady. This will aid revenue gains for top operators, despite declining street rates, and put smaller firms at a disadvantage." **ISS**

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## Quick Price-Setting Tips

**It's well-documented that self-storage** real estate investment trusts (REITs) have been pushing down their street rates in recent months. We're also seeing evidence that the so-called "race to the bottom" is negatively affecting facility performance and, therefore, property

valuations. Now more than ever, unit pricing has a significant impact on the success or failure of an operation, both for new renters and existing tenants.

In some markets, we're finding that REIT-operated properties have street rates that are as much as 50% lower than

those of independently operated facilities, allowing them to steal business from smaller businesses that are slower to respond to market shifts. However, there's much more to their pricing strategy than lower rent. In fact, the REITs have managed to hold their in-place rents relatively flat by

implementing very aggressive rate increases on existing tenants.

Sophisticated self-storage operators have access to revenue-management programs that assist with unit pricing to increase net operating income, which leads to the creation of meaningful facility value. However, you can still compete and succeed in the market even without these tools—if you're diligent. Before you start cutting rates to match those of much larger players, consider the following tips.

### Setting Your Street Rates

The first step to correctly pricing self-storage on the open market is to identify your competition and determine if your units are of a similar type. For example, are they traditional drive-up or climate-controlled? Ground floor or upper level? Traditional lock or smart lock? Are there unit alarms or motion sensors? Are any of the spaces used for specialty services such as boat/RV storage or wine storage?

Next, you need to understand your competitors' street rates. A good way to start is to contact your local self-storage real estate broker and ask for a free rental-rate survey of the market. Once you see how your current pricing and occupancy compare to those of other facilities in the area, set up a system to check your competitors' rates daily. Make sure you watch the *online* rates and *onsite* rates because they're likely different.

Now the question is, do you want your street rates to be slightly lower or higher than those of your competition? Account for overall occupancy per unit size. Sizes in greater demand can be priced higher. Also, determine if any of your spaces deserve premium or economy pricing due to their unique attributes.

Once you start collecting your competition's rental rates and examining your own product, you'll be surprised by what you learn. As with all programs, consistency is key. You must adjust and run tests to see what works.

### Increasing Rates for Existing Customers

The below-market rents being charged by the self-storage REITs are attracting new customers. If you're competing with these operators and you want to protect and increase your facility's cash flow and value, you're going to have to take a page out of their playbook. In other words, be diligent and aggressive with your existing-tenant rent increases and keep your in-place rates at an appropriate level.

What I've observed with the REITs is that customers who rent on a move-in special—sometimes at 50% to 75% below market—

typically receive their first increase during month three or four of their stay. This first jump is generally aggressive and brings the customer's in-place rent to the desired amount or nearly so.

Today, we're learning that self-storage tenants are staying in their units longer and generally absorbing increases. This is good news. We've also found that after they receive that initial price hike, they'll generally accept another one six to eight months later.

That said, no matter how well you communicate the terms of your low, introductory move-in rates or the timing and intent of rent increases, there will be upset customers. You must provide your site staff with the right tools to handle conversations with these tenants and, hopefully, save each rental.

This starts with training managers to properly educate customers during the move-in process. If the renter is receiving a temporary, introductory rate, they should understand when the rate will change and by how much. The manager should explain that the adjusted price is still much lower than the standard rate for that unit size. When all else fails, they should have the ability to reduce or waive the increase when necessary to prevent a move-out.

Some of your self-storage tenants may still choose to leave after an increase. They may even post negative reviews about the experience. This is why it's important to monitor comments on your website, Google,

Yelp and any other platform on which customers can post.

If you get a bad review, the best approach is to respond quickly and explain the situation while reiterating that move-in rates are temporary. When you take the time to apologize and share your side of the story, it can lessen the sting of criticism and show customers that your company is listening and willing to improve. As long as you remain professional and polite, even a negative review can show your business in a positive light.

You can also call the disgruntled customer, discuss the problem, offer some concessions and ask them to post an update to their review. This will also help to alleviate any negative impact. If all of this seems like too much to manage, there are paid services such as Birdseye and Chat Meter that can monitor and manage your online reputation for you.

### A Game Worth Playing

Unit pricing is critical to self-storage success in today's market. To maximize results, you must have a sharp strategy when rolling out street rates and raising rents on existing tenants. It takes a lot of commitment to create and launch a successful revenue-management program, but the rewards make the game worth playing, even against the REITs and other sophisticated competitors. **ISS**

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# TIERED-VALUE PRICING



**These days, self-storage operators** are navigating an entirely new landscape in the face of increased supply and lowered demand. We're all looking for new ways to grow revenue. No doubt you're already implementing rent increases, offering tenant insurance, and selling other products and services like retail merchandise, truck rentals and boat/RV storage. What else can you do to improve income?

Tiered, value-based unit pricing is a fairly new concept in the self-storage industry. More and more facility-management software companies are rolling out this feature and making it easier to use. But how do you know if it's the right model for your business? How do you leverage it properly and assess its performance? Let's look at some of the benefits, best practices and caveats, so you'll have the information you need to succeed.

## The Basics of Value-Tiered Pricing

A tiered self-storage pricing model—also referred to as “good, better, best” pricing—allows you to charge for your units based on the value they bring to the customer. Not all

storage spaces are the same. Some are more convenient or modern and, therefore, more desirable. Units can differ in terms of location and many other features, for example:

- **Location:** A unit might be close to (or far away from) the entrance, management office, elevator, security cameras, etc. It might be ground level or on an upper floor.
- **Ease of access:** The customer may be able to drive up to the space or have to park and go inside a building. The unit might have double doors, front and back, which makes it easier to organize and move contents.
- **Climate control:** The unit might be traditional, with no heating or cooling, or it may be kept at a set level of temperature and humidity.
- **Electricity:** Some spaces come equipped with interior lights and even power outlets.
- **Technology:** You might offer spaces with smart locks, individual unit alarms or interior motion sensors.

The idea is that by pricing your units in tiers based on certain amenities and their appeal, some customers will choose the higher-priced options, and you can increase the average value of new rentals. Here are some additional benefits:

### Create additional sales opportunities.

When working with price-sensitive self-storage customers, tiered pricing allows you to offer a more economical rental option based on their individual needs and financial situation. It's also an easy way to upsell, as the added features and benefits of the “premium” units are clearly outlined.

### Reduce the need for promotions and discounts.

If you're offering multiple tiers and prices for each type of self-storage unit and giving the customer the ability to choose, it should reduce the need for aggressive promotions. It's an opportunity to limit your discount expense and customer-acquisition cost.

## Unit Amenities for Higher Rent Tiers

- Proximity to the front gate, office or elevator
- Ground floor vs. upper floor
- Beginning of drive aisle vs. end
- Climate control
- Easy access (drive-up)
- Newly developed space
- New unit door or smart lock
- Internal motion sensor or camera
- Double doors (front and back of space)
- Lighting or power
- Shelving units

**Differentiate your facility from competitors.** Tiered unit pricing allows you to cater to a wider range of customers. It's also likely unique when compared to competing facilities that only offer a street or web rate.

**Rent less desirable or hard-to-access units.** Consider adding a discount tier for those units that are generally hard to rent, for example, those at the end of an upper-level hallway or at the back of a drive-up property. These budget-friendly options will appeal to a certain portion of your customer base and help you fill those stubborn spaces.

**Simplify your offerings.** Value-based pricing can allow you to reduce the number of self-storage unit options you offer on your website, which streamlines the rental process for customers. By consolidating units by type and assigning them each to a tier, visitors can quickly and easily see their options.

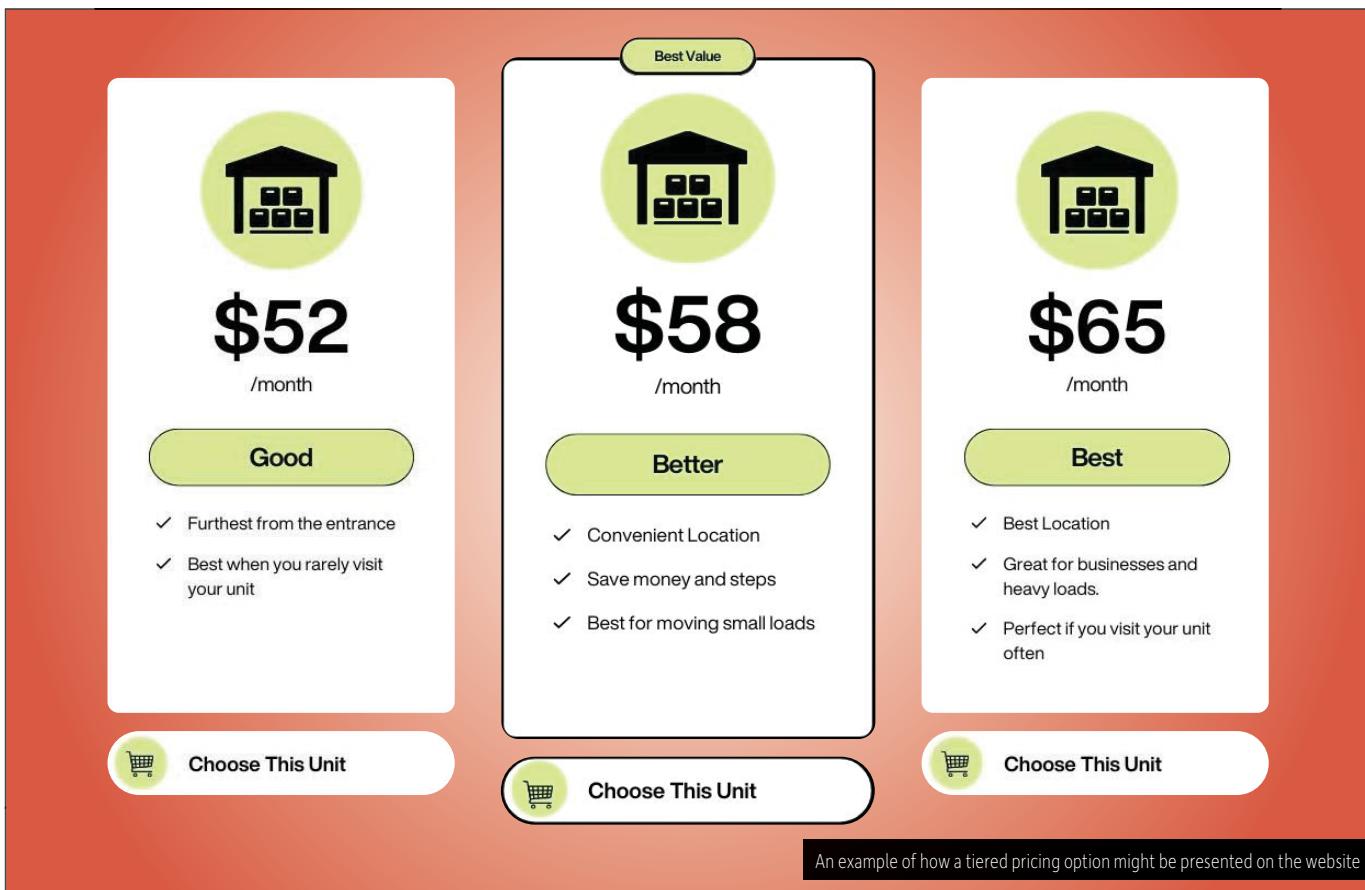
## Is It Doable?

If you'd like to consider using a tiered, value-based pricing model for your self-storage operation, the first thing to do is to confirm whether your facility-management software and website can support it. Ask for an example of how price tiers would display on your website. You shouldn't have to sacrifice a positive user experience. If you're using a third-party service like a call center, check to make sure they can support this strategy as well.

Self-storage pricing can be a challenge, and a tiered-value structure can add a layer of complexity. Expanding from one or two price points per unit type to three, four or more can make things more complicated and may change the structure of your management reports. If you have staff and other resources dedicated to revenue management, they should be able to manage it.

## Implement Your Strategy

Every self-storage management software seems to have a different process for setting



up tiered, value-based pricing; but there are some general steps to follow. First, if you operate more than one facility, decide which site would be best for testing this new model. You might base this decision on the quality of the asset, the experience of the onsite management team, or the range of units available at the property. Next, take your full inventory list, organized by unit type, and walk the site to identify which spaces could be priced higher than others based on location, convenience, climate control and other features.

Now take your notes back to your computer and assign each unit to a price tier. If you set your street rate as your lowest tier and apply a premium to the middle and highest levels, you're creating the best opportunity to grow your self-storage revenue.

When ranking each of your storage units based on desirability, you may find that these decisions can be somewhat arbitrary. Is the space being 10 feet closer to the front gate enough to justify charging more for it? Don't be afraid to experiment with your pricing until you find what works. Most new customers will choose a lower-priced tier—depending on your market, of course. However, you should see as many as 25% of new rentals opting for premium options.

### Measure and Evaluate

Once you have one or more of your self-storage facilities operating on a value-based pricing strategy, keep an eye on the performance. If you're on the fence, try running a basic A/B test over a couple of months. This would mean choosing two facilities that are similar in market, size and quality with comparable monthly rental activity and lead flow. Set up tiered pricing at one and keep your existing rate strategy at the other.

Some specific metrics to watch and compare are month-over-month revenue growth, changes in lead flow and monthly conversion rates. Some self-storage software programs have a specific report that'll tell you the percentage of new move-ins that opted for the premium spaces. If none of your new tenants are choosing them, make sure you haven't priced them too high. Also, consider whether staff need more training on how to promote those options. If you see more than 25% of new customers selecting your higher-tier options, consider increasing prices.

When my company started its value-tiered pricing model, we were told that we could expect to see a revenue increase of 4% to 10% from new move-ins. To measure the performance of your own program, take your

average new-move-in value for each unit type before launch and compare it to your new average two months after. Of course, you may need to factor in normal rate fluctuations that occur due to seasonality or any increases your company is in the process of executing.

Another option is to take the sum of all new rent rates with value-tier pricing, then the average standard or web rate you would've used had you not made the switch. Multiply that average by the number of new rentals and subtract that number from the sum of all new actual rent rates. This will tell you how much more rent you collected as a result of the new program.

Remember, a huge element of success in tiered pricing is the training you give your self-storage managers. They should be well-equipped to apply this new model to their daily interactions with customers.

If you're looking for ways to grow revenue at your self-storage facility, value-based, tiered unit pricing might be a great option. Of course, it isn't the only approach; but it can add more money to your business while improving your customer experience. **ISS**

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# PROPER DISCOUNTS AND SPECIALS

**Rate management is vital** to maximizing the potential of a self-storage facility. Do it properly, and you can enjoy substantial annual increases in revenue—12% or even 15%. Ignore it at your own risk because your income won't grow.

The truth is that setting self-storage pricing is more art than science, and trial and error comes with the territory. But experience is a great teacher, and the more you know about your property, staff, market and competition, the better you'll be at it. It's actually one of the more interesting aspects of operation because conditions are always changing, and this means continually tweaking your strategy to achieve the best results.

Rate management is a four-headed monster consisting of discounts and specials, street rates, rates for existing tenants, and fees. They're all connected. If you need to heavily discount your rates, then perhaps you should use a lighter touch with rent increases. If you must increase rentals because occupancy is lacking, you might need to waive more late fees to retain the customers you already have. In this article, we'll focus on discounts and specials, but remember: This head of the beast isn't independent from the other three.

During my 15-year stint as director of operations for a mid-sized self-storage operator, rate management fell squarely on my plate. Following are some of the strategies I used to effectively manage discounts and specials. For the purposes of this article, let's define discounts as any "dollars off the rent" enticement, such as 50% off the first month. Specials are ways other than free rent to sweeten the pot for potential customers. An example might be a free disc lock or three free boxes.

## Doling Out Discounts With Strategy

Self-storage rental discounts can vary greatly, depending on what your company is trying to accomplish. There are move-in discounts that apply for a specific number of months and others that never end. Those continuous monthly reductions include ones for seniors, military, students and first responders. These typically fall in the 5% to 15% range.

Your occupancy targets should drive the use of move-in concessions in tandem with your street rates. For example, when I was doing this job, our goal was to always have a small number of vacant units in a variety of sizes. Roughly 95% to 97% occupancy was ideal because our income goals were being met and we still had units to offer. Even when we were that highly occupied, we still provided nominal move-in reductions.

One of the unfortunate consequences of The Great Recession was the buying public learned to expect some kind of free rent. As time went on and financial conditions improved, our company generally offered 25% off the first month as a win-win for both the customer and our operation. We gave away a modest amount of free rent per transaction, and the customer felt like they received a great deal.

The discounts you offer might be based on other criteria. For example, let's say you have one unit size with far too many vacancies. You might offer a very aggressive discount on that one problematic size, such as 50% off the first three months or \$40 off per month for six months. You'd be surprised how many customers can make that particular size work when the price is right!

At my self-storage operation, we typically offered 50% off the first month for most move-ins on unit sizes in which we had three or more vacancies. If we had eight or more, we would provide 50% off of two months. We only went to three months when we had to compete with a new facility in the market.

What do you do when the real estate investment trusts offer a \$1 move-in? We found we could successfully combat that strategy with 50% off two months. The net result is the same in both cases: You lose one month of rent. However, we would get a more desirable renter who needed the space for at least two months, generally longer. Also, our customers would be less likely to store junk and let it go to auction than someone who had only paid \$1 to move into the space.

One of the best strategies we used was tying a move-in discount to signing up for autopay via Automated Clearing House (ACH). Renters who use this tend to have a longer length of stay and don't tie up our employees by calling in to make payments. ACH fees are dramatically less than those charged for credit cards, so our company received a financial benefit at the same time our customers did. Again, it was a win-win.

## Try Technology

Another recommendation is to use the discount settings in your self-storage management software. Learn how they work and put them to good use. All rates can be pulled straight from your software and onto your website. You can designate that certain sizes or types of units will always or never be discounted. You might also set specific parameters based on data, such as:

- All units below 90% occupancy are eligible for 50% off the first two months.
- Spaces that are 90% to 94% full trigger 50% of the first month.
- Units that maintain 95% occupancy or higher only receive 25% off the first month.

## Launching a New Facility

When your self-storage property is new and in rent-up mode, be liberal with your discounting. Run concessions that range from three to six months. Those units are mostly sitting empty for a while and something is better than nothing.

Also, in the first year, designate some spaces as charity units to gain some cachet in the community. These might be units on upper floors or those that are irregularly shaped. Be sure to set a limit on how long these will be used for free.

## The Effect on Company Culture

Discounts and specials are an important part of any self-storage operator's revenue-management efforts and need to be constantly managed. How you handle

them can play a large role in the company culture you're trying to create and maintain.

For example, one of the specials we offered in the operation I oversaw was free use of our move-in truck for new customers. This was popular, and we always made it available, no matter how high our occupancy reached. Along with a one-year rate guarantee, the free move-in truck was something that set our company apart from competition. Our employees were required to mention it in every sales opportunity. It was part of our website and all other marketing. That unique sales proposition became part of our team identity.

## A Marketing Measure

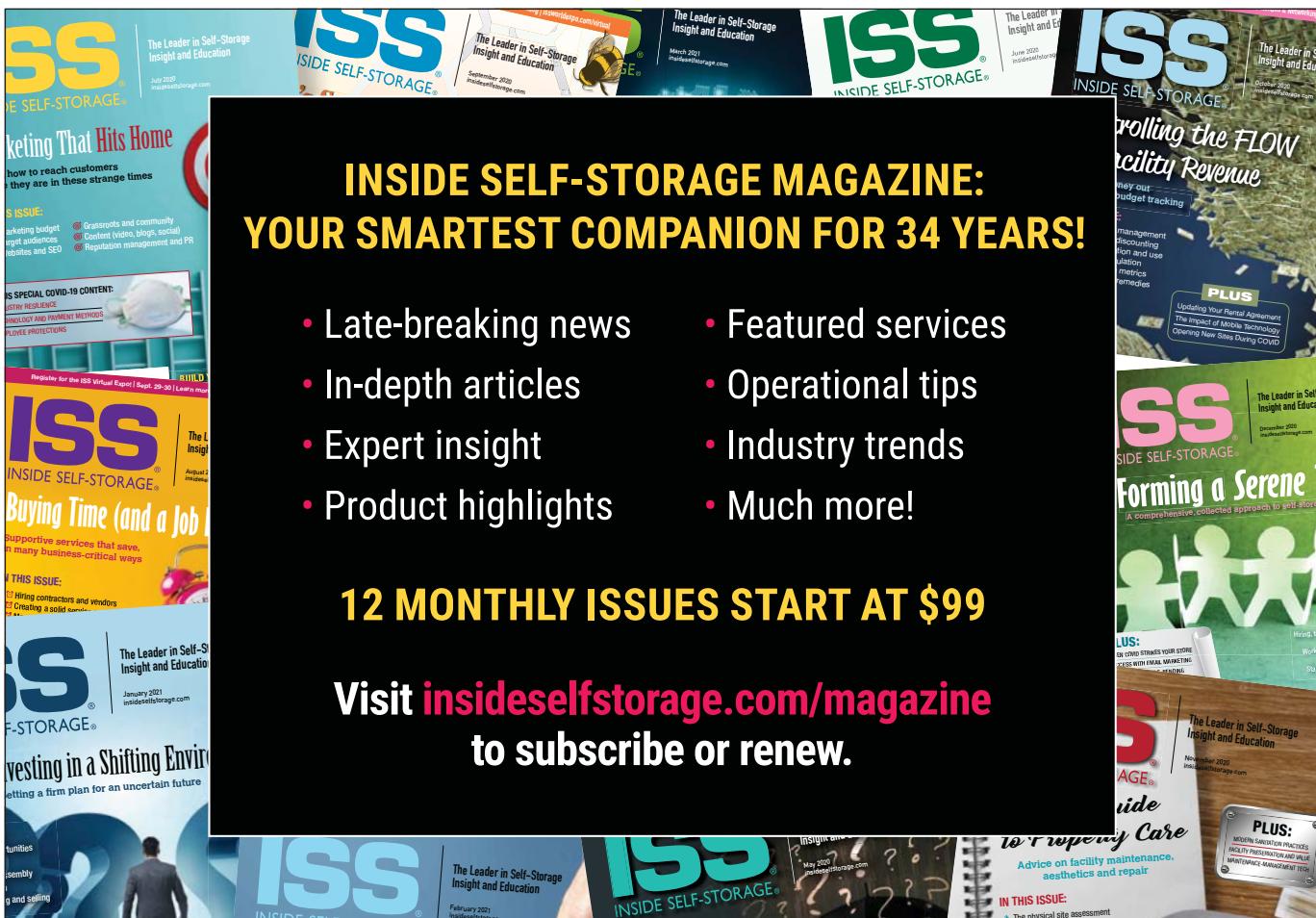
Another special we consistently used was specific to Yelp. To those customers, we offered a free disc lock. We never used that promotion anywhere else, so when someone came in looking for the free lock, we knew exactly how they found us. It was a good way to provide an incentive on this platform and easily track our marketing efforts.

## Concessions Count

Discounts should be reviewed at least monthly along with your self-storage street rates. Again, they're connected and should be viewed as a whole. Don't tinker with them too often because you want to have enough data over time to know if your strategies are working. Conversely, don't wait too long or you'll miss seasonal and market changes.

Part of the review process should include consulting with your onsite self-storage team to gain their feedback regarding the market. Keep track of your concessions and give direction and training to your employees on how to handle them. They should be counseled to not give away rent when it isn't required. When occupancy is high, discounts should be low and vice versa. They should never be your primary sales strategy. Rather, use them when warranted to secure more rentals. **ISS**

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# A Primer on Facility Fees



## Operating a profitable

**self-storage** business isn't all about rent increases. Though rate management has been top-of-mind for most facility operators following the pandemic years, there are other ways to positively impact facility revenue. For example, why not bolster your bottom line with smart fee management?

Customer fees are an essential part of self-storage operation, as they help maintain the financial health of the business. They not only offset administrative and other costs, they encourage timely rent payments while discouraging delinquent behavior. Fees can improve cash flow and ensure the company remains sustainable.

The average consumer is accustomed to paying fees for various services that add value to their experience. For example, I recently ordered airline tickets and paid the upcharge for additional leg room—and I'm not even tall! Customers also expect penalties for things like late payments. Still, I regularly talk to self-storage operators who are reluctant to charge fees consistently, if at all. They tell me they "just can't" charge certain fees at their location.

But why? There's no need to be shy about it! The following will help you assess and collect fees fairly and effectively. Let's start by looking at the types of fees you can charge and how to successfully implement them as part of your self-storage operation.

## Responding to Fee Objections

Here are two examples of potential objections you might hear from customers regarding fees and responses you might use to overcome them.

### Why am I being charged a setup (administration) fee?

This fee includes a free lock for your unit that allows you to access it immediately, and I also get a small bonus for signing you up today. I hope you're all right with that.

### Can you refund my late fee?

I'll tell you what ... I'll do it for you as a one-time courtesy provided you leave us a five-star review on Google. Once you leave the review, email us a screenshot, and we'll refund you. We recommend setting up autopay to avoid this in the future. We'll note this offer in your file. Again, it's a one-time courtesy.

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com, "Leveraging Customer Fees to Generate More Incremental Income for Your Self-Storage Business," by Charlie Kao](https://www.insideselfstorage.com/article/leveraging-customer-fees-to-generate-more-incremental-income-for-your-self-storage-business)

### Late Fees

Late fees are applied each month for overdue rent payments, and they generally motivate tenants to pay on time. They also help cover the costs associated with collection efforts such as repeated phone calls, text-message alerts, reminder emails and overlocks.

The maximum amount you can charge is often determined by state legislation. Many

lien laws include language to address late fees specifically. The most common structure is “the greater of \$20 or 20% of the monthly rent.” Check with your attorney or state self-storage association for specifics.

While late fees are arguably the easiest fee to implement and enforce in a self-storage environment, they’re also the most frequently waived. It’s a simple concept: Pay rent on time and there’s no fee; pay late, and you get charged a penalty. It’s entirely within the customer’s control. Yet many operators are hesitant to enforce the policy!

Every other industry charges late fees without apology or hesitation. Self-storage shouldn’t be any different. It’s perfectly reasonable to expect that your tenant will pay their rent *on time* each month. If the payment is late, the fee should be applied without exception—every customer, every time. It doesn’t matter if they have one unit or 15, or whether they’ve rented with you for a month or three years.

Another mistake I see operators make is failing to charge the maximum amount allowed. Instead of charging \$20 at the earliest possible date according to their state lien law, too many will delay the charge by several days or only assess \$10 initially, with an additional \$5 or \$10 added later. In today’s world where we regularly pay \$8 for a cup of coffee, a \$10 late fee isn’t a sufficient deterrent. Enforce the late fee at the maximum amount on the earliest date allowed. This will help you train your tenants to do business the way you want and expect.

Your time is better spent *collecting* rent, not *chasing* it. Implement, execute and enforce a solid late-fee application into your self-storage operation.

## Lien Fees

Collected during the lien-sale process, lien fees are designed to cover the administrative and legal costs associated with the preparation and execution of an auction. They might cover mailing the lien notice, advertising the sale, auctioneer or online-platform costs, and perhaps trash removal. These fees are generally charged in phases at each step.

Make sure your fees are fair and appropriate for each action taken. For instance, charging \$100 to mail a letter is probably excessive, but a \$100 fee to cut a door lock may be entirely reasonable. Lock removal can be dangerous and often requires special equipment or the expertise of a professional. Your fee should cover the cost of the added liability and expense. It might be anywhere from \$25 to \$150 or more. If you’re unsure what to charge, get insight from a

**66** Regular communication, such as reminders before fees are applied, can help you manage customer expectations. Be prepared to explain the necessity and reasoning behind your fees.

local locksmith. (This is also a fee that might be charged for reasons other than a lien, for example, a customer lost their keys.)

The lien process is lengthy and highly litigious, and the effort you make to execute it properly should come at a cost to the tenant. Like late fees, lien fees should be charged every time to every customer at each step in the process. If a tenant pays their balance prior to the sale, they should still be expected to pay the fees associated with whatever steps have been completed up to that point. Again, it’s smart to check with your attorney or state self-storage association for details.

## Administrative Fees

Stop collecting security or cleaning deposits that you’ll just give back to the self-storage customer when they move out. This only creates more work for you and doesn’t generate additional income. Not only is collecting and holding this money a hassle, the minimal amount charged generally isn’t enough of a deterrent to prevent tenants from leaving stuff behind when they vacate.

Instead, charge a reasonable administrative fee to cover the time associated with account setup and maintenance. This may be \$10, \$20 or even \$30 depending on your market. When asked what the fee is for, explain it as “a one-time fee that helps cover the cost of account setup and pest control” or something along those lines. This one can be easily waived if necessary to help secure the rental.

## Other Fees

Don’t overlook fees for value-add items! For example, if you offer tenant insurance or individual unit alarms, they should come at a cost. Maybe you assign a “good, better or best” value to your self-storage units based on location, ease of access, lighting, etc. Think again about the seats on an airplane. Some are available at the regular price, but depending on the location within the cabin, the cost increases. Just be sure to communicate the reasoning to the customer, so they clearly understand what they’re paying for and the additional value provided.

There are a variety of other fees that may be applicable during a self-storage rental. Things like returned checks, trash removal and after-hours access should have an associated expense. Remember, you set the expectation for how your business operates. If a tenant causes a disruption or asks for a service outside the norm, charge a fee!

## Legal Considerations and Customer Expectations

Transparency is key. Clearly outline all fees in your self-storage lease agreement. Any changes you make should be communicated to tenants according to the rental contract. Remember to check for state and federal regulations. This includes limits on the amounts charged and the notification procedures required.

Regular communication, such as reminders before fees are applied, can help you manage customer expectations. Be prepared to explain the necessity and reasoning behind your fees. Maintaining a firm but fair stance while offering potential solutions—such as an autopay program to avoid future late fees—can mitigate tenant dissatisfaction. Flexibility and understanding can also go a long way in maintaining positive customer relationships.

Embracing a smart, proactive approach to fee management can significantly enhance your self-storage facility’s revenue. By understanding the various fees and their importance, you can create a structured environment that encourages timely payments and increases monthly income. Additionally, open communication with tenants about the various charges, combined with consistent enforcement, helps train your customers to do business the way you want to conduct it.

Remember, fees aren’t just penalties; they’re a critical tool for maintaining the health and sustainability of your self-storage business. Implement these strategies with confidence and watch your bottom line thrive. **ISS**

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# WAYS TO CONTROL RISING COSTS



## Costs have risen in almost

every industry over the last two years following the recent spike in inflation, and they remain above the Federal Reserve's 2% target. Unfortunately, the self-storage sector hasn't been spared. The long list of items that are now more expensive includes subscription-based products and services, utilities, wages, and property taxes.

Those of us who operate self-storage facilities have had to aggressively tackle expenses however possible. At our company, we've focused on several areas in an effort to control rising costs. Hopefully, the following advice will help you find some savings for your own business.

### Track It!

Diligent tracking will help you identify areas in which expenses can be reduced and operational efficiency enhanced. Through careful analysis, you'll be able to detect patterns, outliers and areas of unnecessary spending. This information can empower you to make more informed decisions, negotiate better deals with suppliers, and implement cost-cutting measures that won't compromise your quality of service.

**Source:** *insidestorage.com, "Insight to Cost Management in Self-Storage: Expenses to Track, Plus Those That Create Business Value," by Magen Smith*

## Appeal Your Real Estate Taxes

Real estate taxes have been an area of increasing concern for self-storage operators. In recent years, municipalities have significantly increased the assessments of our facilities, often setting valuations beyond what the buildings are actually worth. This results in considerably higher property taxes. In some cases, we've seen them triple!

Consistently appealing these expenses has created significant savings for our self-storage operation. Despite the additional cost on the front end, i.e., hiring an attorney, returning the assessed valuation of our facilities to reasonable levels has been worth the investment.

## Minimize Utility Expenses

Utilities are one of the largest regular expenses for self-storage facilities, but they can be reduced. For example, we've found savings by negotiating energy-supply agreements with third-party power providers. We've been able to lower our rates and lock them in for several years, which enables us to budget more reliably. Just bear in mind that this may not be possible in every state. To see if third-party energy suppliers are allowed in your region, do a quick web search and find potential vendors. Local government websites may also be helpful.

We've also taken steps to minimize our power use. For example, we've installed motion-detecting LED lights, applied spray-foam insulation, and installed multiple energy-efficient HVAC units rather than a single, large commercial one.

It's also important to control your thermostats, not only to moderate power

use but to avoid risk. If your heat is turned up too high in winter, you'll waste a lot of energy, especially at entryways, which can drastically increase your costs. But if you aren't heating your buildings enough, you risk freezing your pipes and sprinkler systems, which can be disastrous in many ways. It's critical to train facility staff on the use of the HVAC system and check the thermostats regularly.

## Shop Carefully for Services

Annual maintenance and repairs is another area in which we've found a great deal of potential for self-storage cost savings. When bidding out facility services, the more prices we get, the better. We contact multiple companies for formal proposals, then check to confirm the comparisons are apples to apples. We read through each quote carefully to ensure they cover the exact same work. Caution: It isn't always obvious when and where they differ.

Look beyond the large national companies. Often, smaller, local vendors have the most competitive prices. They don't always have websites, so keep an eye out for tradespeople in your community. You can often lock them into a contract for more than one year. We've been able to save thousands at our self-storage facilities this way.

We've noticed that many services are moving to subscription-based fees. If this is true for your self-storage operation, the goal is to avoid having to sign up with various companies for the same services at multiple locations. You don't want a bunch of repetitive monthly charges.

## Look at Marketing Objectively

Marketing is an area in which it can be difficult to know whether money is being spent effectively. Tying your spend to actual sales can sometimes be little more than an educated guess. For this reason, it merits careful monitoring. As profit gets squeezed, the need for tracking results increases exponentially. At our company, we use objective data to track the leads generated by various self-storage marketing campaigns and assess their success.

For example, we sometimes use third-party directories to drive traffic to our self-storage

website. When we do, we calculate profit from these rentals to ensure the service continues to be profitable. If we find it isn't, we shift our focus to offering move-in discounts, which can sometimes cost less and be more effective.

## The Bottom-Line Impact

Given the current inflationary environment and the pressure we're all feeling on our self-storage rental rates, it's important to tighten operating expenses anywhere you can. Whenever you have a cost you can't control, pay careful attention to it and do whatever you can to maximize your savings.

The good news is the above cost-cutting tips have no negative impact on the quality of service you provide to your self-storage tenants. Further, every dollar saved in the expense category is one added to the bottom line. Savings mean added profit, which increases the value of your asset. All in all, it's well worthwhile to invest time and effort in tackling expenses. It means more money and a stronger business. **ISS**

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**Among the foremost advantages** of owning self-storage is its minimal requirement for ongoing capital expenditures (capex). That's one of the reasons I was initially attracted to this asset class.

In my roles as property manager and commercial real estate broker, I've witnessed how these financial outlays can significantly reduce the distributable cash flow of an apartment or office building, for example, despite strong net operating income (NOI). Tenant improvements like fresh paint, new flooring and parking-lot repair are just a few expenses that can quickly add up and

negatively impact the return on an investment. I've seen owners who thought they had excellent NOI only to have little or no cash left after capex.

For years, I accepted these recurring expenses as a normal cost of doing business; then I discovered self-storage and my perspective changed. I fell in love the steel walls, concrete floors and healthy rents. Still, while capital improvements are comparatively low in this industry, there are some that are critical. You'll need a strategy for managing them if you want to be profitable.

## Is It Capex?

When we measure cash-on-cash returns in self-storage, we compare the profits from our operating income to the amount of cash invested in the deal. NOI is calculated by subtracting operating expenses such as property taxes, utilities, insurance, property management and advertising from operating income like rent and retail sales.

Loan costs aren't included in operating expenses. Whether you purchase the property with cash or full debt, the expenses remain the same.) Capex, which include costs for enhancing or maintaining major components

like buildings, doors or pavement, are also not considered operating expenses.

It can sometimes be difficult to know whether a particular project is a capex or an operating expense. In the past, one approach was to determine whether the cost of an item could be depreciated over time for tax purposes. For example, a new roof is typically depreciated over the standard commercial property depreciation schedule. This makes it a capital improvement. However, fixing a door latch isn't a project that's depreciated; it's simply an operating expense. Resurfacing asphalt is depreciated over time, but repairing it isn't. A new furnace is a capital expense, but repairing an existing furnace is an operating expense.

When in doubt, consult your CPA. I did this regularly when I started my self-storage career.

### Establishing a Reserve Fund

A smart goal for any self-storage operator is to have a reserve fund, so that when a capex arises, you can cover it with cash on hand instead of dipping into your monthly operational profit. The amount you'll need to set aside should be rather modest in this business. Determining that amount isn't rocket science, but it does take a little work.

I'm interested in buying an existing self-storage facility, I have a professional

inspect the property and give me a report on the mechanicals, roof and structure, and asphalt or concrete—in other words, all the capex. Then I review each item and determine its replacement cost. If the report says the air handler is estimated to last five more years, I know I need to have a certain amount set aside for when the time comes to replace it.

I build my budget to cover all expected capex for the next 10 years. Then, I figure out what I need to set aside each year to cover those costs and pull out a portion from operational income monthly or quarterly. I do this before profits are distributed. If I'm doing monthly deductions, the amount typically ranges from \$600 to \$1,200, depending on the size of the self-storage facility. This usually falls somewhere between 13 and 18 cents per square foot.

I typically establish the reserve fund at closing with a full year's worth of reserves, if possible. After that, I mainly let it accumulate, as there are generally few capex.

If you apply a commercial mortgage-backed securities (CMBS) loan or an insurance loan to a self-storage project, the lender will go through the budget process and manage your reserve fund for you. For my last CMBS loan, I was required to set aside 13 cents per square foot per year. I would contribute to it monthly, and when I had a capex item to pay, the lender reimbursed me from that account.

### The Impact on Business Insurance

When you set up a reserve fund for your self-storage capex, it frees you up to have a high deductible on your property insurance, which keeps the premium as low as possible. I usually try to set the deductible at \$10,000. When I make an insurance claim, it's always to replace or repair a capex item; then I pay the deductible out of the fund.

One time, I had a self-storage facility with a \$60,000 sign that was blown down by a strong wind. When I filed the claim with the insurance company, I only had to pay the \$10,000 deductible for the replacement; and that came out of the capex reserve. The insurance covered the rest, and I didn't have to take a cent from that month's cash distributions.

Maintaining a modest reserve fund is crucial to avoid disrupting your self-storage cash-flow distributions. It covers predictable and unexpected capex during your holding period. When you're raising funds for a project, emphasize to potential investors that this asset class is superior when it comes to providing steady and predictable cash flow. Now you know a key strategy to uphold that promise! **ISS**

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# 8 Money-Saving Tax Strategies



**A self-storage operation comes** with unique tax complexities and challenges. How an owner navigates them can make a huge difference to the bottom line and the facility's overall success. It's crucial to stay proactive with your financial planning and keep a close eye on opportunities to reduce your tax exposure.

Following are eight strategies to help you maximize the amount of money you keep out of Uncle Sam's pocket and in your own. The goal is to set up your self-storage business for long-term growth.

### Conduct Regular Financial Reviews

Regularly review your self-storage facility finances. Dive deep into your accounting and become familiar with the numbers on your balance sheet, income statement and cash-flow statement. Pay attention to occupancy rates, operating expenses and revenue trends.

A detailed review helps you identify red flags early, such as rising costs or declining revenue, and provides a clear picture of your financial status. This process also helps you understand what's working, so you can double down on those strengths or cut back in areas where you aren't seeing a sufficient return on investment.

## Maximize Your Tax Deductions

One of the biggest benefits of running a self-storage business is the variety of tax deductions available. Everyday expenses like property maintenance and repairs, utilities, and insurance can all be used to lower your taxable income. However, the real game-changer is depreciation, which allows you to spread the cost of big-ticket items, such as buildings and equipment, over several years, reducing your taxable income for a longer time.

Other tax codes like Section 179, which details the large business purchases that qualify for deductions, and bonus depreciation enable you to write off a large portion of these costs up front. Taking full advantage of these deductions can significantly reduce your tax bill, freeing up cash to reinvest in your self-storage business or fill your bank account.

## Properly Time Your Income and Expenses

When it comes to managing your self-storage revenue, timing matters. By planning when to recognize income and expenses, you can take control of your tax obligations.

For example, if you anticipate being in a higher tax bracket this year, you might defer income to the following year or accelerate deductible expenses to reduce your liability. Conversely, if the current year's total revenue is expected to be lower, consider recognizing more income now or delaying some expenses. By balancing your cash-flow needs with a tax strategy, you can keep more of what you earn.

## Leverage Tax Credits

Tax credits are an often-overlooked opportunity to save money. Unlike deductions, which reduce your taxable income, credits directly lower your tax bill dollar for dollar. For example, if you're hiring for your self-storage operation, investigate the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, which rewards you for bringing on veterans or other specified groups. If you're making energy-efficient upgrades to your property, there may be federal and state credits available for additions like solar panels or LED lighting. These credits can help offset the cost of the improvements.

**“ The type of business you operate, whether it's a limited-liability corporation, S-corporation or partnership, significantly impacts the way your income is taxed.**

## Plan for Retirement and Help Your Team Do the Same

Planning for retirement isn't only crucial for your future, it's a smart tax strategy. Establishing a plan like a SEP IRA or Solo 401(k) enables you to save for your "golden years" while reducing your current taxable income. These contributions are deductible and grow tax-free until you retire.

Also, offering benefits like health insurance or retirement plans to your self-storage staff creates a win-win scenario. You gain tax advantages while attracting and retaining valuable employees, who enjoy perks that enhance their quality of life.

## Make Smart Upgrades

When you're purchasing equipment for your self-storage facility, there's more to consider than the price tag. The decision of whether to lease or buy can have significant tax and cash-flow implications. Leasing might offer lower monthly costs, while buying could provide long-term depreciation benefits. For improvements such as paving, security systems or HVAC, plan strategically to maximize tax deductions.

## Review Your Business Structure

The type of business you operate, whether it's a limited-liability corporation, S-corporation or partnership, significantly impacts the way your income is taxed. Many self-storage operators start with something simple but discover that, as their business grows, a more complex arrangement could save them money. For example, electing S-corp status could help reduce self-employment taxes, allowing you to split your income between salary and distributions. It's worth regularly reviewing your business structure with a tax advisor to make sure it's still the best fit for your current situation.

## Monitor and Adjust Your Estimated Tax Payments

In self-storage, your facility income can vary throughout the year, making estimated

tax payments tricky but crucial. Missing these payments or underestimating what you owe can lead to penalties and surprise tax bills. To stay on track and avoid unnecessary expenses, regularly review your income and adjust your estimated tax payments. Work with an accountant to ensure they reflect actual earnings, especially if your income fluctuates significantly. This proactive approach helps manage cash flow and keeps finances running smoothly.

## Preparing for the New Year

As 2024 comes to a close, it's the perfect time to set up your self-storage business for success in the year ahead. Review financials, fine-tune your tax strategy, and set clear goals for revenue and expense management. Organize your paperwork for tax filing and meet with an advisor early to discuss any last-minute opportunities to reduce your tax bill.

If you need to further reduce your tax burden before time expires, consider making repairs, improvements or upgrades toward the end of the year. This isn't only a savvy tax strategy, it'll ensure your self-storage facility is well-maintained.

Taking these proactive steps will help you hit the ground running once the calendar flips to the new year, minimizing stress during the looming tax season and positioning your business for continued growth and profitability. By managing income wisely, maximizing deductions and ensuring that your business structure supports your goals, you can optimize your finances and keep more of your hard-earned money.

Smart financial management and strategic planning are the keys to success. These strategies aren't just about saving on taxes, they're about building a stronger, more resilient self-storage business for the long haul. **ISS**

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# Tax Code and Your Cash Flow



**One of the great things** about being a self-storage owner is there are many ways to use the current tax code to generate additional cash flow and reduce expenses. You may already be familiar with the benefits you can enjoy when renovating or improving an existing facility, but you may not be aware that there are also advantages to tearing something out and throwing it away. Understanding the tax-saving strategies available to you can help you put more money in your pocket and keep it there.

Suppose you won the lottery. Would you want to receive your payout in a lump-sum or in annual installments over 40 years? Most businesspeople would say, "Give me the money! I know how to invest it better than the government or anyone else." It makes sense to let your money work for you and your business rather than for the IRS.

Let's explore tools like cost segregation, bonus depreciation and asset disposition and what they can do for your self-storage business. The reality is, for every \$1 million in facility costs, you're looking at potential tax savings of nearly \$100,000. Don't leave money on the table. Put it to work for yourself!

## Cost Segregation

You can depreciate your self-storage facility in one of two ways. The first is the default straight-line method that allows you to depreciate a building equally each year for 39 years. This means you can apply 1/39th of the cost of your building to offset your annual income. The second method is accelerated depreciation, also known as cost segregation. This tax strategy uses additional depreciation

over a shorter time period to help reduce your federal-tax burden and generate additional cash flow.

The assets of a self-storage building can be categorized into various buckets, each with its own depreciation value. Depending on the type of structure, you can allocate 20% to 40% of the total value into 5-, 7-, or 15-year time periods instead of using the standard 39 years. Items that fit into the 5-year bucket include interior doors, specialty electrical or plumbing systems, and hallway skins. Assets that fall into the 15-year bucket include exterior items like the parking lot, fencing and landscaping.

## Bonus Depreciation

An added tax benefit that's in play is bonus depreciation, which allows you to immediately deduct a large percentage of the purchase price of your eligible self-storage assets. You may be able to depreciate assets with shorter lifespans within the first year or two. Depending on when you bought or built the facility, you may be able to deduct up to 100% of its constituent parts.

From September 27, 2017, through Dec. 31, 2022, the bonus depreciation rate was 100%. Starting in 2023 to when it expires in 2027, it's decreasing 20% per year. If you buy, build or renovate a property this year, you're allowed bonus depreciation of 60%. That means you can deduct 60% of everything eligible for acceleration. If you bought a property in 2018 when the bonus was 100% and you haven't yet accelerated the depreciation on it, you can still do so on your current tax return and get the benefit of those tax savings. Best of all, you don't have to amend prior tax returns.

Year Asset Placed in Service	Bonus Depreciation
2018	100%
2019	100%
2020	100%
2021	100%
2022	100%
2023	80%
2024	60%
2025	40%
2026	20%
2027	0%

Let's look at another example. If you bought a \$3 million self-storage facility in 2023, depreciating it using the straight-line method would provide you with a deduction large enough to offset income up to a little more than \$75,000. At the 37% tax bracket, you could eliminate \$27,750 in taxes.

If you were to instead apply a cost-segregation study with bonus depreciation, you could receive a deduction of \$900,000, or \$333,000 in tax savings. Then, you could take that \$333,000 you didn't pay to the IRS and renovate your newly purchased facility. This would enable you to increase your rental rates and boost net operating income, which increases the overall value of the property.

You could also use those savings to acquire another facility and grow your portfolio. Thinking back to our lottery scenario, you just took a lump sum of cash flow out of your asset

that would've otherwise gone to Uncle Sam and instead invested it to make more money!

### Additional Tax Strategies

There are numerous other tax opportunities you can use anytime you buy, build, renovate or make an improvement to a self-storage facility. For example, when you remove something that still has life for future tax deductions and throw it out, that item may qualify as a disposition. The IRS allows you to write off the remaining depreciable basis of that asset at the time you dispose of it.

For example, lighting is categorized as a 39-year asset from the time you bought the facility. If you replace the current lighting with new LED fixtures and have owned the building for 10 years by that point, you

will still have 29 years of tax life remaining, making those years eligible for disposition. You can also apply bonus depreciation to the new lights that were installed under QIP (qualified improvement property).

Applying this principle to LED energy projects sometimes leads to net-zero cost due to all the tax savings. The same concept could apply to many other items like self-storage unit doors, a parking lot or a roof replacement.

### Grab That Cash!

Every self-storage owner should consider using these tax-saving strategies. If you're planning a facility renovation or improvement, investigate how you can benefit from cost segregation, bonus depreciation and other tactics.

Ask an expert about the necessary timing and specific criteria. A reputable cost-segregation company, teamed with a well-informed tax preparer, can make navigating compliance issues and maximizing deductions relatively easy for you. Your cost-segregation specialist can also work closely with your accountant or tax preparer to maximize deductions while helping you maintain compliance with current tax codes.

Stop leaving cash on the table! Follow up and educate yourself further on how to use the U.S. tax code to maximize the cash flow that can be pulled out of your self-storage assets and put it to work for you. **ISS**

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# UNDERSTANDING ASSET DEPRECIATION



**No matter which asset class** a real estate owner or investor is involved with, the goals are generally the same: to maximize cash flow, decrease expenses, increase value and redeploy capital. One expense that's always troubling is income tax.

The good news is there's a general strategy that can help you save money in this area: depreciation. It's an approach that should be discussed with a qualified CPA and cost-segregation expert; however, reviewing your short- and long-term tax plans is an excellent way to support the financial health of your self-storage business.

### What Is Depreciation?

Depreciation is the decrease in value of a property over time due to wear, tear and aging. It's also an accounting practice used to spread the cost of a physical asset over its useful life, according to Investopedia. Per the U.S. tax-depreciation system known as the Modified Accelerated Cost Recovery System, commercial properties like self-storage facilities are depreciated over a schedule of 39 years. This applies to the real estate itself, but there are strategies that allow you to depreciate certain equipment and components at a faster rate.

For decades, the IRS has permitted "component depreciation," which has developed into what's currently known as "cost segregation," for properties that generate income. Components that are required to achieve Certificate of Occupancy (C of O), such as the core and shell of the building, primary lighting required under building codes, and other life-safety items generally fall under the category "real property," which is depreciated as 39-year, straight-line property over 40 tax years.

Other items may be depreciated as *personal* property. These are components of the building

or improved land that support business activities but aren't required to obtain the C of O. Examples from inside your self-storage management office might include countertops, flooring, cabinetry, millwork, trim, phone lines, internet and cable. These can be depreciated over five years. Outside the building, qualified land improvements are depreciated as 15-year property. Examples are fencing, gates, walkways, pavers, landscaping, retaining walls, drainage, retention/detention ponds, bollards, lighting and signage.

It isn't unusual for a self-storage facility to qualify for 8% to 12% of the cost basis or purchase price as five-year personal property and an additional 8% to 12% as 15-year qualified land improvement. In other words, if the property is worth \$1 million as constructed or purchased, less the land value, the owner may be able to accelerate \$160,000 to \$240,000 in depreciation. And this is helpful, as the larger the depreciation expense, the lower your taxable income and the less you pay in taxes.

### Bonus Depreciation

According to Investopedia, bonus depreciation is an accelerated method that allows a taxpayer to deduct 100% of depreciation upfront on their federal tax return. If you use it, your company may pay substantially lower taxes in the tax year in which you claim it.

With bonus depreciation, any qualified personal property with a 20-year class life or less is eligible for a full percentage deduction under the accelerated-depreciation rules. For tax year 2023, 80% bonus depreciation was available. If we were to do a cost-segregation study on the \$1 million self-storage facility mentioned above, we'd be permitted to

**With bonus depreciation, any qualified personal property with a 20-year class life or less is eligible for a full percentage deduction under the accelerated-depreciation rules.**

accelerate 80% of the \$160,000 to \$240,000 of the depreciation. At a 37% tax rate, that would create \$59,200 to \$88,800 in additional cash flow for the 2023 tax year.

In this case, we're front-loading the depreciation, taking a big chunk. The tradeoff is we're going to get much less over the next 39 tax years. It's about timing. What's important to understand is this is a cash-flow and "time value of money" strategy that creates a massive amount of wealth in the real estate market.

### Potential Opportunities

On Jan. 31, the House of Representatives passed the Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act of 2024 (HR 7024) with 83% bipartisan support. It now needs to get through the Senate and is expected to do so by early August.

This legislation retroactively extends 100% bonus depreciation for tax years 2023, 2024, 2025 and 2026. This is a huge opportunity for real estate owners, investors, architects, engineering firms and all trades of commercial construction. It won't only encourage new development as well as facility expansions and renovations, it'll foster more acquisitions of existing real estate.

To meet the requirements for bonus depreciation under HB 7024, any qualified personal property must be 20 years old or less, and it must have been constructed or purchased between Sept. 27, 2017, and Dec. 31, 2026. If a self-storage asset meets those two criteria, the owner can enjoy tax advantages.

In fact, you may even claim bonus depreciation on a current-year tax return without having to amend any prior year's return. You simply need to file IRS Form 3115, which is a preapproved accounting-method change. This lets the IRS know that you've switched from 39-year, straight-line depreciation to five-, seven-, 15- and 39-year class lives. It permits a one-year catchup of the accelerated depreciation on the current tax year.

The takeaway is there are two tax codes in this country: one for the informed and the other for the ignorant. Keep yourself educated by working with a tax or cost-segregation expert to realize savings for your self-storage business. **ISS**

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**Cash flow is the lifeblood** of any business, including a self-storage facility. It's the money that enters and leaves the operation. To ensure the financial health and sustainability of your asset, you must understand cash flow and do everything you can to optimize it. Let's explore its components and complexities as well as strategies for improvement.

### Revenue

The first step to ensuring a healthy business cash flow is to establish solid and consistent revenue streams. The primary source of income for self-storage facilities



# Optimizing Cash Flow

is rent, but some operators offer additional products and services. For example, many sell retail merchandise like locks, boxes and other packing materials. Others provide truck rentals, tenant insurance or boat/RV storage. These ancillaries not only contribute to overall profit, they enhance cash-flow diversification.

As a self-storage operator, you can also charge various fees such as:

- **Administration fee:** Often applied when a tenant signs their rental agreement
- **Security deposit:** Paid during lease signing and typically refundable upon move-out, provided the unit is left in good condition
- **Cleaning fee:** Collected at lease signing to defray the cost of cleaning the unit after the tenant moves out
- **Additional-access fee:** Paid for 24-hour or after-hours access to the storage unit
- **Late fee:** Charged when tenants fail to pay their rent on time
- **Overlock fee:** Charged when a tenant fails to pay rent and the operator overlocks their unit
- **Transfer fee:** Applied when a tenant wishes to move to a different unit within the same facility
- **Insufficient-funds fee:** Applied if a tenant's check payment is returned or card payment is declined
- **Unit-reservation fee:** A temporary charge to hold a unit open for a specified period

To avoid misunderstandings with tenants, you must clearly outline all fees in your self-storage rental agreement. Make sure you comply with local laws and regulations.

## Expenses

Expense management is essential to running a successful self-storage business and maintaining a strong cash flow. Mismanaged and unnecessary costs can eat away at your profit. Here are some of the most common industry expenditures:

- **Property taxes:** One of the most significant expenses for any self-storage facility, these vary by city, county and state.
- **Payroll:** For most operators, full- and part-time staff represent the second largest expense.
- **Third-party management:** Fees can range from 5% to 8% of gross revenue.
- **Utilities:** Typical services include electricity, water, trash, sewage and internet. This might also include heating and cooling, depending on your method.
- **Software and technology:** These essential tools require an initial investment and sometimes an ongoing subscription fee.

- **Maintenance and repairs:** Costs can vary greatly depending on the project and service provider.
- **Marketing and advertising:** This includes all activities to attract customers such as website development and maintenance, search engine optimization, signage, and promotional materials.
- **Insurance:** Premiums can vary based on location. Facilities in high-risk areas will pay more.
- **Miscellaneous:** Additional expenses might include office supplies, cleaning services, legal fees and other costs associated with running your business.

## Debt Service

Self-storage owners often rely on financing when acquiring, expanding or renovating a facility. When taking out a loan, a critical metric is the debt-service coverage ratio (DSCR), which measures the amount of cash flow a business has to pay what it owes. It's calculated by dividing a facility's net operating income (NOI), which is revenue minus operating expenses, by total debt service, which includes all loan payments (principal and interest).

The resulting value indicates how many times a facility's operating income covers its debt obligations. A DSCR of greater than 1.0 indicates that the asset generates enough to satisfy its debt. The higher the ratio, the better.

In self-storage, stable and predictable income streams are essential for maintaining a healthy DSCR. Factors such as occupancy, rental rates and tenant turnover can impact revenue stability and, consequently, your ratio. On the other side of the equation, effective expense management is crucial for maximizing NOI and improving DSCR. Controlling costs such as payroll, maintenance and utilities can boost profitability and strengthen your ratio.

Fluctuations in interest rates can also affect DSCR. When evaluating your self-storage finance options, assess the potential impact of interest-rate changes on your cash flow. A lending expert can help you determine the loan that best meets your needs. Of course,

economic and market factors like demand, competition, housing and consumer spending also play a role, as they can influence revenue generation. You must adapt your operational strategies to maintain income and expenses at optimal levels.

If you aren't convinced of the importance of DSCR, consider that lenders use this key metric when evaluating loan applications. A low ratio indicates that the business may struggle to meet its debt obligations, increasing the risk of default. A healthy ratio reassures a lender that the business has sufficient cash flow to service its debt, which can lead to more favorable loan terms.

Investors, including shareholders and stakeholders, may also use DSCR to measure a company's financial health and performance. A high ratio signals financial strength and stability, thereby enhancing investor confidence.

DSCR is a critical financial metric for self-storage owners, reflecting your ability to cover debt obligations with operating income. By regularly monitoring this number, you can identify and proactively address potential financial challenges and risks. Remember: The goal is to maintain a comfortable ratio. If you do, you can secure financing, support growth initiatives, mitigate financial risks and enhance investor confidence. It all boils down to effective management of revenue, expenses and market dynamics.

## Cash Flow Is King!

Cash flow reigns supreme in the world of self-storage. Owners and investors can navigate challenges and seize opportunities by fully understanding their revenue, expenses and the critical DSCR. A firm grasp of the factors that impact the money entering and leaving your business ensures financial health and the resilience needed to weather changing market conditions. So, whether you're safeguarding an existing empire or embarking on a new venture, cash flow is the key to long-term success. **ISS**

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**“**Expense management is essential to running a successful self-storage business and maintaining a strong cash flow. Mismanaged and unnecessary costs can eat away at your profit.



# PRESERVING BUSINESS REVENUE

**Over the past couple of years,** it seemed as though the self-storage industry could do no wrong. Occupancies soared and rate increases were met with little resistance. Customer complaints could be overlooked, as any move-outs were quickly replaced at higher rents. Inefficiencies were also ignored in the light of record-breaking revenue. Many operators were able to pause their marketing, reduce their staff and defer capital improvements. Things were indeed good, which naturally attracted many new developers and investors.

Fast forward to today, with our ramped-up, glistening self-storage supply and competition on seemingly every block. Add in an inflationary economy, and we have an environment in which it's crucial to maintain agility in every self-storage asset.

It's time for facility operators to shift their focus to some tried-and-true measures that'll help them prosper in a softening market. When's the last time you delved into your profit-and-loss statements to examine the key factors driving income and expenses? Where can you cut costs without sacrificing income? Let's explore a couple of failsafe strategies to help you preserve facility revenue.

## Operational Savings

To generate cost savings within your self-storage operation, you must track which of your spending is and isn't working. This

is crucial to staying competitive in today's marketplace. The primary controllable expense categories in this industry are:

**Payroll.** While this is generally a fixed expense, the rising cost of labor has greatly impacted our market. It's still one of our largest expenses. For this reason, it's wise to button up any inefficiencies. Today, technology is revolutionizing our facility-staffing practices.

The shift to remote management is here, but is it here to stay? Naysayers point to a lack of personalized customer service and daily hands-on attention to the property as issues to be addressed. The risks and rewards vary by market, but an automated model has been proven to work in many types of environments, urban to rural. Of course, optimizing staff schedules and keeping employee turnover low will help reduce wasted payroll.

**Marketing.** To tighten spending in this area, it's important to track the customer engagement associated with each ad campaign. Data-visualization software tools like Datarails, PowerBI and Tableau can help you spend efficiently across multiple channels. Even smaller self-storage operators can use them to make smart marketing decisions.

**Repairs and maintenance.** It's important to conduct regular walk-throughs to understand the condition of your self-storage property and where upgrades are needed. You can't develop a capital-improvements budget without this information. Planning repairs

and maintenance will also help you eliminate unpleasant surprises or cash-flow crunches.

Roofs, security cameras, paving and paint are common culprits that can be addressed with a more efficient replacement or repair schedule. Preventive maintenance is another key factor, especially in regions with heavy rain or snow. Performing these routine checks will lead to significant savings throughout the year.

## Occupancy Stashing

Occupancy stashing is a new model in the self-storage revenue-management ecosystem. It was born from an exhausted customer base frustrated with frequent rent increases. Many tenants moved in at a low promotional rate, which quickly jumped one or multiple times. Now they're price-sensitive and weighing their options. What if they simply stop using storage?

Customer-acquisition costs are higher than ever due to more expensive advertising. The new trend in revenue management is to "stash" (i.e., retain) existing customers by maintaining a high-quality product and taking tenants' feelings and behaviors into consideration when contemplating a rate increase.

Wall Street is preaching to the large self-storage operators to keep occupancy high by boosting their marketing spend, slashing street rates and implementing aggressive promotions. However, this is where smaller,

independent operators have room to flourish. They aren't reliant on complex algorithms but rather on feedback from their store managers and customers.

This is the first time in several market cycles that self-storage operators have seriously had to consider buying occupancy, but it's the reality we're now in, even during peak-demand season. Are you able to shift your expenses to do so, or are you nimble enough to rotate out of discounts and advertising spend? The good news is, if you can boost occupancy during peak seasons and maintain it afterward, it naturally improves facility income for the rest of the year. This reduces the number of

variables in the year-end budgeting process and simplifies your overall approach to revenue management.

### A New Focus

Over the past few years, as occupancy and rental rates peaked and tenants were considered easily replaceable, many self-storage operators were focused only on revenue. Now, things are changing and the emphasis is on revenue *preservation*.

Tenant satisfaction should take precedence and remain a top priority for self-storage operators of all sizes. After all, renters have the power to fuel our income machine or walk away completely. Revenue preservation

hinges on your ability to enhance the customer experience, particularly in relation to rental-rate management. Remember, a loyal customer not only pays more but becomes an advocate for your business, influencing the buying decisions of future renters.

This isn't a groundbreaking concept, but it enables self-storage to continue flourishing. Instead of focusing on revenue from any customer at the highest price, concentrate on quality and top-notch service to keep the revenue you're already earning from a reliable, long-term tenant base. **ISS**

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# PREVENTING DELINQUENCY

**A self-storage tenant is considered** delinquent when they fail to pay their rent by the due date specified in their rental agreement. Once they miss a payment, a series of actions are triggered, including late fees and lockouts. Eventually there may be a alien sale to remove the customer from the space and recover lost revenue.

Uncollected rent isn't just an operational issue, it impacts the economic health of your self-storage business. Late payments disrupt cash flow, increase administrative costs and

may lead to financial loss. It's important to understand the root causes of delinquency and, more importantly, how to prevent it. Fortunately, there are many smart, proactive strategies.

### Causes of Self-Storage Delinquency

Understanding why tenant delinquencies occur is crucial if you want to develop effective prevention strategies for your self-storage operation. Here are some

common reasons why your customers pay their rent late:

**Financial hardship.** They may face unexpected difficulties such as job loss, medical emergencies or other economic setbacks. These situations can be acute and immediate, making it difficult for tenants to prioritize their storage rent over other pressing expenses.

**Unforeseen expenses.** Similarly, sudden and unexpected burdens like a car repair or emergency travel can divert funds from self-storage rent. These financial shocks are

particularly challenging for tenants who don't have sufficient savings as a cushion.

**Poor budgeting.** Some people simply don't manage their money well, leading to poor allocation of funds and missed payments. This issue is often compounded by a lack of financial literacy.

**Lack of communication.** Some customers overlook their rent due to forgetfulness or misunderstandings regarding payment schedule and due date.

**Economic conditions.** During periods of high inflation, which erodes consumers' purchasing power, and rising interest rates, which make debt more expensive, tenants may struggle to keep up with rising costs and their expenses. Recent data shows more people are falling behind on payments across various sectors, including self-storage.

**Relocation.** Tenants who are moving might prioritize other expenses, as there are many! This can lead to short-term delinquency, or the tenant may give up on the unit altogether.

### Proactive Prevention Strategies

As a self-storage operator, there are many things you can do to reduce the risk of tenant delinquency. Start with a simple one: education. Inform customers about the importance of timely rent payments and the potential consequences of delinquency. Provide materials on budgeting or host education sessions to increase awareness and compliance. Simplify the language in your lease and clearly outline all payment-related clauses. This can help tenants understand their responsibilities from the start.

It's also important to keep communication clear and consistent. Let your self-storage tenants know about payment expectations, due dates and the penalties for late payments. Explain how to make payments and what a customer should do if they anticipate having trouble paying on time. Regular reminders via email, text or phone help keep things on track.

Here are a few other things you can do to ensure timely self-storage payments:

**Offer flexible options.** Allow online payments via your website and mobile app. Incentivize tenants to enroll in your automatic payment plan using a debit or credit card. The more convenient your methods are, the less likely customers will be to miss a rent installment.

**Regularly review your accounts and intervene early.** Looking for patterns of previously late payments can help you anticipate future delinquencies and address them before they become serious issues. Reach out to a tenant at the first sign of a missed payment. A friendly reminder via email, phone or text can prompt them to pay before late fees kick in.

**Establish firm but fair late-fee policies.** Structure them to deter lateness without causing additional financial strain on customers. Communicate these rules clearly from the start.

**Offer a short-term payment plan for tenants facing temporary financial difficulties.** Tailor it to each customer's financial situation and include clear terms and conditions. This flexibility can help you retain self-storage renters who might otherwise default.

**Use technology.** Self-storage management software can automate billing and send payment reminders. It can also offer insights to payment patterns and assist in identifying tenants who may be at risk. Automation minimizes the chance of mistakes and guarantees that reminders are sent out consistently and reliably.

**Offer an incentive program for on-time payments.** Discounts, loyalty rewards or entry into a prize drawing can motivate tenants to pay on time. Incentives not only encourage prompt payments, they enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.

**Stay informed about local economic conditions.** Understanding the financial landscape can help you anticipate challenges and respond proactively. For example, in areas experiencing economic downturns, more lenient payment plans or additional communication efforts might be necessary.

**Invest in professional development.** Ongoing training for your self-storage team will help them handle delinquencies effectively. Equip them with negotiation skills and knowledge of legal requirements to professionally manage these accounts.

**Comply with the law.** Ensure your delinquency policies and procedures comply with local and state regulations.

### The Best Method?

Keeping your self-storage tenants from falling behind on rent takes a mix of smart strategies, clear communication and flexibility. By getting to the root of the problem and acting early, you can cut down on missed payments and keep the cash flowing.

Perhaps the best thing you can do to minimize self-storage delinquency is to provide amazing customer service! This includes responding promptly to tenant inquiries and concerns and developing engagement programs that build a sense of community. Newsletters, appreciation events and surveys can help you stay connected with your customers and resolve any issues. Building strong relationships with current and potential renters can foster loyalty and prompt communication. And tenants who feel valued are more likely to prioritize their rent payments!

With inflation still looming, it's more important than ever to stay on your financial toes. Be prepared to tweak your delinquency-prevention plan as necessary. By building good relationships with your self-storage tenants, you create a culture where paying on time is standard; and that's a key component of helping your business thrive. **ISS**

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# BAD-DEBT COLLECTION STRATEGIES

**As a self-storage operator,** you don't just rent units, maintain the facility and provide excellent customer service; you're also in the business of chasing down late rent. When a tenant misses a payment, it triggers a series of actions that can range from swiftly resolving the debt to auctioning off the unit contents. It can be daunting, but conquering collections is part of ensuring your operation runs smoothly and the business succeeds.

"It would be like rewarding bad behavior if storage operators didn't attempt to collect all bad debt," says Penny Casassa, property manager for Columbia Self Storage, which operates two facilities in New Jersey. "This is something that all companies do, so why should self-storage be any different?"

Collections are key to maintaining your facility's financial health. If you're nervous about them or simply don't like the process, the following best practices will help you better manage delinquent accounts, so you can get the money owed and move on to other tasks.

## Why It's Critical to Collect

Cash flow is the lifeblood of any business. In self-storage, monthly rent is at the heart of every revenue-management program, and it's critical to make sure it's paid on time. When it isn't, the shortfall can impact many aspects of your operation, both in the short and long term. Lost revenue can hinder a company's ability to pay staff and cover operating expenses. It could lead to the postponement of capital expenditures and even cause changes in annual forecasts that reduce the overall value of the asset.

"The collection process is an important part of an operator's revenue because budgets are created based on assumed revenue from rents," says Geoff McGregor, president of McGregor Interests Inc., a commercial real estate investment firm that operates the Lockbox Storage brand. "Without rent collected, budgets will not be met and the return on investment falters."

Collections have taken on an even greater importance in our current environment in which self-storage occupancies are ticking lower and signs of an economic slowdown have operators turning over every rock for revenue.

## A Proactive Approach

Start the self-storage collections process early each month by reaching out to tenants before payments are due. If you provide billing invoices, send the first notice detailing charges, due date and payment options 15 to 20 days in advance as a courtesy reminder. Follow up with another friendly notification one week before the deadline. This'll ensure you aren't scrambling at the end of the month.

While delinquency-prevention strategies are completely up to your discretion, once the rent is late, your actions should be guided by the self-storage statutes in your state. That said, a general approach is to contact the tenant before day five of their delinquency to alert them about the upcoming late fee and when they'll be locked out at the gate and their unit. If the rent remains unpaid for 45 days, send an auction notice and start the lien-sale process.

Tenant notices should be sent via every possible means of communication including email, text, phone and even traditional mail. Send links in emails and texts to make it as easy as possible for customers to pay. Keep all interactions professional and friendly. Remember, they'll still be your customers after they pay their balance.

"When it comes to contacting tenants, be sure to have a provision in your rental agreement for them to provide consent," says Scott Zucker, a partner at Weissman Zucker

Euster and Katz P.C., which has represented self-storage operators for 35 years. "Keep in mind that local and state laws may dictate the verbiage and timing of some or all of collection communications."

It's important to create scripts for your team's collections efforts, as it helps keep the conversations focused. It's easy for a manager to get caught up in the emotion of a phone call or email with a tenant and veer off course.

Also, remember to protect any sensitive tenant information such as gate codes or addresses. You should only share account information with the tenant who signed the rental agreement and not a family member, friend or coworker who may have access to their phone or email. Never call someone's office and tell a coworker or supervisor that their employee owes you money!

## Getting a Response

The sooner you start enforcing late fees and sending lien notices, the quicker you'll get a response from your late-paying self-storage tenants. Often, a customer is embarrassed about owing rent, so they won't answer a phone call but will respond to a text or email. Still, some won't answer at all.

While hosting a webinar for the Texas Self Storage Association, Denise Bowley, owner of five facilities and third-party management firm Self Storage Science, shared a trick her company uses when customers don't acknowledge

## The 5-Step Reminder System

Below is an example of a delinquency system that may work for you, but remember to check the specifics of your state lien laws.

- Third day after due date: Send a friendly reminder about making a payment, plus the customer's options for submitting payment.
- Fifth day after due date: Send a warning that the customer will soon incur a late fee. This will motivate many tenants to pay.
- 14th day after due date: Send a second warning about the late fee.
- 25th day after due date: Send a warning that the unit is nearing lien status.
- 32nd day after due date: Send a notice that the account is now in lien status and a fee has been added. If a notice of auction has been created, let them know.

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), "Preventing Self-Storage Delinquency and Collecting Past-Due Rent: Strategies for Facility Operators," by Cassie Dodgen

notices. "We will call them with urgency in our voice, identify ourselves and say we need to talk to them about something very important regarding their storage unit," Bowley says. "They usually think it's because their unit has been broken into, but we let them know it's about them being late and their payment is due. They almost always pay. However, that's a trick that will only work once per customer."

Many state self-storage associations offer resources that detail step-by-step collections procedures, legal articles and other information. Consult with a legal professional if you're unsure about your state's laws.

### Handling Uncomfortable Calls

Attempting to collect past-due payments can be unpleasant for you and your self-storage customer. It's important to remember that most tenants don't intend to be late. A lost job, illness or other life event can cause someone who's always paid on time to fall behind. Then there are those who forget about due dates and others who simply can't be bothered to pay on time.

Collection calls are especially difficult and require good listening skills. While it can lead to "too much information" moments, let the tenant tell their story. Avoid making threats or engaging in harassment. Rather, be calm, detailed and diligent.

"Be understanding that tenants who begin to swear, cry or make threats are having other issues in their lives and you may just be the easiest outlet," McGregor says. "Stay calm, stick to the facts and ask empathetic questions. Never take things said by an upset customer personally. These conversations require more patience to achieve the results being sought by the operator."

### Legal Considerations

The Fair Debt Collection Practices Act regulates how debt collectors communicate with customers. While it mainly addresses third-party agencies, there are federal rules that apply to anyone who collects debt on behalf of a business. This includes self-storage facility staff. It's crucial to understand these laws so your operation is compliant. Consider having your process reviewed by an attorney. To be safe, include all collections letters, call scripts and other communication.

"Getting paid for rental of the space is primary to any operator. All I can do [as an attorney] is make sure they don't step into the landmines within achieving that goal of collecting revenue, and these days there seem to be more landmines," Zucker says. "The recent interpretation of the Florida Consumer Collection Practices Act, which restricts the hours when a customer can be contacted by a

debt collector, has caused a lot of anxiety about rent collection and revenue management."

The Florida legislature amended the state's *Consumer Collection Practices Act* last year. One of the biggest changes was prohibiting debt-collection communication between the hours of 9 p.m. and 8 a.m. Though the law only applies to businesses in the state, similar legislation could eventually be enacted in others as well.

Knowing and following federal and state regulations not only helps you avoid legal trouble, it ensures a fair and respectful approach to pursuing self-storage debt, which can improve relationships with your customers and maintain your business reputation. Failure to follow these laws can result in civil penalties.

### Consider Payment Plans

When the collections process advances to direct communication with the tenant, approach the discussion with clarity and empathy. It's important to listen carefully to their situation and offer flexible options that align with their ability to pay.

On one hand, offering a payment plan demonstrates a willingness to compromise, which can foster goodwill and increase the likelihood of recovering the amount owed. On the other, managing individual payment plans take additional administrative effort. It also extends the time it takes to recover the past-due rent, which can affect cash flow. It might even encourage some tenants to take advantage of the arrangement and further delay payment.

"We used payment plans during the pandemic, but I'm not a big fan of them because they create a lot of extra work and they have to be enforced," says David Edward, senior vice president of Ojai Oil Co., which operates the Golden State Storage brand. "If you're not careful, the new rent owed is building up faster than the old debt is being paid off and the tenant remains behind. Sometimes, instead of setting up a payment plan, we'll negotiate a payoff and have the tenant vacate the unit within five days, especially if it's a popular size that we know we can quickly rent again."

If you opt for a self-storage rent payment plan, clearly outline the terms, including amounts, due dates and potential penalties for missed payments. This ensures both parties are on the same page.

### Find Help If Needed

If you don't want to handle your own self-storage collections, there are software programs that'll automate the entire process for you, from crafting messages to scheduling and sending notices. There are also tools that use artificial intelligence to deliver your communication through automated calls.

Some self-storage operators hire outside agencies to pursue outstanding debt. In most states, you have this right, though the results may be mixed. By outsourcing, you free up staff time and motivate customers to submit payment. Plus, a professional has more time and resources to devote to these efforts than you do, so they may succeed where you can't. However, agencies are often incentivized by commissions and may focus more on larger, easier-to-collect accounts than smaller ones. That said, even if the odds of collecting the debt are low, it's better than letting a tenant get away with paying nothing at all.

If you've exhausted all other efforts, an agency can be a good solution. First, evaluate their success rate and weigh the potential costs and benefits. Generally, resolving the debt and having the self-storage tenant vacate can be more effective than taking them to auction, as there's always the risk of claims of a wrongful sale.

### Final Advice

Here are some additional tips to streamline your self-storage collections process and improve your debt-recovery rate. Remember, state laws and regulations may limit or dictate how you execute one or more of these strategies.

- Always have your tenant's most current contact information.
- Strongly encourage tenants to sign up for autopay, even if you need to offer an incentive such as 20% off the first month rent or a free lock.
- Absorb credit card fees as a courtesy.
- Offer digital platforms to make it easy for tenants to pay.
- Set your initial late fee high enough that it serves as a deterrent. Just be sure to check your state laws regarding fee limits.
- Establish a target for collections as a percentage of the monthly rent due and award a bonus to property managers if this target is achieved.
- Review collections notices and policies used by companies in other industries to ideas for your own efforts.

Achieving a 0% delinquency rate at your self-storage facility is probably impossible. However, your goal should be to implement policies and processes that'll eliminate as many delinquent accounts as you can. This helps protect your revenue and cash flow while maintaining a stable and successful business. **ISS**

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# Better Online Auctions

**I speak with self-storage operators** every week about their online auctions and listen to their questions and concerns. Many of you may also be wondering about the lien-sale process and how to make it work via a web-based platform. Below is some guidance to help smooth the way and ensure your auctions are as successful as possible.

## What's the Proper Way to Write a Unit Description?

Your description of the items up for auction isn't just a list, it's a powerful tool that can attract online bidders to your self-storage lien sale and impact its level of success. The words serve as keyword matches for people who are searching for specific items. Many are seeking certain products for their resale shops.

- Avoid using general terms like "household goods" or "miscellaneous." Bidders don't search for these phrases because it doesn't return specific results.
- Use a comma between each listed item. If you don't, your description becomes one very long keyword.
- Be as descriptive as possible. For example, instead of writing "furniture," write "dresser, bed, dining table, bookshelf, chair," etc.

## How Do I Take Good Listing Photos?

The most frequent feedback we receive from bidders is that they want to see more detailed photos of the items in the self-storage unit for sale. It's crucial to understand that the high-quality pictures you provide are the cornerstone of an online-auction listing. By empowering buyers with clear visuals, you significantly influence their

bidding behavior. Years of auction data tell us that *more* pictures results in *higher* bids. Consider these tips to take better photos:

- Use landscape mode to get more items in the frame.
- Turn on your flash to reach the back of the unit.
- Avoid having the sun directly behind you, as it will cast shadows.
- For best results, use a photo resolution of 1600 x 1200.

## How Can I Minimize No-Show Bidders?

After the self-storage auction closes, contact the winning bidder by phone, text or email to set up a pickup time or arrange payment. They may not even be aware that they won the unit.

If your original bidder doesn't respond or show up, request a backup bidder from your online-auction provider. When that happens, your original bidder will receive another notification, which may incentivize them to appear. You can also cut out the middleman and contact the bidder directly, which may improve your chances.

## How Can I Reduce 'Cherry-Picked' Units?

When a self-storage auction winner shows up, takes what they want from the sold space and leaves the rest for you and your team to dispose of, the result is a cherry-picked unit. It's very frustrating when this happens. The best solution is to charge a cleaning deposit. The bidder only gets it back once the unit is empty and clean. If you already do this and continue to have issues, consider raising the amount. Some operators charge a different deposit depending on how big or full the unit is.

If you're concerned about holding cash deposits in your self-storage office, insist that the bidder use a credit card. This is now quite common.

Finally, always report any cherry-picking buyers to your self-storage auction platform. If you have reoccurring problems, you can request that certain bidders be banned from participating in your sales.

## What Do I Do With Abandoned Personal Items?

It isn't unusual for a self-storage auction winner to find personal items in the unit such as photographs or paperwork. It's a generally accepted industry practice to leave them behind for the tenant to retrieve. Most online-auction providers have verbiage in their terms and conditions about this; plus, it's a nice gesture, even if not legally required. Still, that leaves you as the facility operator to deal with this stuff.

It's best to create a company policy on how to handle these scenarios, so every staff member understands the protocol. Where will these personal items be kept and for how long? Who will contact the tenant? How will items be relinquished? Everyone should know the answers to these questions.

Online auctions are more popular in the self-storage industry than ever. Bidders enjoy perusing these sales at their convenience, and operators are benefiting by having more eyes on their lien sales. By following the simple guidance above, you can ensure your next event is a success! **ISS**

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# 3 Commandments for Success



## When I graduated from

**college** and started my first job as an agricultural lender, I was full of vigor and excitement. I had landed my dream position and was eager to get going! On my very first day, I remember my boss saying, "Ben, if you want to succeed in this business, return your calls and do what you say you'll do."

As it turned out, being a successful lender wasn't about offering the lowest interest rate or the quickest closing process. Being competitive came from understanding the most basic element of every transaction: customer service. I had to follow through. I had to do what I promised.

I've thought about that advice a lot over the years. In fact, I've treated it like a "thou shalt" commandment. Do it, and you'll be OK; don't, and watch out! Following are a three similar decrees I've applied in my years as a self-storage owner and developer. Heed them, and they'll help you gain a competitive advantage and become a leader in your market. Ignore them, and, well ... Good luck to you.

## Commandment 1: Thou Shalt Know Your Customer

Transactions with real people are what generate revenue in the self-storage industry; and our customers are real people who are often going through a stressful life event. They may be making room for an elderly parent or moving into a new home. Maybe it's a couple just starting their life together or welcoming a new child. Perhaps someone is sick or dying. It could be the customer is relocating for a new job, remodeling their home or making room for a home office. Whether the demand for storage comes from an exciting new chapter or the darkness of loss, our tenant is usually not having their best day.

You know exactly what I mean ... Moving sucks. Our tenants schedule a weekend,

borrow or rent a truck, break something, lose something, hurt their back, get in a fight with their spouse—all before they walk in our door. Being cognizant of and sensitive to this fact is a key to self-storage success. Prospects want to be taken care of quickly and efficiently, so they can get through the battle of moving and whatever else they have going on.

More than being empathetic about our customers' circumstances, we need to understand at least something about who they are as people. The 55-year-old tenant in a well-established home will likely interact with us differently than a 20-something whose apartment is too small for their surfboard. Your staff must be able to serve all audiences well. Relating with our average customer allows us to choose the best places and ways to be noticed when the need for storage arises.

## Commandment 2: Thou Shalt Market Vigorously

Lazy marketing has become the norm in the self-storage industry. Too often, "more marketing" means increasing a number on a screen from, say, \$30 per day to \$40. As if marketing is just transactional! But your efforts should extend beyond the internet. Rental decisions are made by people who care about their stuff. Cost-per-click marketing is a powerful tool, but it isn't the only one that works.

For example, it doesn't cost anything to donate a few empty units to a local Boy or Girl Scouts troop, a baseball team, or a high-school band, but it'll generate goodwill connections with a multitude of future customers. I recently challenged a self-storage manager to get more five-star reviews and increase social media awareness. Her idea was to create a drawing for a holiday-themed gift basket that could only be entered by following the facility on one of its social platforms or writing a positive review. The campaign only cost \$100, but in a single month, it yielded 200 additional followers and 30 five-star reviews. That's a win!

Track your marketing results and give your self-storage managers bonuses for hitting their goals. Encourage them to use a couple hours each week to do some grassroots outreach and meet local businesses. Sponsor a sports team or host a blood drive. Take doughnuts to local schools and first responders. Pay referral fees. Earn and ask for positive reviews.

Want to be more competitive against the bigger self-storage players? Get creative, have fun and quit being lazy about marketing!

## Commandment 3: Thou Shalt Focus on Excellent Service

The best self-storage managers are enthusiastic about helping people. Storage isn't a commodity. Service matters! There's a direct correlation between the number of positive online reviews an operator has and number of move-ins they get each month. Think about it: If you're planning a vacation and one rental house has 12 reviews with an average of 3.5 stars and the other has 250 reviews with an average of 4.8, which will you choose? You might go for the less impressive one if the price is dramatically lower, but not if the cost is similar.

Our industry, like many others, is facing a decline in personal service. It's down everywhere you look. Automation has us all looking at our phones more than each other, which means we're losing a lot of opportunities. *Newsflash: Providing top-quality service is a chance to outpace your self-storage competition.* People still matter. Excellent service leads to excellent results, makes our business more interesting and increases revenue.

I recently mystery-shopped a new manager, posing as a needy customer in dire need of storage at a good price. He wore the brand uniform but otherwise looked disheveled and unprofessional. He quoted me a rate, and when I asked if I could take advantage of any specials or discounts, he instructed me to set

up the reservation through my phone, which would get me a better deal. I asked, "Can't you just give me the better deal and save me that step?" The manager then explained that online reservations were tracked differently ... *as if I should care*. The worst part was he didn't care whether or not I rented, and that was obvious. Two stars, max.

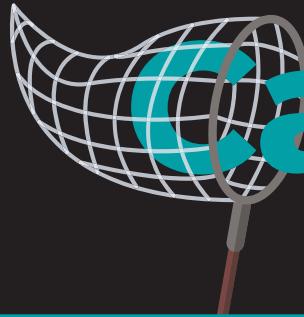
Order-takers make poor salespeople, while good salespeople know that happy customers spend more. We need self-storage managers

who have excellent people skills in addition to being keen online marketers. Those who care that the tenant is satisfied lead to bottom-line success; but too often, we're staffing our stores with order-takers who are dependent upon some algorithm to generate a reservation, even when the customer is standing in front of them!

Our markets are becoming more competitive in self-storage. Competition drives innovation, and if you aren't riding that edge,

you aren't managing your risk responsibly. Be different than your rivals by doing a better job. Serve your customers well, and let them know you're better. You can lead your market by following my three commandments. If you don't, I hope your competition reads this and proves me right. **ISS**

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# Capturing the New Consumer

**The self-storage industry** has undergone a slow evolution over the last 50 years, but every so often, there's a sharp inflection point that changes the way facility operators do business. Right now, we're experiencing one of those fundamental shifts.

For many years, this thriving industry was fueled by the buying and spending habits of Baby boomers (born 1946 to 1964) and Generation X (born 1965 to 1980). Our marketing strategies were based on their behaviors. These customers were conditioned to drive somewhere to get what they needed. They often found our facilities in the Yellow Pages, direct mailers, paper coupon books, etc., then followed up with a phone call and site visit to get more information.

Once these prospective renters were on site, they paid attention to whether the facility and its staff were clean and presentable. Did the office smell nice? All five senses contributed to the customer experience. Price was usually the initiator and important, but perceived trust was usually the top reason someone chose to rent at one facility over another.

About 15 years ago, there was a major shift from print to online advertising. The internet became the main way for customers to find, research and rent from us. This trend was the early warning that there was also going to be a significant change in our target customer base.

Enter the Millennials, born 1981 to 1996. This group, combined with Generation Z (born 1997 to 2012), now comprise 52% of the self-storage renter pool, according to a 2023 demand study published by the Self-Storage Association. In fact, Gen Z has grown from 3% to 15% of our base within the last three years.

These demographic transitions are still in progress in some areas, but it's important to understand our individual markets and how far along they are in the evolution, as this information should shape how we sell and market self-storage to today's consumers.

## New Consumer Habits

The younger generations find, research and choose self-storage units differently than their older counterparts. Their spending habits and lifestyle trends are different, too.

First, the ability to make purchases is now ridiculously easy. Everything a customer could want is at their fingertips or even a voice command. That ease of access, combined with the simplicity of digital payments, makes shopping very impulsive.

I've also seen an explosion in multi-family residential developments vs. single-family homes. Even the single-family developments I do see are more condensed. The ratio of homeowners to renters has also changed. The younger generations tend to live in less space

and are constantly on the move, collecting and storing stuff along the way.

Today's consumers research everything on their phones, where they can interactively find, see and explore all the information they need to make a buying decision. They can learn through others' experiences by reading online reviews. These shoppers don't need (or want) to visit or call your self-storage facility before deciding where to rent. They don't even answer the phone when we try to call them. These live interactions used to be our biggest opportunities to convert potential renters, but they don't work with today's customer base.

In short, the shift to digital has led to diminished human interaction, which once allowed our rockstar self-storage managers to build value and relationships. Now, consumers are more price-sensitive, which can become a slippery slope. Increased competition becomes a race to the bottom, which kills revenue and hurts the industry.

Does this mean we should abandon all the marketing strategies that have gotten us this far? I don't think so. We just need to adjust the way we attract and interact with potential customers. Following are some ideas.

## Smart Strategies

To reach today's self-storage consumers, particularly the younger generations, we need

to identify the forces that trigger them to buy. Leverage these three strategies.

**Focus on convenience.** Millennials and Gen Z believe, "What I am looking for comes to me." They value *convenience*, often willing to pay a premium for on-demand delivery. For example, they love Amazon, Grubhub and Netflix. That means we can offset price pressure by offering products and services that were once considered niche, such as mobile storage and valet storage, which are more in line with the buying preferences and habits of our new consumer base. As facility operators, our focus should be on these types of fresh income streams.

**Offer a positive experience.** Another area on which to focus is your digital customer experience. What does it look and feel like? Can you use it to build customer value and relationships the way onsite managers do in person? The answer is yes, but only if it can quickly identify and answer the prospect's needs. Thankfully, in the digital world, access to data is instant and accurate, allowing you to see what sales and marketing approaches are most effective and respond by making strategic and timely adjustments.

**Be technology-forward.** In response to the demands of today's younger consumers, we're seeing a strong emergence of automation and remote management in the self-storage industry. Especially since the pandemic, technology including kiosks, mobile apps, smart locks and online-rental portals are becoming part of a stronger customer-acquisition strategy.

At the end of the day, self-storage marketing is all about turning data into customer conversions. With new technology including artificial intelligence, we now have tools that can help us strategically and efficiently analyze and even predict customer behavior, then modify our approach accordingly. These are the same tools used to display advertisements in your social media news feeds, which display information based on what you've previously searched, viewed or said.

#### Time to Pivot

The self-storage industry is evolving, and we see key shifts in our consumer base and



their buying behaviors. In the past, it hasn't been necessary to rely on technology to thrive; however, facility operators who understand how and when to use it will be empowered to meet modern customer needs. They're the ones who will take the lion's share of the proceeds. The change is here. Now, it's all about how we pivot. **ISS**

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# How to Nurture and Convert Leads

**The conversion of a self-storage** prospect into a paying tenant isn't magic; but similar to magic, it requires intent. The customer must want to rent a unit, and the facility operator must be prepared to give them one. The process doesn't happen by accident. In fact, it can require a healthy dose of determination, consistency and finesse. But sometimes, it's as simple as following up and asking for the sale!

Some self-storage operators think of their sales leads as an endless pool from which

tenants magically emerge. For facilities in certain high-demand markets, it may certainly seem that way. But for most of you, finding and creating prospects takes work. So, why would you risk squandering those opportunities?

In this article, we're going to explore the simple but necessary art of sales follow-up. I'll help you understand the source of your leads, how to gather valuable information about those prospects, and strategies for converting them into paying customers. There's no hocus pocus involved!

#### Seek the Source

Before we talk about sales conversion, it's important for you to understand the sources of your self-storage leads. How do customers learn about your business? Maybe they regularly drive by your site. Perhaps they were referred by a friend or coworker, or saw one of your ad campaigns. They may have met you at a community event. Very possibly, they found you online. We live in a digital world, and everyone is constantly connected to the Internet.



**Knowing this information won't** only help you make smart marketing choices, it'll help you tailor and strengthen your sales approach. Every lead is unique, and tapping into what each person specifically needs or wants can seriously boost your chances of landing a rental. It's like being a detective—you figure out what makes people tick and then tailor your approach to encourage cooperation.

Here's a quick overview of potential sales sources and how to leverage them:

**Search engines.** Most people begin looking for products and services online. If your self-storage facility shows up in Google Map Pack or in the organic search results, that's great for visibility. It requires excellent search engine optimization.

**Website.** This is often the first place a customer interacts with your self-storage business, so it must look good and be easy to navigate. Include detailed descriptions of your services, facility photos, unit sizes and prices, and tenant testimonials.

**Social media.** These platforms are really important for growing your business. They're a great way to build your brand, talk to customers and share information. Keep them updated, post cool content, and reply quickly to questions and comments.

**Review sites.** Online reviews are a big deal. If you manage your reputation online, it can really sway people's decisions your way.

**Referrals.** These can come from apartment managers, real estate agents, past tenants or other self-storage operators. They have a lot of trust built in. Establish good relationships to keep the leads coming.

**Local engagement.** Being active in your community can lead to natural,

word-of-mouth referrals. These are often the best sources of business and don't cost much.

**Returning tenants.** When someone comes back to your self-storage facility, it means they liked your service before. It's important to understand that these leads are born from loyalty.

### Gather Information

Now that you understand the potential sources of your sales leads and how to nurture them along, let's focus on follow-up. Not every self-storage prospect will become a renter, but you should always aim for this outcome.

First and foremost, gather as much information as you can about the prospect. It's vital to get the right contact details from the beginning so you can communicate with the customer effectively down the line. Whether you're talking on the phone, meeting them in person or chatting online, ask for their name, email address and phone number, at a minimum. You also want to know how soon they'll need storage and what kind of unit they're seeking. Note all of these details in some kind of lead system.

Just remember: Timing is everything. Don't let your sales leads languish. If a person makes an appointment to visit the facility, call them a day or two in advance with a polite reminder. You can also send an email or text. This shows you care. If they don't show up when they're supposed to, reach out quickly to see if they're still interested.

### Convert With Confidence

The next big step is turning your self-storage sales prospects into actual tenants. This often boils down to demonstrating a commitment to their needs.

**Share facility features.** Play up the items that make your self-storage facility stand out. Is your security top-notch? Do you offer convenient access hours or killer prices? Maybe it's your customer service that's the real gem. Whatever it is, make sure the customer gets the picture and sees why your place beats the rest.

**Stay in touch.** This is key, as it shows you're on the ball and genuinely interested in helping. There's a fine line here, though. You need to be persistent, not pushy. Regular, polite follow-ups can be the nudge someone needs to choose your facility over another.

**Ask for the sale.** There's a time for being informative and helpful, and then there's a time for the direct approach. Sometimes you just need to come out and ask, "Hey, are you ready to rent a self-storage unit?" If the customer is hesitating, do some light digging to understand their reservations. (Overcoming sales objections is its own art, in fact.) It could be something simple you can easily address or clarify.

Not every self-storage prospect is going to say yes, and that's OK. When someone decides not to rent, find out why. Their feedback can be valuable. Maybe there's something you can tweak about your services, or perhaps they've spotted an issue you didn't even know about. Either way, it's all about turning those rejections into lessons, so you can improve for the next potential customer.

Creating genuine connections with your sales leads can make all the difference. When people feel that real bond, they're far more likely to choose your business. It's about being more than a product option; rather, you're a trusted friend in the self-storage world. **ISS**

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# Clearing Common Sales Hurdles



**In the competitive landscape** of self-storage rentals, customer objections are inevitable. Effectively addressing them is crucial for increasing sales and establishing positive relationships with tenants.

In this article, we'll explore concerns commonly expressed by prospects and proven strategies for overcoming them. We'll also explore the impact of contactless services on the sales process and how to adapt your approach as a result. By adhering to the following guidance, you can transcend traditional selling to create a holistic experience that not only meets customer needs and closes rentals but builds trust, loyalty, referrals and profit.

## Common Sales Objections

Let's begin by examining a few common customer concerns and general strategies for addressing them. Price is often on the list, but you may be surprised to learn that it isn't always the primary objection or even in the top three.

**Cost.** If the customer says your rates are too high, highlight your facility's value by emphasizing security features, convenient access and additional services like 24/7 surveillance, climate control and online payment options. Consider offering a discount or promotion in exchange for a longer-term commitment.

**Security.** Provide detailed information about the measures you have in place, such as video cameras, access control and abundant lighting. Share testimonials from satisfied self-storage tenants who have experienced the safety of your property.

**Suitability.** If the customer isn't sure whether the self-storage unit you've offered them will meet their needs, conduct a more thorough assessment to understand their requirements. Explain the options available and offer guidance on how to select the most

appropriate size and type. Finally, provide a tour, as seeing is often believing. Some facilities even have model units on display right in their rental office.

**Commitment.** It's common for customers to be averse to signing a long-term commitment. Many don't understand that self-storage is based on a month-to-month lease that can be terminated at any time. So, make sure they understand the contract and how easy it is to end the rental or move into a larger or smaller space if necessary. Transparency in terms and conditions builds trust and confidence.

**Accessibility.** If a customer is concerned about being able to access their stored belongings, explain how simple it is to enter the facility and find their unit. Highlight the convenience of extended access hours if you offer them. Showcase any technology-driven solutions you use such as a mobile app that opens the gate. Of course, if your facility is only open Monday through Friday during regular business hours, be honest about that, too. You don't want to overpromise and underdeliver or set unrealistic expectations.

## A Proven Approach

Every self-storage customer is unique and may have different needs and concerns. However, you can use the below tactics to polish your sales skills and surmount many objections, including those listed above.



**Listen actively.** Practice active listening with your prospects, which allows you to interpret their needs and respond more effectively. If you do an online search, you'll discover that this skill involves multiple steps; but in general, it means being attentive and engaged. Ask open-ended and probing questions. Request clarification when necessary, and repeat what the customer said back to them in a concise paraphrase. Also, pay attention to non-verbal communication, including facial expressions and body language.

**Educate the customer.** Provide comprehensive information about your self-storage facility, including security measures and available services. Explain the value they'll receive and help them see beyond the cost of the rental.

**Customize.** Tailor solutions to meet the unique needs of each prospective self-storage tenant. Offering personalized recommendations and demonstrating flexibility can significantly improve customer satisfaction.

**Use testimonials.** It can be quite effective to share success stories and positive experiences from existing customers. Real-life anecdotes can help alleviate prospects' doubts and build confidence.

**Follow up.** Implement a system to address customers' lingering concerns and provide additional information. A proactive approach demonstrates your commitment and genuine interest in their contentment.

Successfully overcoming sales objections requires effective communication, empathy and reassurance. By employing the above strategies, you can build trust with your self-storage customers, which ultimately increases the chances that they will stay with you longer and refer your business to others.

## The Impact of Contactless Services

The advent of contactless services in self-storage and an increased reliance

on technology for rentals, payments and communication have prompted a shift in the customer experience. As phone and in-person interactions give way to digital exchanges via email, chat and messaging apps, you must adapt your sales and service strategies accordingly.

Often, a potential self-storage tenant interacts with your social media pages and website before you know the person exists. This means you're losing opportunities to overcome their objections—unless you do so preemptively online. A proactive approach aims to reduce a prospect's concerns before they arise.

One of the first things you must do is refine your written-communication skills. You must be able to convey information clearly and concisely to ease customer apprehension and ensure a positive experience. Just because you're no longer talking face-to-face doesn't mean you have to be impersonal. You can enhance engagement by personalizing your written responses. By tailoring them to the recipient's specific situation and needs, you demonstrate attentiveness and a commitment to excellence.



When interacting with a prospect online, you don't have the luxury of hearing their vocal tone or inflection or seeing their facial expressions. Thus, it's more critical to be pleasant and comprehensive in your written responses. Include relevant details to build trust and credibility. In addition, be prompt. Timeliness is vital in the Digital Age.

Implementing an artificial-intelligence tool like a chatbot can also streamline the self-storage sales process and help you handle objections by providing instant responses and solutions based on predefined scenarios. Analyzing customer interactions on your other written platforms can reveal patterns that help you fine-tune this strategy and improve the

user experience. However, don't rely on this method exclusively. By combining technology, personalized communication and a nuanced approach based on the mode of interaction, you can successfully navigate this changing service landscape and ensure positive outcomes.

### Becoming the Clear Choice

Prospective self-storage tenants often delay their decision to rent due to uncertainty, competition, price sensitivity and a perceived lack of attention from facility staff. Securing a rental commitment depends on your ability to assess the customer's needs, showcase property features, offer helpful tips and professionally close the deal. The above tactics build trust and enhance a buyer's inclination to choose you over other operators in the area.

No matter your level of self-storage experience, overcoming customer sales objections is a pivotal skill. Ultimately, it takes a holistic approach that builds customer trust and cultivates a positive experience. **ISS**

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## Listening Your Way to Better Sales

**The Greek philosopher Epictetus said,** "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak." When you adhere to this time-honored axiom in social and professional settings, you'll always learn more. It's such a simple concept, and yet the application can be quite difficult. Why? Human nature.

So often, we listen to others only to respond when we should be working hard to understand. You've been there. Your friend tells a story of how they recently went through

a health scare and had to have this or that procedure. You can't wait to chime in and talk about your recent brush with death. "You had a hip replacement? Well, I had a triple bypass!" It's just what we humans do. We want to share our experiences and expertise. It can sometimes be good thing. But in some circumstances, it's more effective to simply listen and process information.

Take self-storage sales, as a prime example. As a facility manager, you have a goal to help customers. You're supposed to present

yourself as the expert. But how can you help if you don't truly understand their needs and motivations? In these situations, if you follow Epictetus' direction, you will sell more. Here's why and how.

### You're Building a Relationship

Think of self-storage sales as a dialogue and start by introducing yourself. "Hi, I'm Susan. May I ask your name?" There's nothing sweeter to someone than the sound of their own name. Use it throughout the conversation, but not

too much. It should flow naturally. This'll show the customer they're important to you and keep them engaged, but you must be sincere. Building rapport is important, as it helps establish trust; and customers want to do business with those they trust.

People generally aren't window shopping for self-storage or packing supplies. If they're on the phone or in your office, they need your product. So, begin the interaction by determining their needs. Stand, smile and greet them, and then ask qualifying questions. Listen to *understand*. Sales is simply listening to what your customer needs, determining if you have it and offering the appropriate solution.

Politely ask permission before diving in, for example, "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions to help me determine the best storage options for you?" It's important to get this buy-in from the customer at an early stage, as it'll help you close the sale later on. Then continue with open-ended inquiries such as "What are you storing?" and "Where are you in the moving process?"

If they're in the beginning stages of a move, there are additional things you should ask pertaining to moving supplies and truck rentals. Conversely, if they say their truck is in the parking lot (an attentive property manager will have already noticed this), then the questions go right to the customer's storage needs and you're much closer to the sale.

Once you've gathered information from the prospect, repeat their statements back to them. This not only demonstrates that you're listening, it helps you confirm what they need and remember what they said.

If you're speaking to someone on the phone rather than in person, you'll follow the same

general procedure, though the discussion may end with plans for a site visit rather than a rental at this stage. Set a date and time for them to come to the property and look at the unit. Close rates are much higher when the customer commits to this. Add a reminder for yourself to call the day before the appointment, as customers are much more likely to show up when they confirm the meeting.

### You're Building Confidence and Trust

Once you've determined the best unit for your potential self-storage tenant, show it to them—and bring a lock with you! Demonstrate how the keypad and gate work, the elevator, where the push carts are, and review office and access hours. Also, highlight whatever features and benefits your property offers. Establish your facility's value before presenting the cost.

At the unit, ask the customer to hold the lock while you open the door. Allow them to visualize their items in the space (generating more buy-in) by again discussing what they plan to store and how it might fit. Then ask, "Will this unit work for you?" If the answer is yes, have them secure the door with *their* lock and head back to the office to complete the paperwork. The key is to close the sale at the unit.

Sometimes the customer won't be sure about the unit size or location. In that case, show them more until they find the perfect space. Or they might object to purchasing the lock. Let them know it was designed specifically for the door hasp and is the kind they need to secure their belongings. It's

always good to have several responses at the ready, such as "Our locks are designed for maximum security" or "This lock has a seven-year manufacturer warranty." If they continue to object, move on. Renting the unit is most important and what keeps the lights on.

Many self-storage managers present their product hoping there are no objections from the customer, but there always will be, be prepared. Would you jump out of a plane and pack your parachute on the way down? Of course not. So, don't try to wing it. Be ready for any sales scenario. Memorize some typical reasons customers give for not renting, then apply the proper responses in your own words. And practice! The better you are able to overcome objections, the more confident you'll become and closing the sale will be second nature. Not only that, you'll instill more confidence and trust in the customer, and that's what'll seal the deal.

### You're Meeting All of Their Needs

Once you're back at your self-storage leasing office, recommend the appropriate moving boxes and other packing supplies. You might say something like, "Based on what you're storing, you'll need 10 small boxes, a queen mattress cover and a roll of tape." Just remember, the goal isn't to sell as much as you can, just what the customer needs based on what you learned during all of that quality *listening*. If you do this, they will buy from you. If you attempt more, you might come off as pushy and could lose their trust.

If your self-storage facility offers tenant insurance or a property-protection plan, mention it as you're completing the lease. This is a good place for the option close: "We offer goods protection at these two limits for these monthly costs. Which would you prefer?" Less is more. Don't get too deep into the coverage or what-if scenarios. You can always direct the customer to the provider's website or phone number for details.

Improved listening will enhance your ability to understand and communicate with your self-storage customers, making you much better able to meet their specific needs. This builds trust and confidence with your prospects, which goes a long way toward winning their business. It'll also make the experience of speaking to you more enjoyable, which will ultimately boost your sales! **ISS**

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# 6 Sales Mistakes TO AVOID



## Sometimes we learn more

from our mistakes than our triumphs. That's why I'm sharing six of the most common sales errors self-storage operators are making today and what we can do instead to power up our performance and close more rentals.

### 1. Thinking People Who Ask About Price Are Only Interested in Price

Think back to the last time you bought something unfamiliar. Maybe it was a piece of technology you didn't really understand but knew you needed. Chances are the first question you asked the sales rep was how much it cost. This wasn't because you were only interested in the cheapest option but because you didn't know much about the product. So, you asked the only question that made sense to you.

The same is often true when we're selling self-storage. Most people don't know much about the ins and outs of different solutions, so they open the conversation with price. Then they trust us to give them all the technical information they need to make the right decision. When we hear people ask about cost, it isn't always an indication that they're price-sensitive or looking for a cheap option. Assuming this could hurt your sale.

### 2. Believing That Sales Is More About Talking Than Listening

Here's a golden rule to follow in self-storage sales: We have two ears and one mouth, and we should use them in exactly that proportion. Asking the right questions at the right time and listening actively to the answers is the foundation of sales excellence. The better we are at paying attention, the more clues we'll pick up about what this customer cares about, how urgent their need is, and how price-sensitive they are.

Picking up on those clues allows us to tailor our pitch more closely to each customer and give them exactly what's relevant to them. This will improve our sales conversions.

### 3. Starting With Quick-to-Answer Questions

Questions with short, quick answers are known as "closed." Examples are "When do

you need storage" or "How long will you need it?" When you begin the conversation with a self-storage customer with these types of inquiries, it can be an uphill battle to get them to talk more openly about their needs. It's because they've become accustomed to offering short answers that don't reveal anything.

Starting off with open-ended questions is the key to building natural and tailored customer interactions, as they encourage more of an essay-style answer. You might ask, "What do you plan to store?" or "Why do you need storage?" This gets our customer doing most of the talking, and we can do that active listening I referred to above to create a sales presentation designed specifically for them.

### 4. Talking About Your Own Experiences to Build Trust

Building trust with potential self-storage customers is the foundation of all sales conversions. However, one of the common pitfalls when building rapport with others is telling them about our own experiences, such as moving into a new home or decluttering the garage. While these tales are well-intended, they rarely do much for establishing trust. Even with the liveliest storytelling, we're steering the customer away from why they're at your facility, which is to solve a problem *they* have.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't use our personal experiences to convert sales, but we should leverage them to *ask better questions*. Here's an example: "Oh, I tried moving with small kids once. How are your kids handling the change? Are you doing anything special for them once the move is over?" This way, we build trust more effectively while maintaining our focus on our customer and *their* needs.

### 5. Selling Moving Supplies After Storage

Potential customers contact us about their self-storage needs. The moment they feel they have this problem solved, it becomes harder to keep them willing to continue the sales process. Our retail sales are usually at their highest when we treat a customer interaction as one big sale of both storage and product,

rather than first selling the space and then the packing essentials.

Reference your moving and packing materials and how they can help in the self-storage rental throughout the entire sales presentation. This isn't only a good way to sell more, it underscores the fact that you're an industry expert. More than likely, you can impart guidance your customers haven't even heard.

For example, if your new tenant plans to store many boxes, you might direct them toward your sturdiest kind, as thicker cardboard will stack better and save them floor space. Is your customer in a rush? Wardrobe boxes make it easy to take clothes from their closet and add them straight into a box. Moving supplies can easily become a natural part of a storage sale if we just let them.

### 6. Knowing Your Conversion Rate

Hang on ... How is knowing your conversion rate a sales *mistake*? Because there isn't only one! Whatever your sales process is, it contains steps. Perhaps your customer starts by filling in a form on your website and then you give them a call. Then they reserve or book a site visit. Once on site, they rent with you. A level of conversion occurs between each of those phases. How many web-form customers do you reach by phone? How many phone calls result in a reservation or site visit? How many site visits become a move-in?

By breaking down your conversions into stages, you'll see exactly where you're losing potential customers, which will allow you to focus on improving your performance in exactly that area. Knowing your conversion rates isn't a bad thing, but you must understand *all* of them to really power up your sales.

Whether you're new to self-storage selling or a seasoned pro, it's critical to examine your process. Are you unconsciously making any of the above mistakes? If so, it might be time to reevaluate your approach so you can improve your closing ratio. **ISS**

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# Standing Out From Competitors



**Happy customers make the business world** go 'round in all industries. But what makes self-storage tenants and prospects content? Exceptional customer service.

Data from marketing firm Statista reveals that 94% of customers will likely purchase from a company again after a positive experience. Similarly, 80% will forgive a company's mistakes if the overall experience has been good. These numbers highlight the importance of delighting your self-storage tenants. Here are seven ways to elevate your level of service and customer satisfaction in 2024.

## Embrace Personalization

Your self-storage customers want you to prioritize value and offer exceptional service. Moreover, they want personalized attention, transparency and trust. They're focused on business practices besides your main offering of storage. Nowadays, they appreciate tailored experiences more than ever.

To meet this need, use data analytics to understand your tenants and prospects and offer them personalized recommendations. For instance, suggesting the right storage unit or packing supplies according to their needs will build trust. Tenants who feel like you understand them are likely to stick around, too.

## Use Dependable Software

Adding reliable management software to your self-storage operation should be a top priority. Adopting the right program is a game-changer, as it improves the efficiency and security of your facility while reducing costs. Features like automated billing, digital

access control and real-time customer support make your tenants' lives easier and keeps your business running smoothly.

## Introduce Loyalty Programs

Reward long-term customers with discounts, free upgrades or other incentives. Loyalty programs not only encourage tenants to stay but to refer others to your business.

Additionally, the element of surprise can leave a lasting impression. Occasionally, give your faithful customers unexpected perks or discounts, or send personalized thank-you notes or emails. These small gestures go a long way in creating positive memories and strengthening allegiance.

## Practice Social Responsibility

Consumers are increasingly conscious of a brand's environmental and social impact. Show your commitment to sustainability and responsible business practices, from eco-friendly packaging to community support. Moreover, highlight your efforts with prospects and tenants. They'll resonate with those who share similar values and encourage them to choose you over competitors.

## Enhance Communication and Customer Support

Your self-storage customers want to connect with your brand through multiple channels seamlessly. Ensure your communication is consistent and personalized across all platforms, including chat, email, phone, social media and website. The key is to meet people where they are and provide a cohesive experience.

Additionally, offer real-time support through chatbots or live-chat features that can address common inquiries instantly. For more complex issues, ensure customers can easily reach a live support representative through your website.

## Foster Community Engagement

Create a sense of belonging around your brand. Host an open house or other events where tenants can interact with each other and your team. Customers who feel like they're part of a community are more likely to remain loyal to your brand. You can also use your social media pages and groups to increase customer engagement.

## Collect and Act on Feedback

Seek feedback from your self-storage prospects and tenants and, more importantly, act on it. You can use various channels to collect timely responses. Whether it's gathered through surveys, reviews or direct communication, customer input is invaluable for continuous improvement. And when tenants see their suggestions being implemented, it strengthens their trust in your brand.

The key to delighting your self-storage customers in 2024 is a combination of convenience, personalization, security and technology. Happy tenants can be your biggest advocates, helping your operation thrive in a competitive market. Keep providing exceptional service and watch your business grow. **ISS**

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# Sharpening Your Service Skills



**In the dynamic self-storage industry**, providing exceptional service isn't merely a transactional necessity, it's the cornerstone of customer satisfaction and loyalty, which leads to operational success. As a facility manager, you aren't only the embodiment of your company's cultural values, you're the face of the business. This is crucial role to play in an age dominated by self-checkouts, artificial intelligence and kiosks, one in which the art of building one-on-one connections seems lost.

Outstanding service is a conduit for fostering strong relationships with your self-storage prospects and tenants, which is important because positive customer experiences are instrumental in determining your business reputation. Your unwavering commitment to service directly shapes the company's image and market positioning. Why? Because satisfied customers will leave beneficial reviews and often become long-term advocates, renting with you longer and referring others to your facility.

Knowing this, let's look at the fundamental skills you need to facilitate smooth business transactions, resolve customer concerns, and transform negative interactions into positive experiences that generate trust and loyalty.

## The Core Skills for a Customer-Centric Culture

A shared commitment among team members to prioritize customers and their needs creates a positive and welcoming environment, which enhances the overall self-storage experience. To achieve this type of culture and offer the best service, facility managers must possess the following core skills:

**Communication.** Clear and effective communication is the backbone of remarkable service. You must excel in both verbal and written methods, able to craft grammatically correct messages with clarity and precision. This proficiency fosters trust, especially in a

technological era when these skills seem to be slipping. Good communication allows you to manage customer expectations through transparent information and realistic timelines.

**Active listening and empathy.** As a self-storage manager, you must be attuned to the unique circumstances and needs of your customers. Recognizing and addressing their feelings with genuine interest allows you to tailor your responses and solutions, creating a more personalized and less transactional experience. This empathetic approach builds a deeper connection, instills confidence and enhances customer satisfaction.

**Proactivity.** Outstanding customer service involves a preemptive approach to identifying and addressing customer needs. You should actively pinpoint potential issues and aim to resolve them *before* they escalate into serious problems. This forward-thinking strategy not only underscores a commitment to tenant satisfaction, it positions your business as a trustworthy and customer-friendly, fostering long-term loyalty.

**Problem-solving.** Self-storage managers encounter diverse challenges daily, from broken doors and stubborn gates to customers who are unhappy about a late

fee or rate increase. For this reason, strong problem-solving skills are indispensable, as is the ability to think critically and creatively. If you excel in this area, you won't only contribute to your facility's operational efficiency, you'll be able to provide swift and effective resolutions to tenant complaints, thereby increasing customer satisfaction.

**Conflict resolution.** Disputes are inevitable in any customer-facing industry, and you must be adept at settling them when they arise. This requires maintaining composure under pressure, actively listening, and finding fair and amicable outcomes. By addressing conflicts promptly and impartially, you contribute to a harmonious and respectful environment, which preserves positive customer relationships and fosters a sense of community, enhancing the overall experience for tenants.

**Time management.** Efficient time and resource management are paramount in self-storage operation. As a manager, you juggle many responsibilities, so you must be able to prioritize tasks, minimize delays and provide timely service. Organizational skills are vital for enabling quick access to information and smooth execution. They'll allow you to

## Deliver Value

In addition to feeling *valued* by your self-storage business, it's equally important that your tenants feel they're *receiving* value by storing with you.

Be mindful of the products and services you provide. Make sure your customers know about any ancillary offerings such as packing and moving supplies, truck rentals, postal services, propane-tank rental, wine storage, boat/RV storage, etc. The worth of these items to tenants and others in the community can be exponential.

Even if you don't offer any of these things, you can still deliver added value in the form of facility cleanliness, clear signage, strong security, staff helpfulness and other forms of good business.

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), "Nurturing Relationships With Your Self-Storage Customers to Maximize Their Value to the Business," by Melissa Cronin

be more efficient, lower stress, and create a seamless environment for customers and coworkers.

**Technology.** In this digital age, you can enhance customer service by leveraging customer-relationship-management systems as well as online communication tools and platforms. This helps you streamlines your processes but also demonstrates a commitment to meeting customers where they are, improving operational efficiency.

### Keeping Them Sharp

To cultivate and refine your self-storage customer-service skills, you must actively participate in ongoing development programs that cover the above essentials. Regular training won't only equip you with the knowledge required to excel but can serve as

a platform for continuous improvement. Being current on best practices enables you to adapt to evolving consumer expectations.

Actively seek opportunities to stay informed about self-storage trends, tenant preferences and advancements in service practices. This commitment to ongoing learning ensures you remain adaptable and can proactively enhance the overall customer experience.

Practical application is key to mastering customer-service skills, and role-playing exercises provide a robust and interactive way to practice them. Simulate real-life scenarios to navigate various customer interactions, honing your abilities in effective communication, problem-solving and conflict resolution. This hands-on approach ensures you're well-prepared to handle real-life situations with confidence and competence.

Actively seeking customer feedback through surveys and reviews is another way to improve your service skills. Gathering these insights will allow you to identify specific areas to target for development. Look at positive and negative feedback to understand your strengths and weaknesses.

Customer-service mastery is an ongoing journey. Through core skills, continuous learning and a culture that puts customers at the forefront, you can become an architect of unparalleled self-storage experiences. This journey isn't just about differentiation in a crowded market; it's about creating a legacy of trust, loyalty and enduring success. **ISS**

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# Service Slip-Ups and How to Fix Them

**In the world of retail,** companies like to use points of differentiation to sell customers their product or service. These include things like brand, quality, features, price, customization, luxury status and limited editions, to name a few. In the self-storage industry, however, the primary selling points are relatively similar across facilities, for example, accessibility, cleanliness, security, etc. It's important that you don't inadvertently self-eliminate by lacking in any of these essentials.

The biggest differentiator in self-storage? Customer service! A positive interaction with a prospect can guarantee you the sale, while a negative or mediocre one can motivate your potential tenant to move on to the facility down the street. But here's the thing: Even if you

believe you're providing stellar service, there are mistakes you may be making without realizing it.

Let's look at the six most commonly made customer-service errors and how to avoid or correct them. I'll also share strategies to set expectations and elevate the tenant experience to something "magical."

### Avoid the Big 6

To prepare for writing this article, I read hundreds of self-storage facility reviews and discussion boards on customer service. I also spoke with some of my company's district managers for the inside scoop. Based on my research, here are the most common mistakes operators are making today and, more important, how to fix them.

**Lacking product knowledge.** Many self-storage prospects have never rented a unit before. They're looking to you for guidance. A manager who isn't knowledgeable about their facility's offerings can't expertly lead the customer through the sale. The best salespeople effectively guide people to the optimal unit size and assertively upsell when appropriate. They help tenants feel confident about their purchase and satisfied with the service they receive.

**How to fix it:** Know about all of your facility's unit sizes, features, and other products and services, so you can help a prospect identify what they need. You should also be able to explain the benefits of each feature, such as climate-controlled space. If you're unclear about anything, ask your supervisor to explain it.

**Having a bad attitude.** When a self-storage customer interacts with a manager who's unpleasant, grouchy or rude, it leaves a bad taste in their mouth. No one wants to be around a Negative Nancy.

**How to fix it:** Anyone can have an off day or be in a bad mood. The key is not to show it. If there's a bigger problem, such as you're no longer satisfied with your job or employer, it could be time to assess your situation and perhaps move on to something else. When employees feel happy at work, their attitude will spill over into positive interactions with customers.

**Failing to follow up.** When a sales prospect attempts to make contact, it's because they need something. It's your job to respond. It's also your job to follow up and close the sale. If you don't, your customers may feel neglected. They won't believe you want their business.

**How to fix it:** Letting prospects know you're aware of their problem and actively working to provide a solution tells them they're a priority. Timely follow-up increases the likelihood of being able to help, i.e., secure the rental. However, your customer service is only as good as the systems you have in place to support it. Evaluate your current process for potential improvement.

**Disrespecting customers' time.** Everyone values their own time, so don't make your self-storage prospects and tenants hold for long, whether on the phone or in person. Similarly, don't make them wait too long for a callback or return message. If they're having trouble paying a bill or accessing their unit, they need help now, not tomorrow or three days from now. In fact, if you don't respect their time, they can feel slighted and may go elsewhere.

**How to fix it:** To reduce customer wait times, improve your processes. Then follow them. Rely on sales scripts, policies and procedures for a clear set of guidelines. This way, you'll be prepared for most inquiries. If you fall short of providing quick service, a simple "Thank you for your patience" is appreciated and sometimes all it takes to prevent frustration.

**Listening passively.** Many self-storage managers only listen to customers long enough to get the minimum amount of information needed. They're too eager to get the person off the phone or out of their office. Then the prospect or tenant is dissatisfied because they don't feel heard or understood. Nobody wants to be ignored, cut off or dismissed.

**How to fix it:** Learn to listen for keywords or phrases that may signal there's more to the customer's story. Make eye contact when in person and paraphrase what the person has said to ensure you understand. You might also ask some follow-up questions.

**Claiming a lack of control.** When a self-storage customer has a problem, the last thing they want to hear is, "Sorry, there's nothing I can do." They'll be instantly frustrated if you say you can't help, "it's just policy."

**How to fix it:** Of course, you should follow company rules, but you might also ask for some autonomy in your job. Property managers need a bit of freedom to creatively

solve problems and provide customized solutions based on customer needs.

### Manage Expectations

Ultimately, when someone walks away from a customer-service experience disappointed, it's because they expected something other than what occurred. This doesn't necessarily mean your service was *bad*; there was simply a disparity between the customer's anticipated experience and reality.

To correct this, you need to perform an "expectation audit." The goal is to determine what your self-storage customers are assuming will happen when they do business with your facility and where you might be giving them the wrong idea. (Of course, if they have preconceived notions about the industry from the media or some other source, there's no controlling that. All you can do is manage your little corner of the universe.) Here's how to perform a self-assessment:

- **Walk your property.** What kind of impression would a customer get upon visiting your site for the first time?
- **Review customer feedback.** Thoroughly read your online reviews and look for common themes or trends when customers leave one that's less than positive.
- **Audit your website and marketing materials.** Ensure they accurately convey the kind of service a person can expect to receive, not just marketing "fluff." If there are any promises or guarantees, you need to live up to them 100% of the time.

Self-storage isn't all that complex. No one is expecting a white-gloved valet to drive them to their unit. However, those things that most facilities offer, like easy access, cleanliness and strong security? You need to knock these out of the park!

### Make It Magical

There's nothing wrong with providing *satisfactory* customer service, but it isn't memorable. On the other hand, when you go out of your way to "shock and awe" customers, you'll be pleasantly surprised to find that they're more forgiving of the little

inconveniences, such as an unexpected wait time or a mix-up about access hours.

You may be thinking, "Storage is boring. How am I supposed to make it magical?" The truth is it'll take some outside-of-the-box thinking. It may also vary based on your location and market. But here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Many of your customers are undergoing a stressful life transition. Let them know you're cheering them on by offering a pleasantly unexpected gesture on move-in day, such as a free pizza or ice-cold bottles of water.
- Host a fun community event such as an outdoor movie night.
- Collaborate with a nearby spa to give coupons for discounts on post-moving massages.
- Offer coffee, soda, bottled water and other treats to tenants visiting the site.
- Mail a cute or funny thank-you card to new customers. Better yet, create a "welcome" basket with a few goodies.
- Email tenants around the holidays to thank them and wish them well.

### Start Your Journey

Ultimately, it's up to you to decide how much you want to invest in elevating your self-storage customer-service skills. If it feels overwhelming, try these tips:

- **Identify your goals.** Where do you want to see progress? What's your ideal outcome? Think about the reasons you'd like to improve these skills.
- **Set your investment.** Based on your available resources (time, money, energy), determine where they would have the best return. Can you afford to take a class? Attend an industry conference? Participate in online training?
- **Define and track key metrics.** These might include retention rates, referrals, customer-satisfaction scores, and average customer lifetime value. Identify your starting point for each to create a reliable baseline, and then track them over time.

In one online review I read, a happy self-storage tenant described her fantastic customer-service experience like this: "They didn't have to help, but they chose to. Not only that, but they went out of their way to make it an extraordinary experience. That kind of thoughtfulness is rare and should be treasured wherever it comes from." At the end of the day, kindness and generosity are impactful—and they often don't cost a cent. **ISS**

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## Enhance Communication and Support

Your self-storage customers want to connect with your brand through multiple channels seamlessly. Ensure your communication is consistent and personalized across all platforms, including chat, email, phone, social media and website. The key is to meet people where they are and provide a cohesive experience.

**Source:** [inside selfstorage.com, "7 Ways to Delight Your Self-Storage Customers and Stand Out From Competitors in 2024," by Miles Davison](https://insideselfstorage.com/7-ways-to-delight-your-self-storage-customers-and-stand-out-from-competitors-in-2024/)



# High-Touch Customer-Experience Tips



**In the self-storage industry,** where automation and unattended facilities are becoming the norm, it's easy to get caught up in the digital whirlwind and overlook the importance of personal connections. While technology undoubtedly plays a crucial role in streamlining operation and enhancing customer convenience, the human touch remains an invaluable asset in building lasting relationships and fostering loyalty.

The Golden Rule, "Treat others as you would like to be treated," has evolved into the Platinum Rule, "Treat others as they would like to be treated." The business translation is, "Serve the customer on the platforms and in the ways they prefer." There are still a lot of shoppers out there who greatly appreciate customer service, who understand that price is what you *pay* and value is what you *get*. It's why the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co. focuses on the customer experience. Their clientele is willing to pay three times more for their stay because they trust their expectations will be met—or exceeded.

The Ritz-Carlton motto is, "We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." The company follows three primary service steps:

- Provide a warm and sincere greeting. Use the guest's name, when possible.
- Anticipate and comply with guest needs.
- Give guests a warm goodbye and use their names, when possible.

To counterbalance the digital shift, self-storage operators should implement community-centric marketing and branding strategies to set themselves apart. Following are eight unique approaches to deploy now to become the Ritz-Carlton of your storage market and the trusted hometown facility.

## 1. Wield the Power of Human Interaction

Human interaction is fundamental to building trust and loyalty. Customers are more likely to choose and stay with a self-storage facility that offers a personal connection. When issues arise, the presence of a knowledgeable, friendly staff member

can make all the difference. The warmth and understanding of a human being can't be replicated by a machine, no matter how advanced.

## 2. Become a Pillar of the Community

One of the most effective ways to establish an effective ground game is by actively engaging with your community while maintaining a clear and consistent self-storage brand identity. Participating in neighborhood events, sponsoring local organizations and supporting other initiatives raises brand awareness but also demonstrates a genuine commitment to the well-being of the area and the people who live and work within it.

By fostering these connections and ensuring your brand's visual elements, messaging and values are consistently represented, you can position your self-storage operation as trusted partner and valuable resource. This level of involvement, coupled with strong branding, fosters a sense of loyalty and trust among your prospects and tenants. They're more likely to choose a facility that actively contributes to the betterment of their neighborhood and maintains a professional, recognizable image.

## 3. Create Personalized Customer Experiences

While digital platforms offer convenience and efficiency, they often lack the personal touch that can truly resonate with customers. Branding starts at the first hello, greeting the customer when they arrive at your self-storage facility and holding the door for them, offering a bottle of water or cup of coffee, and calling them by name often. By prioritizing face-to-face interactions and aligning them with your brand's core values and personality, you can create memorable experiences that leave a lasting impression.

These interactions, when delivered consistently with your self-storage brand's tone and style, not only demonstrate a genuine interest in the customer's well-being but also create a sense of familiarity and trust that can lead to long-term loyalty.

## 4. Leverage Local Partnerships

Collaborating with local businesses and organizations can be a powerful way to expand reach, foster a sense of community and strengthen brand recognition. By partnering with complementary services, such as moving companies, real estate agents or home-improvement contractors, you can tap into new customer bases and establish your business as a trusted resource within the local ecosystem.

These partnerships should be carefully selected to align with your facility's brand values and target audience. By working together and maintaining consistency across all touchpoints, businesses can leverage each other's strengths and create a seamless, customer-centric experience that spans multiple services and industries.

## 5. Welcome New Customers With a Community Guide

A simple yet effective tactic is to create "Welcome to the Community" envelopes containing information about your self-storage facility, special offers from business-alliance partners and local area guides. These materials should be professionally designed to reflect your brand's visual identity and messaging.

Distribute these welcome packs during every facility tour or through partnerships with realtors, apartment complexes and neighborhood associations. It provides a warm introduction and a personal touch to your business while reinforcing your brand and community commitment.

## 6. Implement a Customer-Appreciation Program

Showing appreciation to your self-storage tenants can go a long way in building loyalty. Create a program that recognizes and rewards your long-term customers. Simple gestures like thank-you and holiday cards or even small gifts can make them feel valued. Consider hosting customer-appreciation days with refreshments and appetizers to show your gratitude.



## 7. Host Events

Organizing quarterly events such as community fairs or charity drives can be an excellent way to bring people together and create memorable experiences. These should be branded consistently, from invitations and signage to staff uniforms and promotional materials. They provide opportunities for face-to-face interactions while reinforcing your self-storage brand identity and demonstrating the business' commitment to the neighborhood.

## 8. Enhance Curb Appeal

First impressions matter! A well-maintained, visually appealing self-storage facility will attract drive-by traffic and pique interest. Investing in landscaping, signage and overall curb appeal will make a lasting impact and encourage prospects to inquire about your services. Ensure that all exterior elements, from the color scheme to the logo placement, align with the brand's visual identity to create a cohesive and memorable impression.

## Embrace the Human Touch

While digital marketing and automation have their place in the self-storage industry, it's crucial to remember that customers are human beings with unique needs and emotions. By prioritizing face-to-face interactions, fostering a strong marketing ground game and maintaining consistent branding across all touchpoints, you can create a competitive advantage that sets your operation apart. Investing in a personalized customer experiences not only builds loyalty, it reinforces the notion that self-storage is more than just a transactional service. Your company becomes a trusted partner in life's transitions and a valued member of the community.

To succeed, self-storage facilities need solid branding and strategic marketing that work in tandem. Branding provides the foundation, while marketing activates that identity to drive business results. As an operator, you get to decide: Do you want to be a commodity and compete on price, or do you want to be the Ritz-Carlton in your market and create an amazing customer and community experience? **ISS**

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# A Cross-Generational Approach to Service

**Self-storage has been the darling** of commercial real estate for several years, and facility operators have done well during good economic times and bad. But with this industry excellence comes more consolidation, competitors, investors and pressure to perform. To succeed in this new environment, you must be able to demonstrate the value of your product—and yourself as its representative.

If that isn't difficult enough, the clientele has evolved. Our customers are becoming much younger and more diverse, and yet there's still a large demographic of older renters. For

this reason, it's essential to be competent at interacting with people of all ages.

Our intensely competitive landscape creates a tight window for success. To take advantage of every sales opportunity, self-storage operators must bring their most emotionally flexible selves to work daily. Every customer is critical to success, so you must find a way to build a bridge of empathy to each of them. That means thinking through their unique experiences to find personal connections, no matter their age. Following is framework for generating dialogue and building rapport.

## How to Do It

In reality, high demand has largely protected the self-storage industry from the consequences of poor customer service. It has afforded operators the flexibility to focus on property maintenance and collections efforts, for example. Yet offering the ultimate user experience should remain a priority. What does it take?

First, you need to find the right mindset to be empathetic with your customers, which can be challenging. It takes a lot of practice and good emotional regulation. You may need to try tools such as meditation, breathing exercises and journaling to help prepare yourself for service.



You also need a gift for conversation. Some customers want quick, to-the-point transactions; but others crave a more meaningful interaction. If you can connect with them, they'll be more likely to ask essential questions or offer critical information that can be key to whether they have a positive or negative experience with your brand. They'll also be more receptive to receiving advice on how to protect their goods in storage with merchandise or insurance, which can amplify the sale.

How much time should you spend making these vital connections? It can vary, but minimum effort should include one to two direct questions and 30 seconds of dialogue. Sometimes, that's all it takes to build rapport and trust. Many customers will easily explain why they're using storage and where we fit into their bigger plan. This is great! We want to tailor our sales presentation based on the information they volunteer. If they don't offer any details of their situation, however, you need to make conversation.

Let's look more closely at how to do that, based on a person's general age. (Note: Sources differ on the years included within each generation. I've identified my definitions below.)

### Baby Boomers (1946-1964)

Baby Boomers tend to be old-fashioned. The most practical detail to remember with this generation is they're less accustomed to technology than others. Look for opportunities to commiserate with them about the ways technology can be hazardous, counterintuitive

or wasteful. Aim to use this connection point but refrain from discrediting any tools or products your company uses to rent units or secure the property.

Similarly, you may be able to connect with these customers using topics such as the latest significant data breach in the news, why there are seemingly endless app downloads, the value of personal contact or the abundance of unwanted sales communication these days. If this doesn't work, ask where they're from or where they're headed. People of this generation have often traveled to many cities, countries and climates and have a lot to say on the subject of geography. They'll also appreciate you looking to learn from their perspective, especially if you're younger than they are.

### Generation X (1965-1979)

Similar to the Baby Boomers, Gen Xers have had long careers or worked for several companies. Their children are grown adults or are about to be. Ask about their kids, and you may open fresh topics. They may discuss their daughter who was just accepted to a premier college or a son who's started his own business. They may have a recent story about their grandchildren they'd love to share.

Another option is to ask if their need for storage is the result of a career move. If a customer travels a lot for work, talk to them about regularly checking their storage space and the hazards of dust accumulation or box deterioration. Connecting on a personal level will open opportunities to provide sound advice and build rapport.

### Millennials (1980-1994)

Millennials have a unique set of characteristics. To start, this generation is pretty tech-savvy, having grown up during the rise of the internet and digital technologies. When engaging with them, leverage their familiarity with technology and highlight how your self-storage company uses it to improve the customer experience. This group values experiences, so you can also connect with them over their latest adventure or favorite escape room in town.

### Generation Z (1995-2012)

Gen Z is digital native, having grown up in a world dominated by smartphones and social media. You may find success in discussing your self-storage facility's smart security features or contactless rental processes. Sustainability and environmental consciousness are other hot topics, making eco-friendly storage solutions and practices potential connecting points.

Be more sensitive to the body language and tone of Millennials and Gen Z. Understanding how they *feel* is the best way to connect with them. If a customer appears distressed, let them know their emotions are recognized and understood. If you want to connect, be supportive.

### The Path to Success

The self-storage industry's enduring success has ushered in heightened competition and a diverse clientele, requiring facility operators to demonstrate adaptability and nuanced customer engagement. As the landscape evolves, you must embrace emotional flexibility and build empathy bridges with prospects and tenants to provide personalized interactions.

Recognizing the needs of various generations of renters is essential to creating meaningful customer connections in self-storage. By navigating these dynamics and fostering relationships, you'll position yourself at the forefront of a dynamic industry. **ISS**

**66** Many customers will easily explain why they're using storage and where we fit into their bigger plan. This is great! We want to tailor our sales presentation based on the information they volunteer.

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# CUSTOMER SERVICE AND THE AI CHATBOT

## As the self-storage industry

endures declining rental and occupancy rates, customer service is emerging as a differentiating factor for savvy operators who seek to attract new tenants and retain existing ones. Enter artificial intelligence (AI). No longer a futuristic concept, it's a real-world ally that's starting to have a significant business impact.

At its core, AI is the simulation of human intelligence in machines that are programmed to think like people and mimic their actions. It's used in popular virtual assistants like Alexa and Siri, which understand and respond to voice commands. It can also be used to offer personalized customer experiences. For example, consider Netflix's ability to suggest TV shows based on a user's viewing history. While these features streamline engagement, they also add a layer of customization to business interactions.

Further, AI's role in predictive analytics contributes to more efficient service delivery. For example, Amazon's anticipatory shipping uses AI to forecast customer buying patterns. Sentiment analysis helps businesses gauge consumer opinions. In this context, AI isn't just reactive; it's increasingly used to anticipate and meet customer needs.

From automating routine tasks to providing deep analytical insights, AI can potentially transform the way we interact with self-storage prospects and tenants, creating a level of engagement that was previously out of reach. And one of the best ways you can tap into its power to refine your service approach and positively impact revenue is to implement a chatbot. Discover how this tool is becoming indispensable for business growth and customer satisfaction.

## A Game-Changer

One of the most immediate and impactful applications of AI in the self-storage industry is the chatbot, which can be used to handle routine inquiries and improve response times. Yet, AI remains a largely untapped resource in customer-service settings. Only 6% of organizations are currently using generative AI to power chatbots, according to a recent study by consulting firm McKinsey & Co.

AI-powered chatbots that use natural language processing are poised to quickly overtake the rule-based ones that currently dominate the market. Also known as decision-tree bots, older chatbots rely on predefined instructions and scripts. While helpful, they lack the ability to understand context or intent beyond their programmed guidelines. This means they can't handle queries that fall outside their commands, leading to a less flexible and sometimes frustrating user experience.

The new AI-powered chatbots promise to provide thoughtful and relevant responses to any query. With the goal of being indistinguishable from a human helper, they unlock a torrent of possibilities for self-storage operations. In fact, a few pioneering companies are using them to provide around-the-clock support, efficiently handle inquiries and simplify the rental process. This 24/7 availability isn't just a convenience, it's a game-changer in customer engagement.

## Key Advantages for Operators and Customers

Chatbots offer many advantages to self-storage operators. Here are the most notable:

- They handle routine customer inquiries, freeing up staff to focus on more complex tasks.
- They reduce the need for customer-service staff, leading to labor-cost savings.
- They augment existing customer-contact centers while deflecting incoming call volume.
- They provide 24/7 assistance, ensuring that customer inquiries are addressed at any time of day, thus improving satisfaction and engagement.
- They gather valuable data, providing insight to tenant preferences and behavior, which can inform business strategies.
- As the business grows, they can easily handle an increased volume of customer interactions, so you don't need to hire additional staff.
- Chatbots can be programmed to identify opportunities for cross-selling and upselling. For example, they can suggest larger unit sizes, insurance options or packing supplies based on the customer's stated needs, thereby increasing revenue potential.

For customers, interacting with a well-designed chatbot yields the following benefits:

- Immediate answers to their queries regarding unit sizes, prices, facility hours and more
- A convenient way to get information or resolve issues without the need for human intervention
- Personalized recommendations based on the customer's past interactions and preferences
- An interface that makes it easy to get the information they need, regardless of their level of technology savvy

If a customer's query can't be answered or resolved by a chatbot, there are several fallback mechanisms to ensure a seamless experience. Typically, the system is designed to escalate complex issues to human customer-service agents for personalized assistance. Alternative contact options like phone or email are also provided for further support.

Many chatbots offer feedback options to improve future interactions and can automatically generate support tickets for unresolved issues. These measures, combined with the ability to direct tenants to self-help resources, ensure that every client query is adequately addressed, enhancing overall satisfaction and maintaining efficient service.

## Considerations for Implementation

Implementing an AI chatbot in a self-storage operation isn't without challenges. Technical glitches and a potential distrust from customers who are wary of speaking to a machine are among the top concerns. The key is to find the right balance and ensure that any technology you use is complemented by human oversight. This hybrid approach can mitigate the risks while maximizing the benefits.

Before implementing a chatbot:

- Understand the demographics and preferences of your self-storage customer base. If they prefer more traditional methods of communication, a chatbot might not be as effective.

- Make sure it can seamlessly integrate with your management software and databases for real-time information updates.
- Ensure it can be customized to align with your brand voice and address the specific needs of your business and tenants.
- Evaluate the costs of implementing and maintaining a chatbot against the potential return on investment, including time and resource savings.
- Plan for initial training to help your staff work alongside the chatbot, and provide ongoing oversight to ensure the tool functions correctly. Update it as needed.
- Ensure your chatbot is secure and compliant with data-protection regulations, as it'll handle customer information.

#### Experience Is the Bottom Line

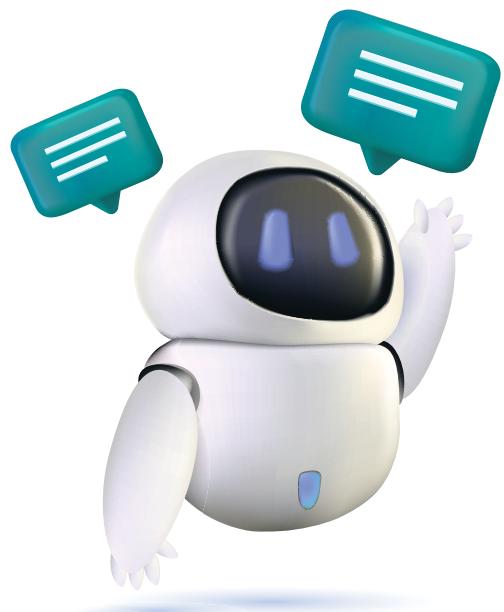
AI chatbots can significantly strengthen the bond between your self-storage company

and its customers. They offer personalized assistance at a moment's notice, which can greatly enhance the level of user satisfaction. However, over-reliance on this technology can lead to a perceived lack of human touch, which is crucial in building trust and loyalty.

AI is far from replacing the human heart that's traditionally at the core of customer service. When a machine isn't up to a task, a skilled person will always be needed to intervene. As such, you must continue to focus on improving the basic aspects of your customer service.

Staying ahead of the technology curve is crucial for competitive advantage. For self-storage operators looking to adopt AI in any form, the advice is clear: Start small, learn continuously, and always keep the customer experience at the forefront. **ISS**

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# A Smoother Customer Experience

**Every month here at Extra Space Storage**, the customer-experience team takes time to carefully review the feedback provided by our valued tenants. We specifically look for remarks about our employees and their customer service.

As I read through the comments, two sentiments consistently resonate with me. The first is a profound sense of gratitude toward our dedicated team members for consistently delivering exceptional service. Second, it's clear that customers have grown accustomed to encountering poor service. I frequently read things like "Good customer service people are hard to find" or "It's a rarity to have a positive customer experience."

According to "The Wall Street Journal," in 2022, 74% of U.S. consumers had at least one poor customer-service experience, an 8% increase over the previous year. So, it's no wonder that people feel relieved when

they have a genuinely positive encounter with a company. Still, there can sometimes be a fine line between customer satisfaction and frustration.

When a problem arises with a self-storage prospect or tenant, it's important to have strategies for managing it. Let's look at four tried-and-true approaches to challenging scenarios that'll help you find resolution and conclude with a positive customer experience.

#### 1. Take Ownership

Every single one of your self-storage employees who engages in customer interaction, whether face to face or over the phone, must be 100% committed to the principle of One Contact Resolution (OCR). This approach demands that the person who initially engages with a customer maintains complete ownership of the inquiry, regardless of the department involved.

For example, if a customer speaks to Rene in Department A, and Rene refers them to Kris in Department B, the customer has to restart the process and explain their issue all over again, which may no doubt be frustrating. Applying an OCR mentality, Rene would take ownership and solve the customer's problem without unnecessary delays. The OCR prioritizes individual ownership and instills a natural inclination to expedite solutions during the initial customer contact.

To reinforce this commitment, empower your employees to take ownership of any self-storage customer issues as soon as they're uncovered. My dry-cleaner once charged me more than what was quoted due to a computer error. It took two in-person visits and a game of phone tag before I received the proper credit. The issue would have been resolved quicker if the employee to whom I originally spoke took ownership of the situation.

By empowering staff to do this, you can efficiently resolve issues and build trust with self-storage customers.

## 2. Show That You're Human

According to HubSpot, 81% of customers prefer using a self-service option to resolve an issue before contacting a customer-service representative. If they do ultimately need to connect with a human, they're often frustrated. If you're on the receiving end, the key is to empathize, which is expressed by and acknowledging demonstrating an understanding of the customer's experience. You can express empathy by using a two-part technique.

First, acknowledge and understand their feelings. Whether it be confusion, disappointment or shock, addressing emotions with statements that resonate can defuse tension and foster understanding. For instance, you might say, "I can see how time-consuming it is when the entry gate isn't working as it should. I'd feel frustrated, too."

The second step involves moving forward. Tell the self-storage customer you're going to work on finding a solution and share what you plan to do to get there. "I'm committed to resolving this for us. To get started, I'll need to ask a few questions and check a couple of things on your account."

When empathy is genuine, it establishes a connection with the customer, which is something they might expect as soon as you greet them.

66 Empower your self-storage customers by offering two or three carefully crafted solutions from which they can choose.

## 3. Ask Questions and Listen Intently

To formulate a unique solution for your self-storage customer, tap into the resources you have around you—including them! Gather the information you need and do your research. Follow your instincts and ask the applicable questions: *Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?*

If you need more time, ask if you can follow up with the customer within 24 hours. This ensures a well-informed solution while demonstrating a commitment to their needs. By asking questions, you can create a more effective and collaborative problem-solving experience.

You just asked your customer a question, and now you must do only one thing: Listen intently. This isn't the time to ring up a different tenant, clear out your open tabs, or

review the person's payment history. Stop multi-tasking and show your customer that you genuinely care about them by taking notes, making eye contact and paraphrasing what you captured. This focused listening approach conveys respect and allows you to make a more empathetic response.

## 4. Provide Options

Empower your self-storage customers by offering two or three carefully crafted solutions from which they can choose. Each should have pros and cons. Outline them to provide transparency in the decision-making process. Then, allow your customer to pick the option that best fits their needs.

You can take the conversation a step further by asking the prospect or tenant what outcome they'd like to see. I've used this technique on several occasions, and the proposed solutions were always reasonable, which results in a win-win for everyone.

It's no surprise that a positive experience can raise customer satisfaction by as much as 20%, according to McKinsey & Co., but constant progress depends on how that experience is created. Even as we embrace the use of technology and explore innovative problem-solving strategies, it's important to acknowledge that self-storage renters will continue to anticipate consistent care when they need our help. **ISS**

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# Resolving **CONFLICT** With Customers

## Customers are the backbone

of the self-storage business. However, as in any situation that involves people, there's the potential for conflict to arise. Here are just a few instances in which a tenant might get upset and tangle with a staff member:

- They have trouble logging into your website to make a payment.
- They're unable to access the property because they forgot their gate code.

- They're unhappy about a late fee or rental increase.
- They've encountered a problem with their unit door or have another maintenance concern.
- Their credit card payment didn't go through.
- Their unit has been damaged or robbed.
- Their belongings were sold at lien sale.
- You've had to talk to them about breaking facility policies or procedures.
- You've asked them to move out for a reason other than non-payment of rent.

Delinquent customers present some of the most common and stressful scenarios for self-storage managers. They might claim they never received any payment reminders or lateness notifications from your facility, or they don't understand why their automatic payment was rejected. In any case, once they realize they're locked out of the facility and their unit and can no longer access their stored items, they can get pretty aggravated.

You can't completely avoid disputes with your self-storage prospects and tenants, but you can learn productive ways to handle them. A good resolution can make bond between company and customer stronger, too.

## Seek Resolution

No matter the cause of a conflict with your self-storage customer, it's imperative to de-escalate the situation and fix the problem. Following are some best practices for reducing and resolving difficult situations.

**Listen.** Truly listen to what the other person is saying. They may be very clear and straightforward about their complaint or have a list of reasons why this issue is generating so much frustration. Either way, all the information they're sharing is important to finding a solution.

Let the customer talk without interruption and get the entire story. Allow them to lay everything out before contemplating a response or action plan. Not everything they tell you will be germane to the problem, so clue in on keywords, dates/times and other pertinent details.

**Take a breath.** Conflict can be uncomfortable, especially when the person delivering the message is angry and verbally aggressive. It's important to remain relaxed but focused. Taking a breath before responding allows you time to revise your thoughts and to make sure your body language and tone don't match the customer's. The goal is to be attentive and understanding.

**Don't take it personally.** There's a pride of ownership that comes with overseeing a self-storage facility, and it's incredibly difficult when a customer blames you for the gate not working or a late fee they were charged. Always remember that the reason they direct their anger at you is because you're the person in charge. They believe you're also the one who can fix the problem. So, let those words of judgement roll off your back, and focus on the root cause of their complaint.

**Maintain professionalism.** In extreme circumstances, there may be a need to pause communication, for example, when the customer is too frustrated to hear what you have to say, or their actions are more than just addressing the true complaint. You're the manager at this location and maintaining professionalism is the priority. If this isn't possible with the conflict in front of you, calling for an intermission is fully acceptable.

**Repeat the message.** When you repeat what you're hearing back to the customer, it verifies your understanding and the fact



that you've been listening. It also confirms that they've been heard and you're accepting their information. Once you've recapped the root of the problem, look for validation from the customer on your understanding. This confirms you're both on the same page and you can now move to the next step.

**Identify the right solution.** This is the end goal for both parties. Often, the instinct is to justify and explain the reason for the mistake. Or you might be inclined to say, "It's company policy." Neither of these is a solution in the short term and likely won't satisfy your customer. Resolutions to conflict don't have to be exceptional or perfect. They're more about what you're going to do now to mitigate the complaint. If the conversation drifts from the root cause, then repeating the issue and your commitment to serve can get the discussion back on track.

**Repeat the mutually beneficial solution and expectations.** Once a resolution has been found, it's important to repeat it to the customer along with clear expectations. This allows any last objections to be heard and addressed. In addition, there's confirmation that both parties have agreed to an action plan.

Again, be professional! You might say, "Thank you for coming in and speaking with me about this. We strive to provide the best customer experience, and I appreciate you holding us to that standard. I will have this issue resolved by midday tomorrow and will call you once it has been done." This reiterates that you're working on it and there's a deadline for when it will be complete.

## Prevention Is Key

Customer conflict is inevitable in the self-storage industry; however, there are

ways to prevent distress. No. 1 is to provide outstanding customer service. Treating people with respect and having a courteous mentality will always minimize interactive confrontation. It's a simple but effective way to keep the peace.

In addition, set expectations from your very first interaction with a new tenant. This'll keep confusion and miscommunication to a minimum. For example, explain the gate hours during the leasing process and clearly state your property rules, such as when rent is due and what happens if a payment is missed. Be transparent about all your products and services, too. If you carry a full line of packing supplies, make sure the inventory is full when the customer is ready to purchase.

Finally, listen to what your self-storage customer is saying—even if they aren't asking for anything. If a tenant comes in to pay their bill and mentions their door is hard to open, then having it fixed before it's *impossible* to open will save the future confrontation. It'll also make the tenant feel important and build rapport with them.

Conflict can be intimidating, in a self-storage environment or anywhere else; but with the right tools and skills, you can prevent and handle any unpleasant interactions. Managing them takes practice, so don't wait until you're faced with an uncomfortable situation to try your abilities. Work with a coworker or supervisor to role-play different scenarios that may arise. Finally, if a situation becomes overwhelming, you can always call for a time-out or get help from someone else in your company. **ISS**

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# General Site Maintenance

## All self-storage operators

**know** the importance of property maintenance, but let's face it: Some tasks are tedious, time-consuming or simply unpleasant. Others are technically difficult or expensive. It can be easy to put things off, especially if your operational costs have gone up notably in the past year, as they have for many facilities.

For example, you may have known that your HVAC system was overdue for replacement, but that's a high-ticket item, so you dithered. You needed to fix the cracks in the parking lot this summer, and the trees had to be trimmed. The bollards were marked up and needed new covers, and you felt pressured to redesign your website to accommodate online rentals. All these things took a toll on your cash flow, but they're customer-facing, which meant they got top priority.

Then one day in August when the temps were in the 90s, your HVAC unit made a horrendous squealing sound; and before you knew it, no more air conditioning! Not only did you have to dish out money for a replacement, you had to pay the installer's exorbitant emergency fee or risk damage to your facility and customers' goods. Let's not forget about the health risks to your staff and tenants. You were in a tight corner, and you paid more as a result.

It's a real balancing act, attempting to preserve your self-storage revenue while investing in maintenance and repairs; but in the end, it's all connected. Property condition is essential to customer decision-making and satisfaction, which impacts facility income. In today's competitive and softer market, it may be more important than ever. It's crucial to know what needs to be done and when, plus when to hire a professional.

## Why Self-Storage Maintenance Matters

A focus on maintenance and curb appeal is crucial for making your self-storage property stand out from competitors and leaving a

positive first impression on customers, but it takes more than picking up garbage or mowing the lawn. It involves bigger tasks like cleaning the roll-up doors, inspecting the roof and refreshing the paint. This tidy appearance must also be facility-wide. If a potential tenant sees a nice street view but spots disrepair during a tour, it sends a mixed message about management.

As Benjamin Franklin wisely noted, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Taking proactive measures now will help you avoid larger problems later. Further, proper maintenance enhances safety, reduces legal liability and can help you satisfy local regulations. Strategic renovations and upgrades might even qualify for tax incentives, putting money back in your pocket.

"There are opportunities for some major savings through Section 179D of the federal tax code, which lists a number of deductions for energy-efficient commercial buildings," says Brent Swiger, facilities manager for Storage Asset Management, a self-storage management and consulting company that oversees nearly 600 facilities nationwide. "Look at solar, lighting upgrades and changing over to LED or swapping out old controls, like those on your HVAC for new ones."

Sometimes, maintenance decisions are beyond your control as a self-storage operator. Stipulations from local officials, your insurance company or the financial institution holding your loan can significantly influence which aspects of your property get attention. These external forces can even force unexpected adjustments to your plans and budget.

"A lot of the cities and lenders will dictate some of the items you need to do maintenance-wise," says Diane Gibson, president of Cox Armored Storage, a provider of third-party management to self-storage properties in Arizona. "We run into that occasionally, where a lender does a yearly inspection and the next thing you know, they're telling you to update your asphalt."

Self-storage businesses are competing for a more discerning pool of potential renters. The good news is a well-maintained, visually appealing site boosts tenant confidence and leaves a lasting impression on passersby who may need storage in the future.

## Maintenance Checklist

Maintaining your self-storage facility and its curb appeal should be an ongoing process. Your to-do list might be organized by component or area, timeline, or all three. In addition to simple daily and weekly tasks like picking up trash, pulling weeds and tidying the restroom, it should include regular inspections for issues like burnt-out lightbulbs, building damage, standing water and leaks.

"There's nothing worse than driving by a facility and seeing lights inside the building are out or only half of a sign is lit," Gibson says. "It makes you wonder what else the owners aren't looking at."

You might schedule quarterly inspections for the HVAC system, semi-annual reviews for roofing, and annual checks for asphalt or concrete surfaces. "All of our managers have daily and weekly checklists, and we perform monthly onsite inspections as well," Gibson says. "Our curb-appeal inspection includes items like signage, especially since here in Arizona, they fade quickly from the heat; looking for holes or cracks in the asphalt; making sure advertising flags aren't torn; and seeing if curbs need to be painted."

For larger items and systems, conduct a thorough assessment using a detailed work sheet. This'll help you prepare for the next fiscal year. By identifying components that aren't operating at full capacity, you can proactively allocate funds to address those issues down the line. This forward-thinking approach not only streamlines the budget process, it ensures that necessary repairs and upgrades are prioritized, making it easier to maintain the site's overall efficiency and performance.

Certain maintenance tasks are often overlooked at self-storage facilities, even though they can significantly impact functionality and customer satisfaction. For example, roofs are easy to forget until a leak forms, damaging tenant goods. Thankfully, it's a simple enough problem to avoid through routine inspection. Asphalt, gutters, signage and landscaping are other areas that tend to get less attention than they need.

"We've taken over properties where they've never touched the gutters, then they want to know why they have a roof leak," says Ryan Rogers, managing partner of RHW Capital Management Group LLC, which operates the Store Here Self Storage brand. "It's not really a leak, water just got backed up and went into a unit."

Ensure that no aspect of your self-storage facility is overlooked. Just remember to keep your tenants informed of any work that may impact their ability to access the parking lot, management office or their unit. Identify specific projects, including where and when they'll take place. The goal is to plan ahead and avoid creating inconvenience. Consider extending business hours or relocating customers if necessary.

### Spending to Save, Spending to Earn

Investing in the inspection and maintenance of critical building systems is a prudent strategy for long-term savings, even if it seems counterintuitive. Routine upkeep can uncover potential issues before they escalate into costly breakdowns that disrupt self-storage operation. This proactive approach should be applied to roofing, plumbing and

electrical infrastructure, safeguarding facility functionality and value.

Proper maintenance also provides visible improvements that can justify rent increases in the eyes of your self-storage tenants, helping to balance rising costs with customer satisfaction.

"When you're the customer and everything else is getting more expensive, it's harder for operators to [give] a rent increase because people don't see storage as being the same as [other services]," Rogers says. "Meanwhile, taxes and payroll are going up, so is trash and water. To keep your yields up, you have to send out those rental increases. There must be some justification for them, even if you're repainting the front of the office or refreshing the landscaping. If the tenants see some improvement to the property for their money, they'll usually be satisfied."

### In-House vs. Outsourcing

Once you've identified the areas of your self-storage site that require maintenance or repair, you'll need to determine whether each task can be handled in-house or should be outsourced to a professional. It could be tempting to save time a few dollars by doing the work yourself, but things can easily turn for the worse, and you'll end up doing the opposite. If you aren't sure about which direction to go, consider these factors:

- Does someone on your staff have the talent and experience to do the job, or is it too big or complex and better if handled by an expert?

- Are you strictly performing a task to save money? If so, and you make a mistake, it could cost more than if you hired a professional.
- Will doing a job yourself take more time than hiring someone more qualified for it? An extended delay could cause customer dissatisfaction.

If there's any question about safety, it's better to hire a pro. "There's certain things we won't allow a manager to do, especially if they have to get on a ladder to do it," Rogers says. "We also require any electrical work to be completed by an electrician who is licensed and insured. The same goes for a roofer. If the risk is too great, we won't allow our managers to do the work, and we'll hire a professional."

Finally, if you hire someone else to perform repairs, they'll usually provide a warranty on their work. So, if the result doesn't meet your expectations or doesn't resolve the problem, they'll address the issue at no additional cost.

Maintaining your self-storage property is simply good business. It improves safety, boosts customer satisfaction and extends the life of expensive components, helping you defer costly repairs and replacements. Together, these benefits protect your investment and increase property value, making it a critical aspect to remaining competitive in your market. **ISS**

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**Maintaining the roof** on your self-storage facility is a critical part of protecting your overall investment—not just your buildings and tenants' stored goods but your business reputation. This component is a structure's primary defense against the elements, and regular upkeep is essential to:

- **Extend lifespan:** A neglected roof can decline rapidly, leading to costly repairs or even replacement and earlier than anticipated.
- **Uphold warranties:** To remain valid, many roof warranties require regular maintenance. Failing to meet this requirement can leave you solely responsible for covering repairs.
- **Prevent leaks and water damage:** Infiltration can ruin stored items and cause mold to grow, which presents health risks.



Without proper maintenance, a self-storage roof can deteriorate and ultimately fail. Various weather conditions wear down materials over time. By addressing minor issues early, you can prevent damage while avoiding the associated costs and headaches. You'll also ensure the structural integrity of your buildings.

This article will guide you through the basics of upkeep for flat and metal roofs, the two most common types used in the self-storage industry. Both can experience various types of wear. Flat roofs, with their minimal slope, tend to accumulate debris like leaves and branches, which can trap water and prevent it from draining properly through scuppers, internal roof drains or downspouts. This pooling accelerates wear and increases the risk of leaks. The sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays contribute to erosion on any roof. High winds can cause uplift on metal roofs, which loosens fasteners and allows water to penetrate.

### Preventive Care

As part of your preventive-maintenance plan, conduct regular roof inspections and cleanings. Check the component at least once per year and especially after major weather events. Record all conservation activities, documenting dates and materials used, and take photos. This diligence is essential for warranty claims and your future reference. For example, your potential buyers will want this information if you ever decide to sell your facility.

On flat self-storage roofs, regularly check the metal caps on parapet walls, which sit around the perimeter, and confirm that they're securely fastened and caulked. There should be no gaps. Applying or reapplying surface coatings can protect against UV rays and

standing water. The protective coating can also wear off on a metal roof. Reapply it to prevent rust and prolong lifespan.

Cleaning and minor repair is essential for all self-storage roof types. Here are some key tasks:

- Use a broom, leaf blower or low-pressure wash to remove debris.
- Ensure that downspouts and scuppers are securely fastened and clear for proper drainage. They should direct water away from the building foundation.
- Remove any vegetation growing near or over the structure, as plants can root into and damage the roofing material.
- Check for signs of wear, and inspect all edges and penetration points. Look at places where pipes, vents or other objects pass through the roof and reapply caulk as needed.
- On metal roofs, check and tighten any loose fasteners, replacing any that are missing or damaged.

These simple chores can significantly extend the life of your self-storage roof by addressing potential issues before they become serious problems.

### When to Call a Professional

If you notice significant leaks, structural damage or extensive wear on your self-storage roof, call a professional immediately. The goal is prevent further decline. Professionals have the tools, knowledge and experience to perform thorough inspections, identify issues that may not be apparent to the untrained eye, and carry out repairs that meet industry standards. Also, keep in mind that if your roof is under warranty,

expert maintenance may be required to prevent it from becoming null and void.

### When to Upgrade

Common signs that it might be time to upgrade your self-storage roof include leaks that reoccur despite routine maintenance, significant erosion of the roofing material, and simple age. Flat roofs typically have a lifespan of 15 to 20 years while metal ones can last 40 to 70 years. Eventually, all roofs will need to be replaced.

When it's time to upgrade, consider the options. If the roof deck and insulation are in good condition, you might extend life by applying a new coating. In cases of extensive damage, a full replacement may be necessary. Materials and designs that offer longevity and energy efficiency can provide long-term benefits.

Roof maintenance is crucial for effective self-storage management and long-term cost savings. Regular inspections, preventive care and timely repairs significantly extend lifespan, shielding your buildings from weather damage. By prioritizing upkeep, you ensure the ongoing security and functionality of your facility. Just remember to consult or hire a professional when necessary and do everything expected to adhere to your warranty requirements. With preemptive care, you mitigate the need for expensive repairs or replacements down the line, creating peace of mind for yourself and uninterrupted service for your customers. **ISS**

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# THE RISK OF WATER INFILTRATION

### Water that infiltrates

**self-storage** buildings can be a nightmare for facility operators and their tenants. Not only does it threaten structural integrity, it can damage stored possessions. Understanding the risks, recognizing the signs, and knowing how to prevent and remediate permeation is crucial for maintaining the safety, function and reputation of your business.

### The Risks

Water infiltration can lead to a myriad of problems in a self-storage environment. Here are the key risks:

- **Structural damage:** Persistent infiltration weakens building integrity, causing cracks and warps, and deteriorating wood, concrete and metal.

- **Mold and mildew:** Moist environments provide the perfect breeding ground for these micro-organisms, which not only cause unpleasant odors, they can trigger allergic reactions and respiratory issues.
- **Property damage:** Water can ruin the goods tenants commonly keep in their self-storage units including documents, furniture and electronics.

- **Electrical hazard:** Water infiltration can lead to short circuits and electrical fires, posing a significant risk to customer and staff safety.
- **Pest infestation:** Standing water attracts insects and rodents, which can further compromise facility hygiene and welfare.

### The Signs

Early detection of self-storage water infiltration is crucial for minimizing damage and preventing costly repairs. Here are some common signs for which to watch:

- **Mold growth:** Visible mold is a telltale sign of excessive moisture.
- **Damp or musty odors:** A persistent smell often indicates the presence of mold or mildew.
- **Stains or discoloration:** These are clear indicators of water damage when appearing on walls or ceilings.
- **Paint problems:** Moisture can cause paint to peel, bubble or crack.
- **Floor damage:** Water can cause wood to warp or buckle, while tile or laminate flooring may develop gaps or lift.
- **Standing water:** Puddles or pools in basements, crawl spaces or around the foundation indicate water-infiltration issues.

### Prevention and Remediation

Preventing water infiltration and responding promptly when it occurs is essential to the well-being of your self-storage facility and the people who use it. Here are some effective strategies:

#### Identify and repair sources of entry.

Conduct a thorough inspection to look for the source of infiltration such as leaky pipes, damaged roofing or poor drainage. Repairing these issues is the first step in remediation.

**Improve drainage.** Ensure that gutters, downspouts and other drainage components are clear and functioning properly to redirect water away from the building.

**Seal cracks and gaps.** This includes your exterior walls, foundation, windows and doors.

**Focus on waterproofing.** Apply coatings to exterior and basement walls and floors to create a barrier against moisture. Over time, the membrane that was applied to these surfaces during construction will degrade (assuming it was ever there in the first place). A fresh application can be a major investment that involves shutting down drive aisles and full-depth excavation. It's always best to investigate less invasive solutions.

**Install sump pumps.** These are effective at removing excess water from basements or crawl spaces, however, they do require

ongoing maintenance. Before going this route, consider the possibility of "gravity drainage to daylight," a process that uses gravity to move water away from a point of collection (for example, an appliance) to a lower point of exit.

**Use dehumidifiers.** These can maintain optimal humidity levels within your self-storage buildings, reducing the risk of mold growth and other moisture-related issues.

**Remove mold.** It's best to hire professionals who can safely and thoroughly eliminate the source of contamination and prevent its recurrence.

Water infiltration poses significant risks to self-storage facilities, from structural damage to health hazards. Recognizing the signs and taking proactive measures to address it is crucial for maintaining the safety and integrity of your business. By identifying and repairing sources of water entry, improving drainage, and implementing effective remediation methods, you can minimize the risks associated with this issue and ensure a dry and secure environment for your tenants' belongings. When necessary, partner with a qualified expert in the field. **ISS**

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# Upkeep for Facility Lighting

### Is your self-storage facility

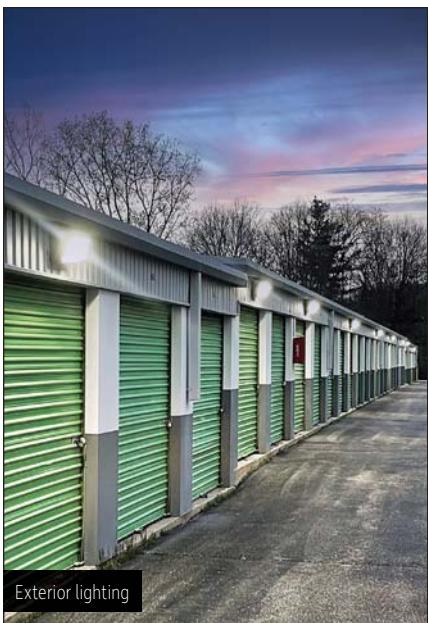
suffering from light bulbs that flicker, dim or burn out frequently? Ensuring that your property is well-lit, secure and efficient is essential and within your control. You have the power to make positive changes that'll help you attract and retain customers in a competitive industry.

Light optimization is critical to self-storage safety, curb appeal customer satisfaction and

cost management. Neglecting it can result in lower occupancy, a damaged business reputation and higher expenses. This guide will illuminate the proper path, revealing practical maintenance tips, preventive-care strategies, and advice on when and how to upgrade your system. By the end, you'll know how to transform your facility into a shining example of efficiency, security and customer approval.

### Why Light Maintenance Is Critical

Lighting quality is a key component in shaping customers' perception of your self-storage facility. Picture a brightly lit, welcoming space that instills confidence and a sense of security. On the other hand, imagine dim, flickering lights casting shadows and evoking a sense of neglect and unease. Which would you choose? The choice is



clear! Lighting maintenance is more than a functional necessity; it's a powerful tool that can elevate every aspect of your business.

Self-storage operators often prioritize access gates, cameras and alarm systems to ensure security. However, good lighting is also fundamental. It helps staff and customers safely navigate the property, reducing the risk of accidents. Well-lit areas also make it challenging for intruders to hide, decreasing the likelihood of theft and vandalism. Additionally, cameras require bright environments to perform optimally. Capturing

clear video with accurate colors is essential in the event of a criminal incident.

A well-lit self-storage facility also enhances the customer experience and improves your brand reputation. Easy access to units and good visibility throughout the facility is vital for leaving a positive impression on tenants, which leads to repeat business and referrals. Your reputation relies on how the public perceives your business. Neglecting light maintenance can send a message of incompetence and unprofessionalism, which can result in a negative public opinion. Conversely, good curb appeal communicates to all who see it that you prioritize their safety and satisfaction. This positive perception can differentiate you from competitors, positioning your facility as a dependable and trustworthy choice.

Finally, lighting accounts for a significant portion of a self-storage operation's monthly energy costs, so efficiency is crucial. Poorly maintained fluorescent and high-intensity discharge (HID) lighting contributes to unnecessary consumption and increased expenses.

### General Light Maintenance

It's important to understand the various types of wear and tear that affect your self-storage interior and exterior lighting. Regular use, environmental factors and other conditions gradually damage your system over time. Below are some common issues and why prompt action is vital for maximizing profits and reducing business disruptions.

One of the most prevalent challenges in self-storage lighting maintenance is bulb burnout. As time passes, fluorescent and HID bulbs will fail. These failures not only diminish visibility, they create safety hazards. Furthermore, ballast failures, commonly experienced with older systems, can lead to flickering and humming, which can be disruptive and costly. With many states enacting bans on fluorescent bulbs, transitioning to more sustainable options, such as LED lamps and fixtures, is a regulatory and practical necessity.

Lens deterioration is another common lighting issue. The lenses on your fixtures provide evenly diffused light and protect the bulb. However, exposure to heat and other environmental factors can cause them to weaken and turn yellow over time. As linear fluorescent and other fixtures degrade, they can make your self-storage facility look dim and unwelcoming. Regular cleaning and lens replacement helps to maintain optimal lighting conditions, ensuring your facility remains bright and inviting.

Also, watch for weather damage and water ingress. Outdoor lighting is constantly exposed to the elements. Rain, snow and extreme

temperatures can compromise fixture integrity, leading to electrical failure. Regular inspections are required to identify signs of damage before it escalates into more significant problems. The best way to tackle degradation is to replace older lights with LEDs, which feature enhanced housings that better protect key components and offer superior thermal management. More on this below.

Don't forget about the harm people can do! At a busy self-storage facility, lighting is at risk of damage from vehicles, moving equipment and customer movement. Even one incident can cause expensive repairs and replacements. To prevent this, consider installing protective guards around vulnerable fixtures or strategically positioning them out of harm's way.

Unfortunately, vandalism can be a significant challenge for self-storage facilities, too. Damaged property results in repair costs and diminishes a facility's appearance and sense of safety. Diligent maintenance can deter vandals, and enhanced illumination can effectively discourage malicious activity.

Finally, don't neglect preventive maintenance. It's essential for maximizing the lifespan of your self-storage lighting. Periodically cleaning fixtures to remove dirt and dust will improve output and prolong durability. By removing obstructions, you'll ensure optimal light distribution and potentially prevent overheating, all while avoiding costly repairs.

Conduct routine light checks and keep an accurate and detailed maintenance log. This'll enable you to identify and address issues early, thus minimizing downtime and emergency expenses. By investing in effective maintenance, you can minimize expenses, enhance operational efficiency, provide superior lighting, and increase customer satisfaction and safety.

### When to Upgrade

There are many reasons why it might make sense to upgrade your self-storage lighting to modern LED fixtures, for example:

- Frequent performance issues, such as bulb burnouts, light flickering or inadequate illumination
- High energy bills, which indicate inefficiency
- Increased costs of repair and replacement for outdated fluorescent and HID fixtures
- Inadequate light levels that fail to meet local, state and national codes, potentially creating liability and diminishing customer trust
- Customer complaints about poor lighting and an unappealing facility appearance that negatively impact occupancy and business reputation

Even if you aren't experiencing any of these issues, it may still make sense to upgrade to LED self-storage lighting, especially when it meets your IRR (internal rate of return) investment threshold. It's typical to see a project pay for itself within two to four years, due to significant reductions in the cost of energy and maintenance from LED retrofits. With technology advancing and energy efficiency becoming increasingly important, now's the time to strongly consider making the switch. It's a savvy investment in operational efficiency and improved customer satisfaction.

### Working With a Provider

To get the biggest return on investment when upgrading to LED self-storage lighting, work with an experienced provider who understands how to optimize portfolio-level efficiencies and develop a comprehensive conversion plan. Partnering with a professional ensures you choose the right fixtures and lamps that maximize energy efficiency, align with regulatory standards and provide the highest rebates.

The first thing your partner should do is conduct a thorough audit of your existing

light system. They'll identify the number, type, condition and technology of every existing fixture and control. They'll also measure and record light levels and note service-panel locations and conditions as well as other relevant details.

Next, the provider will analyze the information gathered and suggest suitable lighting solutions. These recommendations will be designed to meet the desired outcomes and achieve the light-level standards for self-storage facilities as established by the Illuminating Engineering Society.

Before installation, your supplier should make a photometric layout to show how the new fixtures will look and the kind of illumination and distribution you can expect. You should also expect to receive an ROI (return on investment) report, which is a detailed analysis of the financial advantages of implementing LED lighting at your self-storage facility. It should include potential energy savings, project payback, the cost of delaying the project, and the positive environmental impact. It might also provide details about utility rebates and energy-efficiency tax deductions that can be used to help fund the project.

An experienced lighting provider can also produce a report that assesses an entire portfolio, ranking properties ranking from fastest to slowest payback periods, allowing you to make decisions and manage your budget.

Finally, it's important to have skilled and certified technicians handle your LED lighting upgrades to ensure everything meets local, state and national electrical codes. For the best results, choose a company with experience in these conversions to minimize the involvement of your self-storage facility staff.

### Act Now for Optimal Return

Maintaining proper lighting at your self-storage facility isn't merely a matter of functionality, it's a cornerstone of safety, customer satisfaction and operational efficiency. Collaborate with an experienced provider who understands the unique needs of self-storage. Together, you can create transform your property into one that is brighter, safer, more efficient and outshines competition. Act now for your best ROI! **ISS**

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**If you were to show a picture** of a standard roll-up door to anyone in America and ask them to identify the type of building to which it belongs, they'd probably know right away that it's a self-storage facility. The unit doors at your site are more than an operational necessity, they're a major contributor to the identity and curb appeal of your property as well as the first impression customers get from it—and that's just based on looks. Your tenants also interact physically with your doors every time they visit the site.

Unit doors are among the most frequently used components of any self-storage facility. When you combine heavy usage with environmental factors including rain, hail, wind and extreme temperatures, it's crucial that your doors be well-maintained, especially if you want them to be safe and have a long, productive life.

Below, I'll delve deeper into the importance of door maintenance and discuss common types of damage that can occur. I'll also share ways to care for your doors and maximize their lifespan, plus when it's wise to call in a professional or consider replacement.

### Why Door Care Is Important

A customer's perception of your self-storage site can significantly impact their decision of



whether to rent from you. Facility appearance is crucial, and unit doors are among the first things people notice. By that token, they play a key role in your marketing efforts.

But public opinion goes far beyond the simple aesthetics of your self-storage property. Improperly maintained unit doors can be difficult to operate and contribute to a negative customer experience. If they're covered in dust or grime, tenants might question the cleanliness and condition of the facility as a whole and hesitate to store their belongings there.

Proper maintenance also extends the life of your building components, ensuring you get the most out of them. Given the large quantity of doors at the average self-storage facility, multiple replacements can add up to a large capital expenditure.

Finally, while there are operational benefits to having well-maintained self-storage doors, the most important reason to take care of them is safety. The last thing you want is for a tenant to suffer an injury because of a faulty door. When a roll-up is too difficult to open or close, whether because it's too heavy or the tension is too tight, users are vulnerable to accidents that could cause significant complications for everyone.

## Common Types of Damage

Even the most rugged self-storage doors can suffer damage, whether it's caused by heavy use or external factors. Let's look at some of the most common types of harm and why it occurs.

**General wear and tear.** Since doors are some of the most frequently used parts of any self-storage facility, this is expected over time.

**The elements.** Whether the culprit is sun, rain, hail, snow or wind, extreme weather can damage any roll-up door. It doesn't even take a storm. Over time, prolonged exposure can take a toll.

**Attempted break-ins.** Doors can easily be injured as thieves attempt to cut or smash locks, or lift or tear the curtain.

**Vehicle impact.** Your self-storage customers are often unfamiliar with the moving trucks they're driving. A crash can cause significant door damage and the need for extensive repairs.

**Broken springs.** At some point, you'll have to deal with these, regardless of the quality or strength of the door. When springs break, the door will be difficult, if not impossible, to open.

**Door-curtain misalignment.** Some self-storage operators use vinyl door curtains to reduce energy loss and keep debris out of the unit. These barriers sit right inside the roll-up door; but they sometimes slip out of their guides, impacting door performance. A damaged or improperly positioned curtain can also pose an injury risk.

## Maintenance Guidelines

Now that you understand the potential issues you might face with your self-storage unit doors, let's focus on how to reduce the risk of damage and keep them in top shape for optimal performance. Here are five helpful tips to ensure your doors operate efficiently and last longer.

**Check spring tension.** It's of the utmost importance that your self-storage tenants can operate their unit doors with no difficulty. Ensure they open and close freely by periodically checking the spring tension. If a door is difficult to move, a small amount of tension may need to be added to the springs, but DO NOT attempt to do this yourself. Always rely on a professional!

**Lubricate the springs.** On some self-storage doors, the springs are enclosed in a barrel assembly, so they're protected from the elements. Others have exposed springs. If the springs become dry and brittle, they're much more prone to breaking. It's advised that you apply a spray lubricant to keep them moist.

**Keep the guides clean.** Dirt and dust tend to accumulate in the guides, which can prevent the door from freely opening and closing. Remove any debris to maintain optimal performance.

**Clean the metal curtain.** Just remember to avoid spraying water directly at the door and refrain from power-washing. It's best to first wipe away any dust with a dry cloth, then use a damp cloth with mild dishwashing soap.

**Minimize debris.** Keep all of your self-storage driveways and hallways clear of detritus by frequently sweeping, dusting or shoveling. This will minimize the amount of rubble that ends up in your door guides and along the bottom edge.

## When to Call a Pro

As a self-storage operator, you have plenty of responsibility on your plate. While it might be tempting to save money by handling door repairs yourself, it's often best to rely on a professional. Consider calling in an expert to adjust or replace springs. When it comes to changing out your door latches, your approach will depend on your team's level of comfort and expertise.

## When It's Time to Replace

Even with proper maintenance, any self-storage unit door will eventually need to be replaced. Here are a few signs that it's time:

- The metal curtain is damaged beyond repair.
- The springs have broken and the door is more than 10 years old. (Springs can be replaced, but on an older door, breakage can be a warning.)
- The door is significantly faded or scratched. While a fresh coat of paint can resolve this, it can do more harm than good and shorten the door's lifespan. It may also void the manufacturer's warranty because it changes the weight, putting stress on the springs and other components.

Self-storage unit doors are a critical building component, not just for you as the facility operator but for your tenants who interact with them every day. It's crucial that they're well-maintained so they open and close easily and safely and always look good. This creates a positive customer experience, which leads to good reviews and word-of-mouth referrals. In a way, your doors help you market your property to potential renters. Don't neglect them and close the door on new business! **ISS**

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Hide-Away Storage in Fort Myers, Florida

**Signage is a necessity** for all self-storage facilities, especially those that are remotely managed with less onsite staff. Signs aren't only a primary method of communicating with customers, they promote your brand, attract new renters, increase sales and impulse buys, advance your marketing efforts, reflect professionalism, and more. In short, they can provide you with a competitive edge in a crowded marketplace!

Consumers can be attracted to a particular self-storage company for many reasons. Some choose a facility based on needs such as unit size, climate control or low price. Others prioritize proximity and ease of access. Whatever your prospects seek, it's important that your facility makes a positive visual impact. Attractive signage with bright colors that's easy to see and clearly communicates who you are is a must. It'll help customers instill trust in your business—but only if you take care of it and keep it looking fresh.

Harnessing the power of signage is a game-changer for any self-storage operation. When properly chosen, installed

and maintained, these eye-catching and informational displays can fuel facility success. The following strategies will help you keep them clean and attractive while extending their lifespan.

#### Selection and Installation

If you want your investment to last, choose self-storage signs made of high-end materials and ensure they're installed correctly. Prices can vary dramatically. Less expensive options might seem like a good deal upfront, but it's important to consider more than the initial cost.

As the saying goes, "You get what you pay for." Quality plays a big role in pricing, and not all signs are created equal, even if they look similar. If you buy an inferior product at a lower price point now, you may need to replace it sooner than anticipated, costing you more in the long run. Opt for signs made from high-grade materials by reputable manufacturers. They'll be more durable and last longer.

Also, make sure your signs are installed properly. Follow your supplier's recommendations or hire a licensed

professional. For exterior signs, use silicone to seal the edges. For interior ones, use high-quality, very-high-bond tape to ensure long-lasting adhesion.

#### Maintenance

Keeping your signs in good shape is key to ensuring your self-storage property and business image stay fresh. Signage isn't just about sharing information, it signals to customers that your team is on the ball and willing to help. If you don't keep it up-to-date, it can lead to confusion. Make a great impression and show you care with clear and well-maintained visuals!

Caring for your self-storage signs isn't as simple as grabbing a Scrub Daddy and using a bit of elbow grease. If you're too rough, you could scratch the laminate, detach the vinyl or even scrape down into the raw base material. To properly clean your signage without damage, wipe it with a soft cloth and minimal soap and water. Follow up with a soft, dry cloth to remove any remaining wetness.

For persistent dirt or stains, add a little vinegar to your soapy-water mixture.



The entry sign at Stor-It Self Storage in Daytona Beach, Florida

Never use abrasive cleaners or scrubbing materials, or you'll need a replacement sooner than later. Keeping your signs clean not only creates a good impression of your self-storage property, it ensures they last longer.

### Replacement?

It's easy to recognize when it's time to order new signs. If your existing ones are fading or hard to read, it's time. You also need new signage when your self-storage facility undergoes significant changes, for example, you update your policies or procedures, add a building, relocate, or rebrand.

If your transitioning from onsite to remote management or refreshing your marketing campaigns, consider updating your signs with QR codes and website links. Clear signage is essential for helping customers navigate the property. They serve as a central source of information and enable users to make payments, place orders and get live help.

If your facility is in a high-crime area where vandalism is frequent, consider paying a little extra for anti-graffiti laminate and longer-lasting, more-durable material to avoid replacing signs as frequently.

### Full Service

An easy way to maintain the appearance of your self-storage signs and ensure consistent messaging across locations is to work with a full-service signage company. It won't only be easier to manage your purchasing and accounting, you'll have access to everything from unit numbers and signs that comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act to exterior electrical displays and monument signs. It's also important that the supplier can accommodate your current footprint and future growth needs.

Signage is a crucial part of self-storage success. High-quality, well-maintained signs with clear messaging boost communication, enhance branding, attract customers, increase sales, reflect professionalism and build customer trust, all of which gives you a competitive edge. Just remember: Investing in superior materials and proper installation reduces the need for frequent replacements. In a competitive market, strategic signage is essential for thriving and standing out from the crowd! ISS



A digital sign at U-Stor-It in Carol Stream, Illinois



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# Asphalt Preservation and Repair

## At a self-storage property,

asphalt pavement is among the most expensive capital assets. It represents a significant investment, and its condition can directly impact the business in several ways.

First, consider site safety. Cracks, potholes and uneven pavement can lead to trip-and-fall accidents and potential vehicle damage, posing a risk to customers and staff and exposing your operation to potential legal claims. If your insurance company conducts periodic inspections of your property, it'll expect you to resolve these issues, usually within 30 days, or risk policy cancellation.

In addition, a well-kept, attractive parking lot and drive aisles signals professionalism and attention to detail to potential self-storage customers, while a neglected surface can serve as a deterrent. If you read social media and online-review platforms, you'll see it isn't uncommon for renters to complain about the condition of facility's asphalt and how it negatively impacted their experience at the property.

Proper care ensures a positive environment for customers and employees while neglect can negatively affect facility performance. Below, we'll explore the unique challenges associated with maintaining your asphalt pavement as well as DIY tips, common repairs and costs, and the importance of a long-term management plan. These strategies are crucial for protecting your investment and ensuring your business thrives.

## Unique Challenges

Self-storage operators face unique challenges when it comes to keeping their asphalt in top condition. To ensure proper

functionality and aesthetics, pay special attention to the following.

**Heavy loads.** Moving trucks can weigh up to 26,000 pounds, which puts immense stress on pavement, leading to premature wear and tear. The constant turning and stopping of vehicles can also lead to deterioration.

**Weather exposure.** Without proper sealing, your asphalt is vulnerable to the elements, leading to cracks, potholes and fading. Snow and ice can accelerate decline. Relentless heat and sun can quickly oxidize pavement, allowing stones and sand to ravel from the surface. During routine cleaning or a windy day, self-storage drive isles can become wind tunnels, which makes it easy for loose detritus to blow into units.

**Low unit thresholds.** Most self-storage facilities don't have the necessary depth in the drive lanes to accommodate a future asphalt overlay of 1.5 to 2 inches. The concrete threshold at the unit doors simply isn't high enough. That means that when it's time for repaving, milling is required to create clearance for a new layer. This step prevents drainage from running into and getting trapped inside storage units.

**Business disruption.** Your asphalt-maintenance activities need to be carefully coordinated to minimize disruption to customers and employees. Access is an issue for everyone, but especially commercial tenants like contractors, landscapers and pharmaceutical reps who may access their space daily to store equipment and inventory.

## DIY Tips

Many of the above challenges will require the support of a professional asphalt company

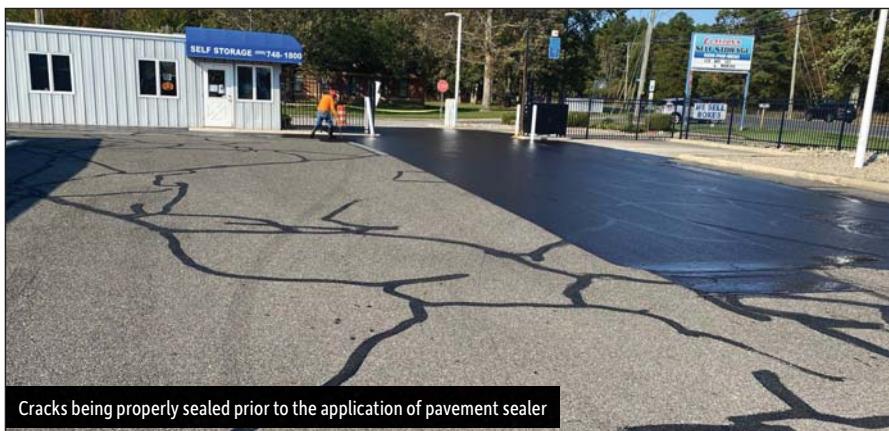
to fix, however, there are things you can do as a self-storage operator to keep your pavement in good shape.

- Ensure you have proper drainage in your parking lot and drive aisles to prevent water pooling, which can weaken the asphalt base. Standing water can also turn into ice in cold climates, which isn't only bad for your pavement, it's a safety hazard.
- Trim overhanging branches to prevent shade, which can slow the rate at which your pavement dries after it gets wet. Moist conditions can encourage moss growth.
- If you live in an area that gets snow, be cautious with snowplows. They can cause damage, particularly to swales.
- Encourage your self-storage customers to report any pavement issues they notice. This will help you address minor fixes before they become major problems.

## Common Repairs and Costs

Understanding the costs associated with maintaining your self-storage asphalt is crucial for effective budgeting. This knowledge allows for better planning and ensures that resources are allocated efficiently. Here are general price ranges for common jobs:

- **Sealcoating:** \$0.20 to \$0.40 per square foot
- **Crack sealing:** \$0.75 to \$1.50 per linear foot
- **Pothole repair:** \$5 to \$15 per square foot
- **Asphalt patching:** \$3 to \$7 per square foot
- **Asphalt overlay:** \$2 to \$5 per square foot
- **Asphalt milling and overlay:** \$4 to \$8 per square foot
- **Line striping:** \$500 to \$1,500 depending on the amount of stenciling required



To develop a quick asphalt budget for your self-storage facility, there are several tools you can use. For example, you can purchase a measuring wheel at your local home-improvement store and use it to walk your property, or consider using Attentive. ai landscape-management software, which uses artificial intelligence. All you have to do is enter your address, and the platform will calculate for you.

With cracks, check for those that are at least a half-inch wide and measure the linear footage. For potholes or clusters of alligator cracks, measure the damaged sections in squares or rectangles, extending your measurements six inches into the surrounding intact asphalt. Just remember, the above figures are *average* costs. They can vary depending on your location, the extent of the damage and the chosen contractor.

Here's what a sample project might look like, assuming a facility has 80,000 square feet of pavement:

- **Sealcoat:** \$24,000
- **Crack repair (3,200 linear feet):** \$3,200
- **Other repairs (1,000 square feet):** \$10,000
- **Line striping:** \$500
- **TOTAL:** \$37,700

### A Long-Term Management Plan

It's smart to create a pavement-management plan for your self-storage asphalt that includes regular inspections, condition assessments and proactive maintenance. A well-designed plan will help you:

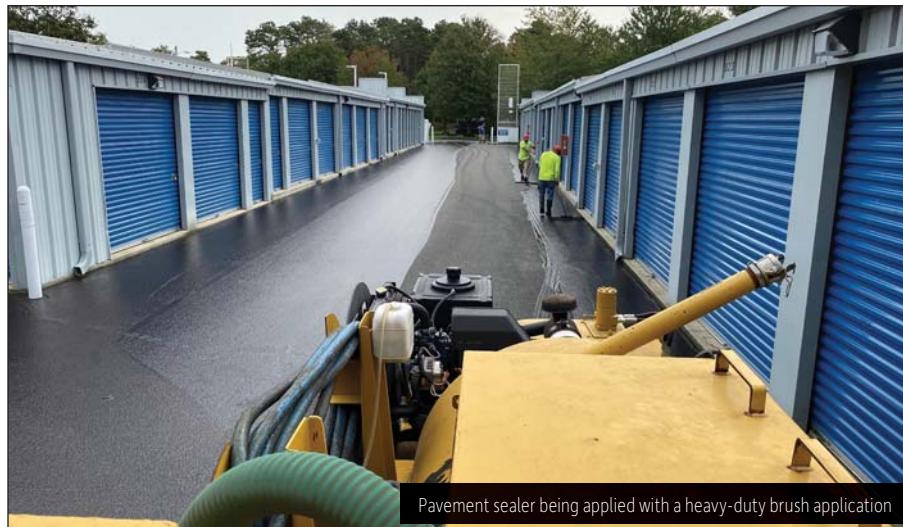
- **Save money.** Addressing issues with your pavement early is more cost-effective than paying for more expensive repairs or replacements down the line.
- **Extend pavement life.** Proactive maintenance can significantly extend the lifespan of your asphalt. "Run to failure" is the most expensive management option.
- **Set a budget.** A plan helps you forecast future maintenance expenses, so you know what you should expect to spend in a given year.
- **Prioritize tasks.** Identifying the urgency and impact of upcoming repairs allows you to prioritize them, so you're more efficient with your future spending.
- **Preserve asset value.** A well-maintained lot increases the overall value of your self-storage property and the return on your investment.

Partnering with a reputable asphalt company is essential for developing and implementing an effective pavement-management plan. They can assess

your site condition, create a customized maintenance schedule, inspect your property on a yearly or bi-annual basis, and provide professional services for repairs, sealcoating and overlays.

Your asphalt is a valuable asset that contributes to the success of your self-storage business. By understanding the unique challenges involved, budgeting for maintenance and implementing a comprehensive management plan, you'll protect your investment, enhance your facility's curb appeal and ensure a safe, and positive experience for your tenants and staff. **ISS**

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Pavement sealer being applied with a heavy-duty brush application

# A PEST-CONTROL Game Plan



**According to a survey** from Storage Café, roughly 38 percent of Americans have used, or plan to use, a self-storage unit at some point. But that figure doesn't account for the wide array of pests who also intend to make a home at the industry's 50,000 facilities nationwide. Even if they could use technology, there are probably too many of these storage users to count!

Unwanted invaders can be a significant problem for self-storage operators. They can damage stored items, create health hazards for employees and customers, and make it easier for other critters to access buildings. But you can protect your property—and your tenants' treasures—by taking a proactive approach that includes facility maintenance, customer education and professional support.

## The Most Common Threats

The primary pest threats to self-storage facilities are:

- Rodents:** The most prevalent annoyance here is mice, as they can enter the facility through customers' stored belongings or openings as small as a dime. Once inside, they can easily move around and access multiple units. They can also survive for extended periods on minimal food and water.
- Bugs:** This includes ants, cockroaches, moths and stinging insects like wasps and yellow jackets. These last can build nests behind the rivets on corrugated metal structures and pose a danger to customers. Don't forget about spiders and their webs, which can be found anywhere.

- Birds:** They roost along rooflines or electric signs, leaving behind unsightly and unhealthy droppings.

A self-storage facility may also attract scorpions, snakes and various other wildlife, depending on its location.

## The Impact of Invasion

Pests can have a significant physical and financial impact on a self-storage facility, from damage to buildings and stored goods to health hazards. Rodents will chew through cardboard, fabric and even plastic. Moths can ruin clothing, bedding and textiles. Some vermin carry a variety of diseases and can contaminate stored items with their droppings and urine.

Self-storage facilities with known pest infestations will likely lose revenue when customers

decide to rent elsewhere while your brand reputation suffers. Customers may also demand compensation for damaged goods, adding to the unintended financial consequences. Don't forget about the costs of remediation, which can be substantial. Once pests gain access to your facility, they can attract others and quickly spread, which will require more extensive, and costly, solutions.

### Assessing Vulnerabilities

Self-storage units can be vulnerable to pests for various reasons starting with facility location. Every environment, whether rural, suburban or urban, presents a different set of potential challenges. In dense suburban and urban areas, problems can arise from infestation or food sources in an adjacent property or business. In rural areas, you may be at risk due to the proximity of agricultural fields, heavy vegetation and standing water.

Unlike residential buildings or other commercial properties like restaurants, offices or manufacturing plants, self-storage facilities contain units that can remain largely undisturbed for long periods. This plays directly into the hands of pests, allowing them to establish and grow their populations without being noticed.

These slick buggers also thrive in commonly stored items like bedding, furniture, clothing, paper-based products and rugs. Your customers can unknowingly introduce pests to your facility through their unit contents.

Items that aren't stored in pest-proof bins or containers with tight-fitting lids can be vulnerable to pests. For example, mice can easily gnaw through cardboard, fabric or other paper-based boxes. Bugs can get into nearly anything through a minute opening.

Depending on the age, construction materials and methods, and maintenance of your self-storage facility, units can have multiple access points as far as pests are concerned.. The No. 1 culprit is missing or damaged door sweeps, which present an easy way to get inside. Gaps in the foundation around vents and utility penetrations on the roof can also provide entry.

Climate-controlled storage units offer a particularly inviting environment. As the seasons change, pests seek places to escape winter cold or extreme summer heat.

Like apartment buildings or retail centers, self-storage facilities sometimes share walls and ceilings with neighboring businesses. This

gives pests navigation pathways via utility pipes, wiring, wall voids and open-beam ceilings, enabling infestation in units that are adjacent, above or below.

### Tell-Tale Signs

Be alert to the following signs that pests may be present at your self-storage facility. Prompt identification and response are crucial to prevent further infestation and damage:

- Droppings are the most visible sign that mice have gained access and established a nest.
- Look for gnaw marks, as rodents will chew on cardboard, door weatherstripping, electrical wiring, furniture or even drywall.
- Dead rodents or bugs can be an indication of an infestation. Check corners, near windows and doors, and in less frequented areas.
- Pest activity or nests are a clear indicator that pests are present and attention is needed

The absence of visible signs doesn't guarantee that unwanted intruders aren't around. Regular inspections, thorough exclusion and maintenance efforts, and ongoing staff and customer education are essential.

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## Prevention Strategies

There are several proactive steps you can take to make your self-storage facility less attractive and susceptible to pests. To begin, make sure all potential entry points are sealed including gaps around doors, windows, vents and utility penetrations. Install door sweeps, weatherstripping and caulking to close any openings. Here are a few other tips:

- Stay on top of maintenance issues, such as improperly fitting doors and leaky faucets, and consider switching exterior lights to LEDs to reduce pest attraction.
- Reduce harborage areas outside by cutting the grass and trimming shrubs and trees. Avoid placing mulch near buildings by using a 12-inch barrier of stones or cement.

- Use secure lids on trash cans or dumpsters, and make sure your customers properly dispose of any waste rather than let it sit inside their units.
- Include language in your rental agreement to prohibit storing food of any type.
- Regularly clean units between rentals to remove clutter and other conditions conducive to pests and inspect for signs of pest activity. Just because a renter's contents are removed doesn't mean the pests are gone.

## Professional Support

The time may come (or is already here) for you to hire a professional pest-control company. Choose a provider that has experience and a proven track record of successfully protecting self-storage properties. Ask what type of reporting tools they use to share information about your

program and how you can access it. Electronic documentation of service reports, sightings logs and maintenance requests are preferred.

Inquire about the company's service-response time, and make sure your contract includes pricing, service frequency, key contact information and what services are covered.

If left unchecked, pests can be a real nuisance and a danger to your self-storage property, staff and customers. Therefore, it's important to be vigilant in your policies and procedures when it comes to maintenance, cleaning and customer education. Get ahead of any small-scale issues before they become bigger, more costly problems. **ISS**

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# A Luxurious Landscape

**When people think of self-storage**, landscaping might not be the first thing that comes to mind. However, the right curb appeal can make a significant difference in how customers perceive a property. Their first impression of a business often comes from its exterior appearance, which is a reflection of how well it's managed and the quality of service it provides.

A lush, green lawn, neatly trimmed shrubs and vibrant flowers can convey a sense of care and attention to detail. On the other hand, overgrown grass, dead plants and unkempt trees suggest neglect. In a competitive market, a well-kept lawn can be a deciding factor for customers when choosing where to store their belongings.

Furthermore, a thoughtfully designed landscape can enhance security by ensuring clear

visibility of entrances and exits, deterring criminal activity. It also contributes to environmental sustainability by reducing erosion, improving air quality and providing shade.

## Common Tasks

Maintaining your self-storage landscaping requires consistent effort. Specific tasks will vary based on location, but here are some common items on which to focus:

- **Mowing and edging:** Keep grass at an appropriate height and create clean lines between the lawn and flower beds or walkways.
- **Trimming and pruning:** Shrubs, trees and hedges should be regularly trimmed to maintain their shape and remove any dead or diseased branches.

- **Weeding:** Weeds can quickly dominate, so keep them in check. Prevent them from competing with desired plants for nutrients and space.

- **Watering:** Frequency will depend on location. Automated irrigation systems can help ensure consistency without wasting resources.

- **Mulching:** This improves the appearance of flower beds, but it also helps retain moisture and suppress weed growth.

## Scheduling

A well-planned maintenance schedule is essential to keeping your self-storage landscaping in top condition year-round. It should take into account the local climate, plant types and seasonal changes.

Mowing, edging and weeding should be done weekly during the growing season, while trimming and pruning can generally be done monthly (some plants require more frequent attention). In the spring and fall, it's important to aerate the lawn, apply fertilizer and replace any dead plants. During winter, preparation might include protecting foliage from frost and ensuring that irrigation systems are drained to prevent freezing.

## Revitalization

Even with regular maintenance, your self-storage landscaping can become outdated. Knowing when and how to refresh it can revitalize the facility's appearance and attract new customers. Signs that it's time include thinning grass, overgrown shrubs and faded flowers.

To breathe new life into your curb appeal, consider replacing old plants with hardy varieties that are better suited to the local climate and require less maintenance. Perhaps redesign your flower beds and create visual interest by changing the layout, adding new colors or introducing different plant species. Update the mulch or gravel in these areas as well as

walkways to create a fresh, polished look. Finally, incorporate hardscaping elements like stone pathways, benches or decorative boulders to add structure and further enhance the design.

## DIY vs. Outsourcing

When deciding whether to manage your self-storage landscaping in-house or hire a professional, it's crucial to assess not only the immediate costs but the long-term impact on facility appearance and functionality. A DIY approach can be appealing for operators who have a green thumb and a clear vision for the property's aesthetic. It allows for hands-on involvement and the flexibility to make changes as needed. However, the demands of ongoing maintenance can quickly become overwhelming, especially if your team lacks the necessary horticultural skills.

A professional can bring a wealth of knowledge to create landscapes that are visually appealing and sustainable. They understand local climate challenges and can design something that thrives year-round. Additionally, they often have access to high-quality materials and tools that may be

cost-prohibitive for in-house teams. While hiring an expert may cost more, the consistent results and potential increase in property value can make it worthwhile in the long run.

Balancing these factors against your self-storage business' specific needs and resources is key to making the best choice. For many operators, a hybrid approach might be best. You and your staff might handle simple tasks like mowing and weeding, then outsource more complex jobs like irrigation-system installation or major redesigns.

Landscaping is a vital component of a self-storage facility's curb appeal, directly influencing customer perception. By prioritizing maintenance, setting a consistent schedule and knowing when to refresh the design, you can ensure your property remains attractive and welcoming. Whether opting to DIY or hire a professional, the key is to recognize the importance of landscaping as a long-term investment in the business' image and customer satisfaction. **ISS**

**Contributor:** Ron Matejko, *Inside Self-Storage*, [www.insideselfstorage.com](http://www.insideselfstorage.com)

# Supporting Your Security System

## Running a self-storage facility

isn't just about renting units and keeping the grounds tidy, it's about ensuring that the property is safe and secure. A cornerstone of any successful operation is a robust, reliable security system that works seamlessly day and night.

Consistent maintenance is vital for the smooth function of this system. By establishing a time-relevant schedule and assigning responsibility for key tasks, you can ensure everything is completed on time and keep everyone accountable. To make things even more efficient, outline and document a step-by-step process for each procedure. This way, new hires and relief managers can quickly learn routine chores.

The below advice will help you ensure the security and efficiency of your self-storage business, giving owners, staff and customers peace of mind.

## Ensuring Peak Performance

A well-preserved security system is the backbone of a safe self-storage facility. Regular

maintenance ensures that all components are functioning correctly, reducing the risk of unauthorized access, vandalism and theft. It also extends the lifespan of your equipment, ultimately saving on repairs and replacements. Finally, a reliable system enhances customer confidence and trust in your facility.

Following is a list of key self-storage security components and critical maintenance tasks organized by day/week, quarter and year.

## Keypads and Gates

- Daily/weekly:** Ensure keypads are clean and undamaged, and verify that they're working properly. Ensure the gate operates smoothly without obstruction and test all safety sensors.
- Quarterly:** Ensure all wiring is intact and secure, and install any firmware or software updates. Check and secure all electrical components and connections. Lubricate moving parts to ensure smooth operation.
- Annually:** Conduct a comprehensive audit of the keypad and gate and have them professionally inspected and serviced. Conduct a full safety audit to ensure compliance with standards.

## Cameras and DVRs

- Daily/weekly:** Ensure all cameras and DVRs are operational and recording properly. Verify that housings are intact and secure, and check to confirm that all cables and connections are secure and intact. Clean the lenses to remove dust, smudges or obstructions. Randomly review footage to ensure quality and proper coverage.
- Quarterly:** Install available firmware and software updates. Ensure camera angles are optimal and adjust if necessary. Verify night-vision functionality. Finally, back up and clear old footage to free up storage space.
- Annually:** Conduct a comprehensive review of the entire camera and DVR system, and have everything professionally cleaned and serviced.

## Door Alarms

- **Daily/weekly:** Test alarms to ensure they're working correctly and inspect sensors to confirm they're clean and free of obstructions.
- **Quarterly:** Replace batteries in all door alarms and install any available software updates.
- **Annually:** Conduct a comprehensive test of the entire alarm system and have your alarms professionally inspected and serviced.

## Smart Locks

- **Daily/weekly:** Inspect lock condition to ensure they're clean and undamaged. Also, test operation to verify that all locks function correctly.
- **Quarterly:** Check for and install firmware updates, and replace all batteries.
- **Annually:** Have all smart locks professionally inspected and serviced.

## Creating a Maintenance Schedule

Ensuring that your self-storage security maintenance is done consistently and correctly takes a systematic approach. Start by creating a task calendar. Above is a basic list of items you might include. Use it as a starting point and customize based on your facility's needs.

Next, you'll need to assign responsibility for various maintenance jobs. Clearly define who's accountable for each and use your self-storage management software to maintain clarity and visibility. Most programs include task-management features that allow you to set deadlines and track progress.

You'll also need to write instructions for each task. Detail the steps to take, the tools needed and any safety precautions. It's also helpful to include visual aids such as photographs, diagrams or videos to clarify complex jobs and ensure they're performed correctly. Use templates for these documents, so they're consistent, and review and update them regularly to reflect changes in procedures, equipment or software. This will ensure all staff have access to the latest information.

Finally, provide training so staff understand the importance of security-system maintenance and how to use process documentation and scheduling tools. Regular education ensures all team members are competent in performing work and encourages feedback for system improvements.

## DIY vs. Professional Help

Understanding when to troubleshoot issues yourself vs. hiring a professional can significantly impact the effectiveness and reliability of your self-storage security system. Here are a few tips to try before making that call:

- **Identify the issue.** Determine whether the problem is hardware- or software-related.
- **Check connections.** Ensure all cables and connections are secure.
- **Restart devices.** Sometimes a simple reboot can resolve issues. If that doesn't work, try completely powering down and back up.

- **Update software.** Check to confirm that all firmware and software are up to date.
- **Keep a stock of spare parts.** Make sure you have extra cables, batteries and fuses on hand to quickly address minor issues.
- **Consult manuals.** Refer to your equipment documentation or reach out to the vendor for additional troubleshooting steps.

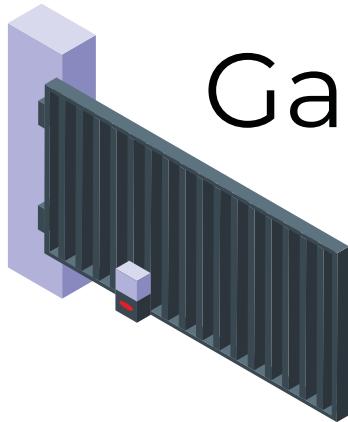
Once you've done the above, you may still need help. It's easy to do things like test system functionality, update software, clean lenses and replace batteries. For full-system or safety audits, professional cleaning, and complex repairs, it's best to hire a professional.

## Secure = Successful

Regular maintenance of your self-storage security system is crucial for safeguarding your property, staff and customers. By adhering to the above advice, you can keep your components operating smoothly. Consistent care not only extends the lifespan of your equipment but helps prevent costly repairs and downtime.

Always remember, a secure self-storage business is a successful one. With these maintenance guidelines, you can ensure that your systems remain in excellent condition, providing peace of mind for you and your tenants. **ISS**

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**Gates are the first line of security** at most self-storage sites. They aren't only our defense against intruders, they allow us to keep track of the people who are supposed be on site, including employees, tenants and vendors. But while this barrier to entry is our trusted ally, it can also be one of our greatest business liabilities.

# Gate MAINTENANCE and SAFETY

A gate is a piece of technical equipment, and just like your HVAC system or your car, it requires proper maintenance and attention to safety. Without those things, it can fail to operate. Worse, it can become dangerous.

Think about it: If your self-storage facility has 500 units, the gate likely opens 1,000 to 1,500 times per month. If the same gate serves as both the entrance and exit, that number doubles! How can you expect it to do that without fail unless you care for it? The good news is that with proper upkeep, you can expect it to operate smoothly for a good long time.

## Gate Types

In the self-storage industry, there are three primary types of access gates. Your choice of which to use should be guided by your need or desire to enhance security and operational efficiency.

- **Slide gates** are one of the most reliable. When properly maintained, they can give your site years of service.
- **Swing gates** are used sparingly, as they require more room and usually need to be bi-parting to meet the required driveway width.
- **Vertical pivot gates** are a great solution where space is an issue and can be just as reliable as the other options.

## Maintenance Definitely Matters!

Regardless of which gate you choose for your self-storage property, maintenance should be conducted monthly, with safety checks performed weekly. If you stick to this schedule, each task should take no more than a half hour to complete. It's also important to keep records for reference in case of an incident and to track potential issues.

If you aren't sure which parts of the self-storage gate require maintenance or how to do it, all reputable manufacturers provide a comprehensive list of items that need attention, and when, in their manuals or on their website. Most schedules are broken down by month, quarter and year; however, with such heavy use in a self-storage environment, it's imperative to follow my above recommendation regarding frequency.

If you aren't comfortable maintaining your own gate, contact a qualified installation and service company with trained and certified personnel. Remember, in the event of an incident, everyone who has had anything to do with the gate, including its operation or maintenance, is considered liable.

How do you know if your self-storage access gate needs additional attention? If any of the following things are true, it does!

- It makes a funny noise.
- It jumps, stalls or fails to run smoothly.
- The chain has enough slack to reach the ground.

- You can't remember when it was last serviced.
- The rollers are chipped, split or missing parts.

Ignoring your self-storage access gate is the same as neglecting your car. If you turn your back on potential issues and do nothing, they won't magically go away. They'll get worse, and the gate will eventually break down. Then you'll be faced with even greater problems! Having an inoperable gate is a security risk and a huge public-relations issue that can damage your business reputation and drive away customers.

## Safety First

No one really wants to discuss gate safety, and yet this piece of equipment can be one of your self-storage facility's greatest liabilities. Each year, thousands of people are injured by gates, some severely and even fatally. In almost every case, the incident was 100% avoidable. All it required was for the owner to maintain the gate, put the necessary precautions in place, and ensure the equipment met local building codes as well as the regulations outlined in UL 325 and ASTM F2200. These safety standards exist for a reason!

You may be thinking, if it's so easy and important, why are there so many gates that don't meet the proper requirements? The simple truth is that the people doing the inspecting are either unaware of the codes or they aren't trained to ensure they're being met. This is why it's so

critical to perform regular maintenance and keep inspection records. They serve to protect you and your facility if an incident occurs.

There are also a few organizations that promote gate safety maintenance and provide valuable information, including education and other resources. The American Fence Association is a very proactive group that offers classes to members and certification courses to technicians. Gate-Safe promotes gate safety across the United Kingdom and Europe. It understands the standards unique to those regions and holds meetings with certification classes. Both organizations can help you find reputable companies in your area to install, inspect, service and maintain your gates to the highest standards.

The Hummingbird Alliance was founded by Dayna and Eric Quanbeck after their young son, Alex, was killed at school by a gate that was improperly installed and maintained. This tragedy likely could have been avoided if the proper standards had been met. Unfortunately, Alex isn't the only person who's been killed or injured due to negligence and someone thinking, "All this safety stuff isn't really necessary."

Self-storage gate maintenance *is* necessary. It's important. It shouldn't be ignored, and it must be done. **ISS**

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# TIME FOR A TECH CHECK



## The self-storage industry

has experienced significant technological advancement in recent years, which is reshaping the way we do business. This evolution isn't only streamlining facility operation, it's intensifying competition among providers. In this dynamic landscape, technology functionality and reliability—and, therefore, maintenance—is paramount.

Tools like kiosks, video cameras, smart locks, online portals and mobile apps play a key role in elevating the self-storage customer experience, resulting in greater satisfaction and loyalty. They also enhance operational efficiency by

minimizing downtime and boosting team productivity. Routine maintenance of these items prevents major breakdowns, lowers repair costs and prolongs lifespan. By being proactive about upkeep, you can maintain a competitive edge in your market.

## Creating a Maintenance Schedule

Formulating an effective maintenance schedule is crucial for ensuring the longevity and dependability of your self-storage technology. The following key steps will help you develop a strong routine that minimizes downtime and maximizes performance.

- **Daily:** Conduct basic inspections and cleanings to ensure all systems are operational.
- **Weekly:** Reboot systems, check for software updates and clean components.
- **Monthly:** Conduct more detailed inspections, test functionality and address any minor issues.
- **Quarterly:** Conduct comprehensive system audits, and hire the professional servicing and calibration of equipment.
- **Annually:** Conduct a complete system evaluation, install major updates, and replace any outdated components.

These general guidelines can be applied to nearly all of your self-storage technology devices and systems. Below are more detailed maintenance tips for specific components.

## Facility-Management Software

- Perform routine data backups and implement strong data-governance practices to maintain quality and integrity.
- Continuously monitor performance and audit permissions to prevent unauthorized access.
- Schedule recurring process evaluations and testing to validate alignment of core software with business objectives.
- Regularly monitor data integrations and automation to ensure expected results.
- Regularly update your software to ensure it remains secure and compatible with other systems.
- Remain current on new features and capabilities, continuously seeking opportunities for improvement.

## Desktop Computers and Tablets

- Keep the operating system and all apps updated for optimal performance.
- Secure all devices and govern the suite of applications installed.
- Regularly inspect tablets for physical damage, ensuring screens and ports are intact. Use protective cases and screen protectors to minimize risk.
- Implement quality checks to confirm that any data collected is accurate and reliable.
- Implement security measures like encryption to protect sensitive data.
- Focus on data integration to automate processes, ensuring that devices are effectively linked with your management software and other systems. This should enhance efficiency and reduce manual errors.
- Maximize productivity by simplifying the user experience and developing standard setups and deployments.

## Self-Storage Kiosks

- Secure all wall connections with tamper-proof solutions.
- Regularly clean touchscreens with a soft cloth and mild cleaner, avoiding abrasive materials.
- Routinely check for and install software updates. It's best if the software allows for remote management of the system.
- Inspect hardware components, and test video and voice capabilities.

## Network Infrastructure

- Ensure all devices are securely placed to avoid damage, and inspect physical connections.
- Periodically reboot routers and access points.
- Check for firmware updates.

- Examine battery backups and follow manufacturer guidelines for their upkeep.
- Clean devices with compressed air to remove dust.
- Monitor performance to promptly address connectivity issues.
- Implement remote-management hardware and software to enable reboots and facilitate device recovery without needing an IT technician.

## Drones

- Regularly inspect and clean propellers with a soft brush.
- Monitor battery health. Store batteries in a cool, dry place.
- Update firmware, following all manufacturer guidelines.
- Conduct pre-flight checks and regular test flights to ensure peak operational performance.
- Ensure all components are up-to-date, and proactively replace any worn parts to avoid costly repairs.

## Automated Payment Systems

- Schedule regular software updates.
- Use specialized cleaning cards for card readers.
- Conduct test transactions to verify system accuracy.

## Internet of Things Monitoring Systems and Devices

- Calibrate sensors, following all manufacturer instructions.
- Replace batteries, using only high-quality options.
- Regularly verify connectivity and data accuracy.
- Analyze information patterns and search for anomalies to ensure optimal performance.
- Periodically review data logs to maintain accurate readings.

## DIY vs. Hiring a Professional

When deciding whether to maintain your self-storage technology in-house or hire a professional, consider the complexity of the tasks involved. Routine cleaning, basic software updates, and simple repairs or replacements can often be managed by your own trained staff. For complex repairs, extensive network issues or specialized tasks, it's best to seek help. Professionals bring expertise to handle intricate problems safely and ensure compliance with industry standards, ultimately safeguarding the integrity of your systems and avoiding potential pitfalls. Balancing both approaches can optimize efficiency and performance.

## Troubleshooting

When you have trouble with a piece of self-storage technology, effective

troubleshooting is a systematic process that begins with careful observation of your tool or system. The goal is to identify and document the issue while noting any patterns or symptoms that could provide clues. Next, move on to diagnosis by consulting manuals and using diagnostic tools to pinpoint the exact problem.

Once you have a verdict on the root cause, perform tests to confirm it, such as checking connections or running software diagnostics. Finally, implement the proposed solution and conduct thorough testing to confirm the issue has been fully resolved. This structured approach helps address the immediate problem and prevents future issues.

## A Proactive Approach

Keeping your self-storage technology running at optimal performance requires regular maintenance, timely updates and prompt resolution of issues. To ensure your systems are managed effectively, start by training staff in the proper use of each tool and how to take care of it. Perhaps develop a playbook your team can use. Here are a few additional strategies:

- Establish a useful-life schedule and replacement budget for your tech tools.
- Maintain strong relationships with your vendors to access technical support and warranty services.
- Create and implement emergency-response plans for critical systems to minimize downtime during unexpected failures.
- Collect, consolidate and analyze your technology data to enhance operational efficiency, improve customer experience and optimize revenue.
- If you operate more than one self-storage property, standardize best practices across all of them to streamline processes, reduce downtime and lower maintenance costs while achieving economy of scale.
- Regularly review and upgrade technology to stay current with industry standards and improve efficiency

The self-storage industry is undergoing a technology-driven transformation. Operators who embrace it not only improve their efficiency and customer satisfaction but position themselves as leaders in an increasingly competitive market. Tech tools provide an advantage, but they must be properly maintained. The above guidelines will help ensure they remain reliable, efficient and secure, contributing to operational excellence and customer satisfaction. **ISS**

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# Digital Decluttering

**Outside, the lot is litter-free,** the lawn is freshly mowed, the sign is sparkling and the lights are shining brightly. Inside, the counter is clean, the floor is swept, and all windows are free of smears and smudges. Your self-storage facility looks fantastic! However, your computer's desktop wallpaper is hidden behind a ton of files, most of which aren't readily identifiable. You aren't even sure how most of them got there!

It's easy to let the digital aspects of your self-storage housekeeping slip when you have a hundred real-world tasks to complete. Unless your computer starts to act up, there's generally little pressure to tidy up your files and online workspaces. But if you don't properly manage your digital assets and services, your desktop display isn't the only thing that's going to suffer! The following tips will help you identify what's important and get organized, so you can save time and avoid unnecessary headaches.

## Identify Your Digital Assets

Every day, your self-storage facility is inundated with emails, app alerts, spam bots and other digital "noise." You might rely on various tools to reduce this clutter, like spam filters and ad blockers, but you still end up with a significant amount of content that needs assessment and sorting, which can be tedious and time-consuming. Many of us end up with a large, disorganized mess of files and links that we intend to "deal with later."

But this approach can land you in hot water. Important items you need can fall through the cracks. Some files can create security risks. For this reason, it's crucial to stay organized and keep tabs on the following:

- Email:** Check your spam folder and make sure it isn't filtering out legitimate communication from customers. These are important messages! You also don't want to miss anything from supervisors, the corporate office or ownership, or any of your hired service providers.
- Customer records:** All tenant payment records, leases and legal notices should be easy to find and update when necessary.
- Financial records:** Like most consumers, your self-storage business probably pays its bills

online. You may also use online platforms to handle things like payroll and marketing. Save and organize all of your invoices, statements and payment confirmations. Create folders for these documents on your computer or in the cloud, so you can easily access them when needed.

- Software reports:** Your facility-management software may be programmed to generate performance reports on a schedule, or you may pull them manually. Either way, you need a way to store and keep track of them.
- Online listings:** Know where to find and access all of your facility's online listings, such as Google Business Profile (GBP). These count as part of your online workspace, and it's important to check and update them regularly. Add fresh content and photos and respond to customer reviews.

## Keep Track of Your Digital Services

The next step in your self-storage housekeeping plan is to identify which digital services you're using and exactly what they cover. For example, do you outsource your website design or maintenance, search engine optimization (SEO), social media posting, or reputation management? You don't want to pay multiple companies to do the same job, but it's easy for some of these offerings to overlap.

Create a master list of each digital service your self-storage operation uses, what it costs, what you get for your money, whether there's a contract and when it expires, and whether there's a fee to discontinue. If there's any overlap between vendors but none you can do without, make sure they know about each other and what each provider handles on your behalf. For example, you don't want your reputation-management company doing something that accidentally conflicts with the efforts of your SEO specialist.

Also, make sure you own and control all of your digital assets. For example, if you hire a company to build your self-storage website, make sure you get to keep your domain if you stop working together. If you sever ties with your digital-marketing firm, you want to retain access to your GBP as well as your Google Search Console and Google Analytics accounts. Outsourcing can

greatly simplify and enhance your operation. Just make sure that all elements of your business remain secure and under your command.

## Best Practices

As you clean up your self-storage digital files and online workspaces, here are a few best practices to follow:

**Name your digital files.** Search functions are great for accessing specific records when you need them, but only if the file you need has an accurate name. Get in the habit of creating descriptive, consistent file names, and you'll be able to find exactly what you need, when you need it.

**Organize your files and messages.** Create folders for all of your PDFs, Word docs, Excel spreadsheets, images, videos, etc., and make time to do that digital filing! Create email filters so you can quickly see which messages need immediate attention and which can wait.

**Discard old files.** Having enough digital storage space used to be a challenge. That's no longer true unless you're working with many huge files like videos. This means deleting old records may not seem important. Just remember that some files should be removed from your computer and cloud for security reasons.

**Back up your data.** Systems like OneDrive, iCloud, Gmail and Google Docs automatically back up your digital information. Make sure there's also a backup of the items stored on your computer hard drive. There are lots of inexpensive ways to manage this task and even services that'll do it for you.

If you create good habits, digital housekeeping won't be too time-consuming. There are many ways you can automate your self-storage operation so emails get funneled into proper folders, reports are saved in the right place and important records are easy to find. The danger of disorganization is you won't be able to find what you need quickly or complete your work efficiently. Once you've set up a strong system, the junk should flow into the trash and nothing important will be missed. **ISS**

**Contributor:** David Austin, StoragePug, [www.storagepug.com](http://www.storagepug.com)



# Site-Maintenance Tips for Boat/RV Storage

## While the boat- and RV-storage

industry is still in its infancy, many developers cling to the "Field of Dreams" mentality, believing "If you build it, they will come." Those with a sharper vision, however, know that an immaculate site offering the highest level of service is what attracts—and keeps—this savvy customer base.

Smart facility operators work hard to ensure their tenants' high-priced toys are safe and sound. They understand that their customers expect luxury and convenience and are willing to pay higher rates to get it. To meet this elevated standard and keep renters happy, you must be vigilant and maintain your site with care. Below is expert advice on how to do so.

## First and Lasting Impressions Count

"I try to inspect the facility as often as I can to make sure it is pristine in its appearance," says Greg Crews, who recently completed Brannon Crossing Self Storage in Lexington, Kentucky. "People with valuable contents want a top-notch facility to store their belongings, especially if they're paying a premium price."

Brannon Crossing is Crews' second facility. He learned while operating his first that traditional self-storage is a lot more work for less pay. His new site has a much higher ratio of boat- and RV-storage units. "Facilities like this require a minimum of maintenance. Security is a top concern, and we place a premium on that," Crews says.

In addition, customer service is critical. "The tenants' needs have to be addressed, and they need to feel that if there is an issue, you will be there to take care of it," Crews adds.

Steve Lucas, CEO and managing partner of marketing firm The Storage Group echoes that sentiment. "Proper maintenance enhances the overall customer experience, instilling confidence that their cherished vehicles are in a safe, well-maintained environment. By prioritizing maintenance, storage facilities can attract and retain customers as well as extend the longevity of their stored boats and RVs," he says.

## Specific Areas of Concern

Effective maintenance ensures that your storage areas remain secure and well-preserved,

protecting valuable assets from potential damage from the elements, pests, crime, and general wear and tear. At the core of keeping a boat/RV-facility in impeccable condition is a simple best practice that's been applied at traditional self-storage sites for decades: the property walk-through. Operators should tour the site frequently to evaluate urgent needs and identify items that may need to be addressed in the future.

"Regular inspections and upkeep of parking surfaces, storage bays and access points are vital to prevent deterioration and accidents," Lucas says. It's vital to regularly inspect the following:

- Doors and gates
- Perimeter fencing
- Restrooms
- Wash bays
- HVAC systems
- Roofing
- Plumbing
- Electrical systems
- Paint
- Flooring
- Pavement
- Landscaping
- Security components
- Pest control

You must sustain high standards of care throughout your facility, regardless of its size or location, according to Mark Sherman, director of operations for industry consulting and development firm S3 Partners. "Machinery like rolling doors, access gates and HVAC systems will all eventually need service or replacement," he says. "Building materials like flooring, pavement and paint will need regular upkeep or will look neglected over time. Roofing will need to be inspected regularly, and any leaks should be repaired swiftly."

If the site offers outdoor parking, pay close attention to those areas. The spots should be clearly striped and labeled. If you have a gravel lot, ensure it's free of weeds, and watch for growth along the fence line, advises Terry Campbell, a self-storage veteran and former CEO of third-party management firm Copper Storage Management.

## Safety and Risk Management

Curb appeal is important, but safety can make or break tenants' confidence in a boat/RV-storage facility. For that reason, include security components in your maintenance program, and make them a priority.

"A well-lit, fully fenced facility with electronic access is imperative, so regular night audits to ensure lights are on is key," Campbell says. "And recorded video surveillance is a huge plus for security, so make sure it's running properly."

In addition, conduct regular risk assessments and review your disaster plan biannually. "This will not only help in the maintenance and upkeep of a site but [will] also give all team members a tremendous step up in maintaining the highly valued asset they oversee," says Terry Anderson, CEO and president of insurance company Tenant Property Protection.

## Is It Time to Improve?

Perhaps you've been operating your boat/RV-storage facility for several years, and though you've been meticulous about maintenance, wear and tear has diminished its appearance and functionality over time. If you let it go for too long, the consequences to your business can be devastating.

"What happens when a facility falls into disarray and then a competitor pops up on the corner with a beautiful, shiny storage facility?" asks Troy Bix, president of the R3 (Restore, Rebuild, Replace) Division at Janus International Group, a provider of self-storage doors, hallway systems and technology. "You'll probably see tenants leave because they'll pay the extra 40% to ensure their boats and RVs are safe and secure. And once they're gone, they aren't coming back!"

When operating a boat/RV-storage facility, the primary goal is to make it as clean and safe as possible to attract and retain tenants while avoiding liability issues. "Just remember, it's the owner's fiduciary and ethical duty to create a safe rental experience for their tenants," Bix says. **ISS**

**Contributor:** Drew Whitney, Toy Storage Nation, <https://toystoragenation.com>



# Establishing a Safe Workplace

## When you manage

**employees**, you have a legal and moral responsibility to provide them with a safe work environment. Every year, thousands of people experience accidents or other tragic incidents in the workplace, which can have devastating consequences for staff and the business. Think of the physical and emotional harm, lost productivity, deflated morale, medical expenses, and legal fees that can result. These situations will affect everybody on your team in one way or another.

As I visit self-storage facilities for clients and talk to the onsite staff, I'm surprised to hear some of the comments they make about feeling unsafe at work, whether it's due to physical hazards or certain tenants that make them feel uncomfortable. No employee should have to deal with that in their place of business. As an employer, you certainly don't want to deal with the negative ramifications, either.

Maintaining a safe workplace and providing your self-storage team with the right tools, knowledge and conditions to work unharmed should always be your top priority. Luckily, this doesn't have to be complicated. Below, I share key tips to help you protect your employees and keep your business running smoothly.

## Evaluate Your Site

Regular and timely analysis of your workplace conditions is essential. When was the last time you really audited your self-storage property from a safety perspective? As a facility owner or supervisor, you have a responsibility to identify and eliminate potential or existing hazards. This activity has the added benefit of helping you avoid incidents or risks that might be very expensive to fix.

Your facility managers and other staff are a great resource for understanding what perils exist on your property; however, they may not always report them to you. They might not want to be seen as being a tattletale or whistleblower, or perhaps they assume ownership doesn't want to pay for necessary repairs. They may simply think, "If the owner doesn't care, why should I?"

Of course, recognizing safety issues is great, but you need a plan for addressing them, too. In short, if you can prevent something bad

from happening, you're making a positive contribution to workplace safety. This can save time and money and potentially prevent someone on your team from being hurt.

## Aligning Staff on Safety

Once you know the potential risks lurking at your self-storage site, you must ensure your entire facility staff knows how to work safely. To begin, you need policies and procedures in place to encourage a secure, healthy environment. Your focus should be twofold: to ensure your team understands and has easy access to your company's safety protocols, and to provide regular training on safety measures and proper work methods. Together, these efforts help establish a companywide culture that lowers the likelihood of accidents and boosts performance.

Having the right practices in place is vital to workplace safety, but they mean nothing if your staff doesn't know about them or fails to follow them. To ensure compliance, invest in team training. Include everyone from full-time site managers to part-time employees to maintenance workers. We often think that if we train the property manager, it'll have a trickle-down effect; but this leaves room for error or gaps in knowledge. Be diligent in your follow-up and make sure everybody receives the same level of instruction.

If you aren't comfortable providing this training yourself, ask your insurance agent for assistance or check with the local police and fire departments for community programs that teach safety and awareness. You can seek information from a nearby health center or hospital, too. There are also many online resources offering great information. Just remember: It's always preferable to over communicate than to come up short or leave room for miscommunication, so use all the appropriate options available to you.

## What to Cover

Next, you need to decide what to include in your self-storage safety training. It might differ based on your facility location, size and type as well as the size of your team and their level of experience. That said, here are some essentials to consider:

- How to spot and report potential site hazards
- What repairs staff can make themselves and which require a professional
- What personal protective equipment (PPE) is available for employees, where to find it, when and how to use it, and how to maintain or replace it
- Proper lifting techniques
- How to prevent slips and falls, which account for many onsite injuries
- How to properly use a ladder and work at height
- How to correctly use maintenance and repair tools
- How to drive and park the golf cart and rental truck
- How to handle cleaning and pest-control products and other hazardous chemicals
- How to administer basic first aid and possibly CPR
- Where the fire extinguishers are and how to use them
- How to handle a person who seems dangerous
- How to respond to a criminal attack, such as a robbery
- What to do in the event of a natural disaster

## Feeling Threatened?

If you ever feel threatened in your self-storage workplace, report it to your owner or supervisor immediately, or your human-resources department if you have one. Sometimes the situation warrants a phone call to the local authorities. If you feel it's necessary to protect yourself, report an incident anonymously.

All incidents, no matter how seemingly insignificant, should be investigated. It's crucial that your self-storage company intervenes at any sign of a feasibly hostile or aggressive situation and takes swift action when warranted.

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), "Creating a Safe Workplace for Self-Storage Employees and Tenants: How to Predict and Avoid Violent Behavior," by Angie Decembre

As part of your safety training, run emergency drills with your self-storage staff for a variety of incidents, so they understand their responsibilities. For example, do they understand the specific protocols in case of a fire, flood, tornado or other catastrophe? If your facility has a power outage, do they know how to manually open your gate? They should know what to do if someone gets injured on site, how to diffuse a tense situation and when to seek help from local law enforcement.

Let's dig into a few of the above training elements in more detail, starting with situational awareness. Personal safety is paramount, and your team should know how to look for suspicious activity and what to do if they see it. That said, it's your job to make their job easier in this regard. Is your facility well-lit at night? Are there any "hidden areas" of your property that should be better exposed? Your staff and tenants should feel safe on your site after dark.

Also, make sure you're supplying your self-storage employees with the proper

equipment they need to do their jobs and that it's well-maintained. Over the years, I've seen many broken tools and taped-up electrical cords at facilities. Not good!

It's critical that your equipment is regularly inspected for wear and tear and replaced as needed. This includes your golf cart, power tools, ladders and PPE. What gear do your managers have for cutting or drilling locks? Do you provide gloves and goggles? These items should be replaced if become worn or damaged. In addition to understanding how to correctly pick up and carry heavy items, your staff should have access to mechanical aids to prevent strains and sprains.

Among the items you provide to your self-storage team are no doubt some cleaning products, maybe some pest-control devices or chemicals. There might be substances to avoid ice build-up in the winter. Any potentially hazardous items need to be handled correctly as well as properly stored and disposed of, when necessary. Create a binder of safety-data

sheets for any products you use on site. These are usually available online.

As a final note, please be aware that some states might require that you assign a safety manager for your self-storage site or have at least one employee who is CPR-certified. Check your local regulations to ensure you comply.

### ABC: Always Be Careful

We should all strive to operate a self-storage facility where employees and tenants like to be and feel safe. If you don't, you could wind up dealing with a variety of unpleasant circumstances including worker's compensation claims, lawsuits, staff loss and more. Workplace-safety training helps reduce risk and creates a great environment that's healthy and productive for everyone connected to your business. **ISS**

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# Safety Best Practices



**Self-storage operators go to great lengths** to ensure their sites are safe and secure, but intertwined with facility operation is a stack of legal and compliance considerations. Adhering to your own business guidelines as well as government regulations is paramount to minimize business liability and risk. For example:

- You must protect customer privacy, ensuring that personal information isn't disclosed or exposed to unauthorized parties.
- As a matter of conducting business, you can't discriminate against customers based on race, gender, religion or any other protected characteristic.
- Your property must be accessible to staff and customers with disabilities.
- You must ensure that your rental agreement is legally binding and enforceable.
- You must carry liability insurance to protect against potential claims.

Last but not least, self-storage operators have a duty to facility staff, customers, visitors and the community to maintain a safe property. Let's explore the primary areas of concern and some best practices to help you remain compliant, protect your business reputation, and maintain customer and public trust.

### Top Concerns

To guarantee the safety of your self-storage customers and employees, adhere to the following guidelines:

- **Fire:** Your facility must have adequate suppression systems, such as sprinklers. Conduct regular inspections to ensure this equipment remains in proper working condition.
- **Security:** Put measures in place to protect customer belongings from theft or damage, including surveillance cameras, alarms and secure locks.

- **Hazardous materials:** Regulations prohibit the storage of certain types of goods, including highly flammable and explosive items, to prevent accidents and injuries.

- **Electrical:** Make sure all equipment such as HVAC and lighting meets recommended standards by having it installed and inspected by a licensed electrician.

- **Accessibility:** Beyond the legal obligations for site and unit access, safety concerns include proper lighting, clear pathways and appropriate signage.

### Plan Implementation

The best way to ensure your self-storage site adheres to the above safety protocols is to put a formal plan into place that covers all legal requirements, then educate staff and customers to ensure compliance. Steps should include:

- **Research:** Before diving in, familiarize yourself with all local, state and federal safety standards. Each location can have nuances that require special attention.
- **Training:** Knowledge is the first line of defense, so make sure all staff members are thoroughly trained on safety protocols and procedures.
- **Inspections:** Daily walk-throughs and site audits aren't enough when it comes to potential hazards that are difficult to detect. Schedule regular, thorough inspections of the premises by trained professionals.
- **Expertise:** Outside perspective can be helpful in ensuring your site is as safe as possible. Consider hiring a safety expert or consultant to vet your property.
- **Feedback:** Encourage tenants and staff to report their safety concerns. This creates a two-way channel for improvement and can prevent costly and damaging incidents.

Of course, formulating a plan and putting it into action isn't always easy. To begin with, safety regulations aren't static; they evolve. Staying updated with every new amendment or guideline can be daunting. Then there's the fact that implementing quality safety measures often comes with a price tag. Balancing cost-efficiency with business need can be a tightrope walk.

Let's not forget the difficulties you can face in dealing with tenants. They should be prohibited from storing hazardous materials, but not everyone will adhere to site rules. Site managers need to be as diligent as possible about what's being stored in units. Even with thorough training, humans can make mistakes or miss tiny clues. Ensuring consistency with safety practices requires ongoing vigilance.

### The Consequences of Non-Compliance

Failure to adhere to safety regulations doesn't just risk the integrity of your self-storage tenants' belongings and your facility, it can have costly business implications. One misstep can lead to another, creating a ripple effect that can disrupt operation and tarnish your reputation. Legal consequences can include:

- **Heavy fines:** An immediate repercussion of non-compliance is financial penalty, which can be hefty, depending on the severity of the oversight and jurisdiction.
- **Litigation:** Failure to comply can land a business in court. Legal battles are expensive and can stretch for long durations, diverting focus from core functions.
- **License suspension:** In severe cases, regulatory bodies might suspend or even revoke your business license, halting operations entirely.

- **Criminal charges:** If an incident due to business negligence leads to serious harm or endangerment, owners could face criminal charges.

Any of the above is bad enough on its own, but non-compliance can have other far-reaching effects on your business. First, there's the damage to your reputation. In the Digital Age, news travels fast. Any incident resulting in hefty fines, litigation or worse can lead to negative publicity. Legal consequences from safety issues can also erode customer trust, leading to a decline in tenant retention and acquisition. Add to that the cost of addressing violations, such as retrofitting your property with necessary equipment. This can certainly be a blow to your wallet and budget.

From minimizing fire risk to preserving customer privacy, adherence to facility protocols is essential in protecting tenant belongings and your business standing. Effective implementation of safety measures, ongoing vigilance and staying current with regulations are all crucial strategies. In an era in which customer trust is foundational, ensuring compliance with rules and best practices isn't just a responsibility, it's the bedrock of a thriving self-storage operation. **ISS**

**Contributor:** Emily Hill, Freelance Author



# FIRE PREVENTION AND SAFETY

**The chief service priority** for self-storage operators is to keep customers' belongings safe and secure from threats including fire, which can be devastating to the business and its tenants. To protect against potential incidents, you need strategic operational policies and procedures. You must also design and run the site to minimize risk. Following are strategies to help you prevent incidents of fire and maintain a safe environment if one occurs.

### Tenant Education

Fires can start in many ways. While some may ignite due to nature, such as a lightning strike, most stem from human error. In self-storage, this means the biggest danger can be your tenants and the things they choose to store in their units. Thus, the best prevention measure is to educate them about safe storage practices.

Post signs that notify customers of harmful items that are prohibited on the

property. These should include gas cans and gas-powered tools, chemicals, oil cans, dirty rags, propane tanks, and even camera film. Tenants often use their units as overflow space for their attic or garage and, in many cases, don't realize that seemingly innocuous items can pose a serious fire hazard.

Of course, signage isn't enough to fully deter the storage of improper materials, so it's best to create a clearly stated policy in your self-storage rental agreement and

communicate all risks at contract signing, so tenants understand what not to store and how to keep their units and belongings safe from fire. Provide them with a checklist of prohibited items. Though you may receive blowback, it's critical to minimize risk. It's always best to turn away a potential renter than have an issue with hazardous materials.

In addition to what's being stored, how units are filled can pose a fire hazard. Thus, when someone rents a unit, it's wise to discuss the amount of property they wish to store. Have a policy in place about how much is allowed in each unit. While it makes financial sense for a tenant to rent the smallest space possible, inform them about the dangers this can entail.

If you believe a customer has too much stuff for the space they want, be firm but informative as to why they need a larger unit. If the tenant intends to store paper documents, photographs, film and other valuables, recommend that they place them in a fireproof safe. You don't need to turn people away from your facility, but it's an effective preventive measure to inform them about the dangers overcrowding poses to their property and that of others.

### Staff Training

When creating a fire-prevention plan for your self-storage facility, it's critical that employees understand every aspect of it.

They must be aware of potential dangers on the premises. They also need to know how to identify issues with fire-safety systems in case they stop working properly.

By thoroughly teaching your prevention plan to employees, they'll be able to relay the information effectively to tenants. This should prevent fires from occurring and help them understand what to do if one does ignite.

### Protection

In case a fire occurs at your self-storage property, you need an effective suppression system in place to extinguish the flames or keep the blaze at bay until emergency responders arrive. There are two primary options to consider. The first is a water-sprinkler system, with heads in every unit, hallway and work area. The second is a dry-chemical system, which sprays a powder that coats the fire and breaks it down without wetting unit contents. The latter is the best, as it won't cause further damage to customer belongings the way water will.

You should also place fire extinguishers 75 feet apart throughout the facility. It's crucial to have them by all entrances and exits. Storage facilities should also be equipped with heat monitors and smoke detectors. Hardwired, electronic detection systems will trigger the central alarm and alert

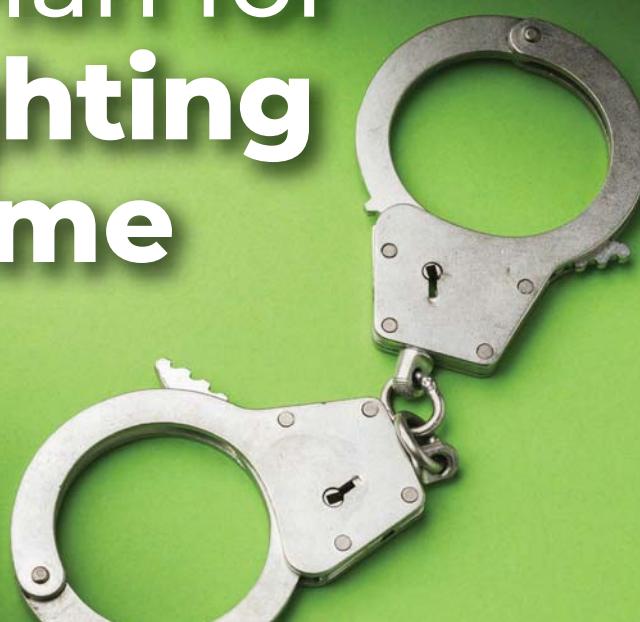
the local fire station. This greatly speeds emergency-response times, which can make a big difference in saving your business and customer belongings. Some security systems can even integrate into your fire-protection system and be set up to send notifications to a smart device in case of emergency.

Finally, it's imperative that you have fire insurance. Consult with your agent to ensure you have the right coverage for your business, as every self-storage facility is unique. Always make sure your policy is up to date and never lapses. Contact your agent every six months to discuss whether you need to make any changes. You should also discuss any actions you can take to lower your premium.

When it comes to fire safety, prevention should be top-of-mind for every self-storage operator. By putting sound policies in place that inform as well as direct customers and staff, you'll help create a safe environment. Follow that up by installing critical safety systems that can minimize damage should an incident occur. In addition to these simple steps, obtaining fire-safety techniques and recommendations from your local fire marshal can go a long way toward strengthening your risk-management strategy. **ISS**

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# A Plan for Fighting Crime



### When choosing a self-storage

facility, consumers look for a place that seems safe, one where they feel protected and can confidently leave their belongings. It's the primary reason why so many operators use words like "secure" or "guard" in their brand name. But it takes more than a name to earn a good reputation. A preventive approach to crime is a crucial element when it comes to establishing a business customers believe they can trust.

Self-storage properties can be targets for a wide range of criminal activities. While some are opportunistic, others are premeditated, posing various levels of risk to facility operators. Some of the biggest threats include:

- Theft
- Vandalism
- Illegal dumping of waste or hazardous materials
- Drug storage, production or distribution
- Unauthorized occupancy (loitering)
- Illegal habitation
- Arson
- Assault

Your goal as a self-storage owner or manager is to ensure that engaging in misconduct at your location isn't worth the risk, even for the most determined bad actors. Following are some strategies for prevention as well as steps to take during and after an incident.

## Be Vigilant

To deter criminal activity at your self-storage facility, you need to take meaningful measures to protect people and property. A proactive approach will help build your reputation as an operator who's serious about security. Your first line of defense? Your onsite team! Everyone who works at the property should be on the lookout for these red flags:

- **Unusual visits:** Be wary of individuals who visit the facility frequently without a legitimate reason for doing so. They could be scouting for vulnerabilities.
- **Loitering or lurking:** People who linger near storage units or common areas without a clear purpose may be observing security protocols or waiting for an opportunity to commit a crime.
- **Multi-person unit access:** If several people are seen accessing the same self-storage unit, especially at odd hours or without a valid explanation, it could signal unauthorized use or illicit activity.
- **Unusual vehicles:** Pay attention to cars, trucks and bikes that don't belong to tenants or others who regularly visit the facility.
- **Door tampering:** Any attempt to meddle with locks, pry open doors or otherwise gain unauthorized access to units should prompt investigation.
- **Unsolicited offers for assistance:** Be wary of anyone offering unwanted help or services to tenants, as they may be attempting to gain access for nefarious purposes.
- **Erratic behavior:** Individuals exhibiting nervousness or agitation or avoiding eye contact when approached may have something to hide.
- **Use of disguises:** Wearing hats, sunglasses, masks or other costumes to conceal one's identity may indicate an intent to avoid detection or surveillance.
- **Abandoned or suspicious items:** Any unattended bags, boxes, bins or other items left on the property should be investigated promptly.
- **Violation of facility rules:** Any behavior that goes against your policies and procedures, such as loitering after hours, carrying prohibited items or propping open doors, should be addressed and documented.

By watching for signs of suspicious activity, you can better protect your self-storage facility and ensure the safety of staff, customers and stored belongings. In addition, encourage your tenants to report any unusual or concerning behavior they observe. Security requires all hands on deck!

## Partner With Police

Establishing strong relationships with local law enforcement can greatly enhance the security of your self-storage facility. Consider collaborating with the police and fire department through community-outreach programs. Share any incident reports you create and participate in crime-prevention workshops. This will foster a sense of partnership and encourage timely response to your security concerns when they arise. Additionally, having a designated liaison for communication with law enforcement streamlines coordination when there's an urgent situation.

## Use the Right Tools

To help your self-storage team be vigilant and keep the property safe, consider investing in the following security tools. Most are considered essentials in the industry today, though many now have advanced options available due to advancements in technology.

**Perimeter fencing.** Fencing establishes clear boundaries and restricts unauthorized access, making it harder for criminals to enter the premises undetected. Choose a barrier that's sturdy, tall enough to deter climbing, and equipped with anti-tamper features such as barbed wire or sensors. Conduct regular inspections to check for damage or breach.

**Access control.** This system regulates entry to the property, limiting access to authorized individuals. Choose one with multiple layers of authentication including keypads, access cards, biometric scanners or electronic locks. Regularly update access credentials and revoke access for former tenants or employees. Today's smart systems use cloud-based platforms for enhanced security and operational efficiency, allowing tenants to lock or unlock units with a mobile device.

**Lighting.** Adequate lighting enhances visibility and reduces hiding spots, creating a sense of surveillance. Distribute bright fixtures evenly over all areas of the property including parking lots, hallways and entry points. Promptly replace burnt-out bulbs or damaged fixtures.

**Cameras.** These provide constant vigilance, allowing you to capture and review footage. They help you identify clues that illegal activity may be going on at your self-storage facility, but only if used correctly.

First, opt for high-resolution cameras with wide coverage angles and place them strategically throughout the property to ensure all areas are covered. Regularly check their functionality and study the recordings. This is essential! If you need help, new products powered by artificial intelligence promise to scan your video feeds and automatically flag suspicious activities, sending you an alert.

**Drones.** To really take your surveillance system up a notch, consider drones for their aerial capabilities. This enables a quick, efficient view of large areas. Drone use can also be coupled with remote monitoring for real-time visibility into facility activity from anywhere.

**Door locks and alarms.** Ensuring that your tenants use the right type of lock—properly—is essential to site security, so consider making it a requirement. When selecting products to sell, look for high-quality mechanisms that are resistant to cutting, picking or drilling. Disc or cylinder locks specifically designed for self-storage are recommended for their durability and tamper-resistant features. Individual unit-door alarms add an extra layer of security, alerting staff to unauthorized access attempts.

**Security guards.** While not a common feature at self-storage facilities due to cost, dedicated security personnel provide a physical presence and immediate response to threats or emergencies. They can monitor your facility as part of a patrol route and be on call to respond to alarms or other situations.

## Audit Your Access-Control Logs

Your self-storage facility's access logs, containing meticulously documented entries and exits, can be instrumental in detecting suspicious behavior. When reviewed regularly, these vital tools will help you identify unusual patterns, unauthorized or failed entry attempts, access from restricted areas, prolonged stays, and off-hour visits. Any of these can signal security threats such as a potential break-in, someone attempting to live in a unit or other illegal activity.

Consistently comb through your access logs to spot anomalies, and then promptly investigate any discrepancies. You might also implement automated alerts for specific access activities, which can enable you to respond swiftly to potential threats and safeguard the facility's integrity and safety.

## Establish Response Protocols

Despite all of these efforts, incidents of crime may still occur at your self-storage property; so, you need clear protocols for handling emergencies, including when it's

appropriate to contact law enforcement. Some situations may be simply resolved by issuing a warning to the offending party or demanding that they leave the premises. Others are more serious and require an immediate police response.

First and foremost, prioritize the safety of your tenants and staff. Afterward, document

the event, assessing any damage or losses, and communicate transparently with affected tenants. These essential post-crime steps will help mitigate the negative impact and restore trust.

Protecting a self-storage facility from crime requires a multi-faceted approach that encompasses prevention and response.

By remaining vigilant, partnering with police, implementing robust security and monitoring your access-control data, you can create a safer environment and mitigate the risk of incidents. **ISS**

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# EMPLOYEE THEFT

## Most self-storage managers

**are honest**, reliable and hard-working. *Trustworthy.* As an owner, you put the performance of your multi-million-dollar asset into their capable hands. You believe they will have your facility's best interests at heart. After all, those interests often align with those of your team, helping them earn more money come bonus time.

The unfortunate reality, however, is internal theft can still occur. It happens. Even a good worker can turn to bad behavior under the right circumstances.

The good news is that by implementing a few simple, preventive measures and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, you can significantly reduce the likelihood of theft and maintain a secure work environment. Let's start by looking at the situations that might drive your self-storage staff to engage in dishonest behavior.

## Factors That Drive Internal Theft

Employee theft happens for several reasons, but it's primarily a crime of opportunity. Most self-storage facilities employ very few people, and there's rarely any direct supervision. This absence of accountability through authority can easily lead to temptation, especially at facilities that accept a lot of cash payments for unit rentals, retail sales, truck rentals, etc. Here are some of the reasons a worker might steal:

- They believe they are underpaid. Perhaps they haven't received a raise or a bonus in a long time and feel they deserve one.
- They feel disrespected or unappreciated by the company.
- They need extra cash for an unexpected expense and have no other way to get it. They might take a few dollars, intending to replace it on payday and rationalizing the crime as a "short-term loan." When they aren't caught, it may encourage them to do it again.
- They may be suffering with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem, or a shopping addiction.
- They may be facing other personal challenges such as a maxed out credit card, a medical issue or a divorce. Some simply like to live beyond their means.

These are just a few of the desperate situations that can push a self-storage manager into a financial bind, leaving them feeling like they have no other option. In some cases, they never meant to steal from you; they were simply overwhelmed by their circumstances and felt trapped.

One last thing to keep in mind is an employee can steal more than cash. They may be sneaking supplies, or renting out space to their friends and family at no charge. They may be stealing time by not working all the hours they state on their timecards.

Do you have a manager who never seems to answer the phone when you call? You might even show up at the property to find the office locked and the employee nowhere in sight. When you ask them about it, they claim they were picking up supplies, taking a lunch break or making a bank deposit. Perhaps they're always in the office but doing another job such as online sales, web design or some other money-making activity. Make no mistake: This is theft. The person takes your money and gives you only a portion of the time for which they're being paid.

## Preventing Employee Theft

Right now, you're wondering what you can do to prevent employee theft at your self-storage operation. Here are a few effective strategies:

- First, know all the features of your facility-management software and the data it produces. If you see red flags in your financial reports, investigate.
- Inform all employees that unannounced facility inspections can occur at any time ... and *do them!* Threats mean nothing; actions say it all. It doesn't mean that you don't trust your team. It's just a good business practice. As self-storage owner, it's your responsibility to protect your money.
- Consider not accepting cash payments, which eliminates the need for a cash drawer and the temptation all that money creates.

- Use paperless leases so there are no printed copies lying around that can be used for a cash-paying tenant.
- Every customer should be logged in your management software.
- Put as many tenants as possible on autopay using a debit or credit card. This not only eliminates cash payments, it helps you avoid delinquency.
- Instead of keeping petty cash on site, give your managers an Amazon, Lowes or Home Depot credit card for things like office supplies, cleaning supplies, weed killer, etc. The accounting department can easily itemize and reconcile these accounts, and it removes the temptation of cash.
- Make sure your self-storage auctions are handled by a third party and all payments are made with a credit card.

### Warning Signs of Employee Theft

So, how do you know when an employee is taking advantage of your self-storage business? There are a few methods you can use and red flags for which to watch.

First, pay attention to changes in income. If your self-storage facility has been around for a while, you have historical financial data. Use it to help you identify potentially problematic trends. While periodic fluctuations can occur due to economic factors like inflation and increased competition, dramatic dips require investigation.

Regularly reviewing your self-storage management reports can also help you spot patterns. For example, if your facility traditionally handles a lot of cash but you notice fewer cash payments despite steady occupancy, something might be amiss. If you're seeing that late fees are frequently waived in your software, it's possible that the employee is collecting them in cash and putting it right in their pocket. If you're seeing your manager offer a lot of move-in specials, particularly months of free rent, further investigation may be warranted.

### Responding to Potential Employee Theft

If you suspect that one of your self-storage employees of stealing, begin by doing an investigation and documenting any findings. Never accuse a team member without solid evidence! Here are a few critical steps you should take:

- Conduct a thorough facility audit (or hire a professional to do one).
- If you have a cash drawer and petty-cash account, balance them.
- Review all tenant files to ensure there are no leases with zero rent, and check the software to confirm no units have been removed. Count any inventory and balance it against the computer records.

If you find proof of theft, it's time to end the manager's employment. I could write an entire article on the subject of termination (and have), but here are a few general steps to follow:

- Prepare the employee's payroll as well as any pay due for vacation time and bonuses.
- Collect any company property from the employee including facility keys and uniforms.
- Have a locksmith change the locks. (You can't be too careful. Keys can be copied.)
- Have the employee remove all personal items from the office.
- If the employee lives on site, give them a clear and reasonable amount of time to vacate. If there's a door between the residence and the office, have the lock changed immediately. Once they've moved out, conduct a walkthrough of the living space to ensure everything is in the condition you expect.

There are many reasons why a good employee might make a bad decision and steal from your self-storage company. While this doesn't happen often, it's crucial to be prepared. Offer competitive pay, treat staff with respect, and implement motivating and achievable bonus programs. Also, give them the authority to do their job, conduct regular performance reviews, maintain open communication, set clear guidelines, and perform regular facility audits. This proactive approach benefits you, your facility and your managers by addressing problems before they escalate. **ISS**

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**Your self-storage operation is committed** to safeguarding customers' belongings. You're well-versed in what's required to secure these physical assets, including a strong security system, employee vigilance and positive relationships with law

enforcement. But is your organization savvy about protecting its *digital* property?

Cyberattacks are on the rise, and criminals are becoming more aggressive. To counteract them, you need cybersecurity. This is a broad term for tools and strategies

that protect internet-technology (IT) networks, technical devices and digital data from unauthorized access or criminal use. Typically, IT service providers weave a complex web of solutions to create "cyber resiliency." By integrating the right

technology, they lessen the possibility of a successful cyberattack and minimize the damage if one occurs.

If you consider how much valuable yet sensitive information you have in your self-storage operation's digital network—customer names and contact information, credit card numbers, maybe Social Security numbers—it's clear why cybercrime is a burgeoning, profitable global enterprise. Personally identifiable information, payment and banking details, and intellectual property are incredibly valuable on the Dark Web. Your company is responsible for keeping it secure.

Statistics show that small to mid-sized companies are prime targets for cybercriminals, often called "bad actors." In fact, most studies indicate that nearly half of the cyberattacks in the United States target smaller organizations. That puts tremendous strain on businesses that don't have IT specialists on staff and can't afford sophisticated solutions. Thankfully, there are simple steps you can take to keep your data safe.

### Evolving Cyber Threats

While physical threats against self-storage facilities can be addressed during construction and then later through technology and operational procedures, cybersecurity requires agility and focus. The cyber-threat landscape evolves constantly, with hackers and other bad actors creating sophisticated attacks at a surprisingly quick pace. That means you must be vigilant and stay informed about the latest risks, adjusting policies and solutions accordingly.

Social-engineered attacks, often called "phishing," continue to lead the pack as the primary cause of data breaches. They may come through email, text or even a phone call. Constantly educating your self-storage employees and keeping simple security steps top-of-mind is key when it comes to battling this threat.

Eighty-one percent of all businesses report that they've experienced a malware attack, according to a study by telecommunications company Verizon. These often slipped into the network through an endpoint or compromised application. One of the biggest challenges is hackers gain access to your network and then lurk there for weeks, taking all the time they need to steal sensitive information and sell it.

### Protecting Your Digital Assets

Safeguarding your self-storage business, data, and employees from cybercrime starts with some simple tools and strategies. First, make sure your company is using:

- Firewalls to monitor traffic into and out of your internet network to prevent bad actors from accessing it
- Filtering and email security to scan and stop spam
- Endpoint protection to secure devices and limit network access
- Antivirus software to detect, quarantine and remove malware

Once you have the right digital defenses in place, the following operational tactics will add more layers of critical protection against cyberattacks:

- **Establish clear policies.** These should address areas where security gaps can occur within your digital access control. For example, spell out acceptable uses of company devices including computers, phones and tablets.
- **Use multi-factor authentication.** This validates user identities by requiring a secondary confirmation, such as a text to a mobile phone or a code from an app like Microsoft Authenticator. Layer it over every access and login point to address common vulnerabilities.
- **Enforce password hygiene.** Create a clear, highly enforced policy for password creation, updates and storage.
- **Replace obsolete technology.** Legacy hardware and software can provide easy access to your network since it's likely unsupported by the vendor.
- **Patch your network promptly.** Applying security patches is a straightforward way to close security gaps.
- **Do penetration testing.** Thinking like a hacker is one way to protect your network. Many IT providers offer "ethical hacking," a process for scanning your network for vulnerabilities through fake phishing attacks and password tests.
- **Develop an incident-response plan.** Being prepared will help you minimize the damage of a cyberattack and facilitate a swift recovery. Include communication plans for your customers and employees.
- **Purchase cyber insurance.** This coverage can offset the financial and legal impact of a security breach.
- **Hire a cybersecurity partner.** Managed services providers not only address the fundamentals, they often have additional expertise with compliance, such as regulations for payment processing.

### The Importance of Training

Your best line of defense against cyber attacks is sitting right inside your self-storage facility: your team! By educating employees about

common vulnerabilities and the right steps to take when faced with a threat, you'll improve your cybersecurity posture tremendously.

Security-awareness training is usually outsourced, and there are many vendors qualified to reorient employee thinking about email, passwords and access points. If you outsource your IT tasks, your partner might be able to provide or recommend a program. Additionally, your cybersecurity company might offer some simple, DIY training, though it may not always cover the very latest threats.

Most cybersecurity training programs are priced per employee and include an annual contract. Expect to pay about \$10 to \$40 per person for a reputable and thorough product.

Because of the evolution of cybercrime and the creative, persistent nature of bad actors, security-awareness training is never really complete. As you aim to improve security at your self-storage facility, remember to focus first on prevention. However, don't overlook having a comprehensive plan for backing up and recovering essential business data in case of a breach.

### It's Up to You

As a self-storage operator, you have a responsibility to protect your company's sensitive business information, including all tenant and employee data. Failing to invest as much effort into securing your digital assets as you have in protecting your physical environment and customer valuables can land you in legal trouble, including violation of federal mandates about payment information and privacy. After all of the hard work you've invested into your business, it would be a tragedy to let a cyberattack thwart your success. Instead, impede those bad actors by putting proper cybersecurity in place. **ISS**

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# CRISIS-MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW



**Dealing with a crisis** is never easy. And though you may not want to admit it, as a self-storage operator, you're always susceptible to risk. Our industry faces a variety of threats that can disrupt business and create challenges for owners, staff and tenants. Some can be quite devastating and costly, while others are just messy and inconvenient.

While difficult situations can make us feel powerless, many catastrophes can be made more manageable by creating and following a simple crisis-management plan containing guidelines on what to do before, during and after the incident. Let's look at some of the unfortunate scenarios you're likely to encounter and how to remain operational and competent through the process.

## Potential Threats

Let's begin with an overview of crises self-storage operators might one day face.

## Managing the Message

When a catastrophe occurs, there's a lot to manage, from ensuring the safety of people to minimizing property damage to documenting everything as it occurs. Among the most critical things you need to do, however, is control the information going out to your customers, investors, community and others. Public relations is a key contributor to how well your business survives the ordeal.

Whatever you do, don't ignore the situation. Never put your head in the sand, which will almost certainly result in angry tenants, business partners and neighbors. Instead, keep everyone calm and informed with the right messaging delivered in a timely fashion via multiple methods. Here's advice for controlling your narrative and smoothing the way to recovery.

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com),  
"Managing the Message: Public Relations After a Crisis Occurs at Your Self-Storage Property," by Cassie Dodgen

**Natural disasters.** These can include hurricane, tornado, flood, fire, earthquake, winter storm, and excessive heat or cold. Hurricanes bring strong wind and heavy rain, potentially causing structural damage, power outages and flooding. While these storms may be forecasted, flowing water often hits quickly and with a force that catches many people by surprise. Structures in areas where hurricanes and tornadoes are common are often built to withstand high winds but might be unprepared for a deluge of water. Even a region that isn't prone to flooding can suffer simply because the drainage systems are too easily overwhelmed.

Fire can also devastate a self-storage business. It might be the result of faulty wiring, electrical malfunction, arson or accident. Tenants might willingly or unknowingly store flammable materials or attempt to live in one of your units, burning candles or using appliances that are unsafe for such an environment.

**Theft.** This might come in the form of a physical facility break-in or a data breach. It might even come from within your own team.

**Legal issues.** These can range from contractual disputes to wrongful-sale lawsuits. You might have to deal with the death of a tenant or being served with a search warrant. Problems may arise if you aren't adhering to the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act or the Americans With Disabilities Act. The legal side of the self-storage business can be rife with risk.

**Equipment or technology failure.** This always seems to happen at the worst possible time. It could be that your gate, keypad or cameras malfunction. Your HVAC system stops working, or you lose power altogether. You could lose internet, which can impact your self-storage management software and website, impacting your ability to process online rentals, take payments and interact with customers.

## Before the Crisis

While the above is hardly a complete list of the possible crisis situations that can occur in a

self-storage environment, there are a few key prevention strategies that can help you mitigate a variety of emergencies. The following may even help you avoid an incident altogether.

- Conduct a thorough risk assessment of your site, then sit down with your staff to develop a well-defined crisis-management plan for a wide range of scenarios. Don't forget to arrange for communication with tenants, staff, emergency personnel and the media, if necessary.
- Watch your self-storage property the next time it rains heavily. Evaluate the water flow from the roofs and gutters all the way down to the detention pond to ensure everything is moving as it should. If not, invest in improvements.
- Regularly inspect and maintain your facility's electrical systems as well as your smoke detectors and fire extinguishers. Make sure all exit signs are working, and clearly post the site's emergency-evacuation plan where people can see it.
- Implement robust security measures. An advanced system is crucial to crime deterrence and response. The key is to work with reputable industry experts who can help implement the right components and cybersecurity measures for your unique operation.
- Regularly review and update your self-storage rental agreement, and keep up-to-date on industry laws. Seek legal counsel to preemptively address potential issues.
- Join your state self-storage association, which should be able to help you understand your local lien laws and may be able to provide a rental-agreement template as well as other educational resources.
- Create a contingency plan for potential system failure. For example, there should be a plan to maintain property access if the gate malfunctions and manual processes for handling rentals and payments. Communication with tenants during any such interruption is extremely important.
- Ensure you have comprehensive insurance coverage tailored to your operation and review it with your agent annually.

## A Frequently Overlooked Risk: Workplace Violence

While violence in the workplace is becoming more common, there are ways to spot potential problems. One notable red flag is a drastic change in an individual's behavior.

For instance, you might notice that a self-storage employee or coworker who's generally reliable suddenly starts coming in late or fails to show up at all. They might miss deadlines, question a supervisor's authority or become disrespectful of others. Additional warning signs include emotional language or frequent crying, or making inappropriate comments, particularly around acts of violence to themselves or others.

Threats can also come from self-storage tenants. Your renters could be hostile or threaten onsite staff. Suggestive language or unwanted advances also constitute harassment.

Not all of these behaviors mean that a person will become violent. They're simply something to note and a reminder to proceed with caution.

**Source:** *insideselfstorage.com, "Creating a Safe Workplace for Self-Storage Employees and Tenants: How to Predict and Avoid Violent Behavior," by Angie Decembre*

### During the Crisis

You're more likely to maintain calmness and order when you have a pre-established crisis-management strategy on which to rely. When tragedy strikes, activate your plan immediately! Collaborate with emergency services and relevant authorities to address the incident quickly and effectively. Continuously assess the situation, adjust response strategies as needed, and maintain the flow

of communication. Manage media inquiries through a designated spokesperson, ensuring a consistent and accurate narrative and appropriate response to public concerns.

### After the Crisis

Post-crisis recovery can be a lengthy process depending on the extent of the damage. Conduct a comprehensive assessment of the situation and prioritize your efforts. Keep all

self-storage tenants, staff and stakeholders informed about progress, timelines and any changes in facility operation. Ensure compliance with legal or regulatory requirements related to the event, including any reporting obligations and necessary documentation.

Depending on the severity of the crisis, there may be a need for additional action. For example, consider the potential impact on the mental and physical health of your staff and customers, and provide access to support services as necessary.

This is also a good time to carefully review your crisis-management plan and identify areas for improvement based on the lessons learned. Continue to conduct regular training sessions and drills to keep your self-storage team well-prepared for potential emergencies.

Understanding the diverse nature of potential disasters will equip you to develop a comprehensive crisis-management plan tailored to your specific risks. This proactive approach ensures a more resilient and responsive self-storage operation, capable of navigating challenges effectively and minimizing the negative impact on people and property. **ISS**

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# Catastrophe Response and Prevention

**A self-storage business can** be a lucrative investment, but it also comes with risks that can lead to costly repairs, insurance claims and damage to business reputation. A catastrophe can occur at any time. It might be a break-in, vandalism or some other crime. It could be a tenant who stores hazardous materials that lead to a fire or other environmental hazard. Natural disasters are becoming more prevalent, causing fierce winds and floods. Maybe someone trips and falls on your site, becoming seriously injured.

If one of these calamities occurs, it's important that you and your self-storage team know how to respond, both immediately and in the weeks that follow. This is critical not only

to protect your property and the people on it but to ensure positive public relations. If you must file an insurance claim, you want that process to go quickly and smoothly as well.

Following is a list of steps to take if tragedy strikes at your self-storage facility. We'll also cover some prevention strategies you can use to avoid incidents happening in the first place.

### Responding to a Self-Storage Catastrophe

If your self-storage business experiences a loss, it's important to respond swiftly and appropriately. Here are the key steps to take following an accident, crime, natural disaster or other incident:

**Put safety first.** Make sure all staff and tenants are protected. If anyone is injured, call emergency services immediately. Evacuate the premises if warranted by your facility's crisis protocols.

**Notify authorities.** If the loss involves a fire, flood or hazardous materials, contact emergency services, even if the situation appears under control. For crime-related incidents, call the police to file a report. Retain any documentation provided by law enforcement or the fire department, as it'll be essential for handling your insurance claim.

**Assess the damage.** Once it's safe to do so, evaluate the damage to your self-storage buildings and tenants' stored belongings.

Cross-reference your customer list with the affected units to identify those whose goods might be compromised.

**Document everything.** Before moving or cleaning anything, take detailed photographs and videos. Visual evidence will be critical for your insurance claim. Save any security footage that might be useful. Also, create a list of anything that was damaged, including business and customer property. Be as specific as possible to avoid discrepancies during the insurance-claim process.

**Mitigate further damage.** If the property is still at risk, take immediate steps to secure and protect it. Document any repairs that are made for your insurance company.

**Notify your insurance provider.** Report the loss as soon as possible. Most insurance companies have a specific timeframe in which they expect to be notified of a loss. Share all the evidence you've gathered and clearly communicate the extent of the destruction. Your agent will guide you through the next steps. Stay calm and speak regularly with the adjuster to help the claim progress smoothly.

**Notify affected tenants.** Promptly inform customers whose units have been impacted. Explain the situation and the steps you're taking to resolve the situation. If they have coverage for stored items, advise them to contact their insurer to file a claim. Be prepared for upset tenants. Communicating and showing empathy will help reduce the risk of disputes or legal actions.

**Coordinate repairs.** You may need to hire specialists to restore your self-storage facility. Only choose licensed, insured contractors, and keep records of all repairs and costs.

**Manage legal obligations.** If there's a chance of disputes with tenants or contractors, or if you're unsure about your liability, consult with a lawyer who specializes in insurance or property law.

## Further Mitigation to Explore

Once all of the above critical steps have been followed and the situation has been largely resolved, you'll want to sit down with your self-storage team and identify what went wrong and what preventive measures could've helped. Look carefully at your policies and procedures and determine whether they should be updated to include additional protocols.

Another smart thing to do at this juncture is to review your current self-storage insurance policies and determine whether you should add more coverages. Self-storage owners often focus on obvious risks like theft, fire and vandalism; however, there are several less obvious hazards that won't be covered under standard policies unless specifically addressed.

Consider the following common occurrences and the insurance solutions that can help protect your business:

**Cybercrime.** Your digital systems and websites can be vulnerable to cyberattacks. Hackers can steal sensitive customer information, which can lead to claims for identity theft or financial loss. Cyber insurance covers costs associated with a data breach, including legal fees, notification of affected customers, credit-monitoring services, and potential fines or penalties. It can also pay costs associated with business interruption caused by a cyber event.

**Environmental contamination.** A self-storage facility could be held liable if customers store hazardous materials that seep into the ground or cause other issues. Pollution insurance covers the cost of cleanup, legal fees and damages related to environmental contamination that might not be covered under a general-liability policy.

**Natural disasters.** Losses from floods or earthquakes are typically excluded in a standard business-insurance policy. Coverage can be purchased separately depending on your self-storage location.

**Wrongful sale or disposal of customer goods.** If you settle an unpaid account by emptying the tenant's storage unit, the renter may claim their property was wrongly disposed of or sold without adequate notice, even if you follow the law. Sale-and-disposal coverage provides legal-defense costs and protects your business from claims related to auctioning or disposing of stored property, especially in cases of procedural mistakes.

## Often, Prevention Is Best

If any of the above sounds daunting, bear in mind that prevention is often the best medicine. Properly maintaining your self-storage facility can help curtail accidents, prevent crime and avoid serious damage during a natural disaster. Consider the following best practices.

**Set emergency protocols.** When something devastating happens, it's easy for people to panic and react emotionally. Creating emergency protocols for your self-storage business in advance can help alleviate anxiety and mistakes in the moment. Have clear, well-documented plans in place for a wide range of incidents including theft, injury, fire, flood, power outage, etc. Then train your staff in these situations, so they can respond appropriately.

**Maintain your buildings and components.** Inspect your self-storage property regularly for leaks, mold, pests or structural issues. Install smoke detectors, fire alarms and sprinkler systems, and test them regularly. If you offer climate-controlled units, make sure the HVAC systems are

well-maintained to keep the temperature and humidity at proper levels. Use clearly marked signs to guide tenants around the property and restrict access where needed. Finally, install slip-resistant flooring in high-traffic areas, particularly in wet or icy conditions.

**Enhance security.** Use a self-storage gate system with a keypad that requires specific tenant codes, so you can control and log who enters and exits the site and when. This reduces unauthorized access and provides a clear record for potential disputes. Proper lighting and surveillance cameras may prevent accidents and crime, so make sure your entrance gates, hallways and parking lots are well-covered. Cameras can also provide evidence if an incident does occur.

**Educate your tenants.** First and foremost, use a self-storage rental agreement that clearly outlines your customer's responsibilities and the limits of your liability as the facility operator. Tenants need to clearly understand the legal nature of their rental. In addition, enforce policies that prohibit the storage of dangerous materials such as explosives, chemicals, and flammable or perishable goods. These restrictions should be outlined in your contract, but you can also post facility signage to ensure customers understand.

Finally, consider requiring your tenants to carry insurance for their stored items, whether they get it through their homeowners policy or purchase it from your business. This should help smooth the situation in the event a customer suffers loss or damage to their stored goods.

Unfortunately, emergencies and natural disasters can and do happen at self-storage properties. However, being prepared for them can lessen the impact on your business, staff and tenants. The above measures enable you to significantly reduce the likelihood that an incident will occur or that it'll lead to an insurance claim. This proactive approach also fosters a safer, cleaner, more secure environment for tenants and staff.

## The Right Response Leads to Resolution

When a catastrophic incident occurs at a self-storage facility, an immediate and intelligent response is crucial to minimize further loss. Your No. 1 goal is to protect your staff and tenants, and minimize damage. Next, you want to do anything you can to facilitate the insurance-claim process. You must also manage customer and public relations. There's a lot to think about and do quickly, but with the right plans in place, you can ensure a smooth resolution. **ISS**

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# WEATHERING NATURAL DISASTERS

**Self-storage operators should always** be mindful of the potential for a natural disaster to strike. We're seeing a surge in the scale and frequency of such occurrences, with changing climate patterns behind much of this new trend. It's important to be prepared.

With the safety of your property, staff and tenants on the line, a robust strategy that covers severe weather and other catastrophic events is an operational necessity. Fortunately, there are best practices that can help protect your business against negative effects.

## Understanding the Risks

The adage, "Know your enemy," is relevant here. The first step in setting a disaster-preparedness strategy is to understand the risks, which may be different for every self-storage facility. A property in California faces radically different perils than one in South Dakota. Depending on location, your business might be susceptible to flooding, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes or other region-specific events. Each carries its own set of challenges and requires tailored precautionary measures.

Whatever catastrophe might hit your location, there will likely be physical damage. Buildings and their contents can suffer extensive harm from wind, water, fire or debris. Understanding the structural vulnerabilities of your facility is crucial for effective mitigation.

There may also be operational disruption and financial repercussions. Disasters can lead to prolonged business interruption, which impacts your ability to generate revenue and can affect your standing within the community. In addition, consider the long-term financial impact of a disaster including repair costs and potential increases in insurance premiums.

Understanding these risks allows self-storage operators to prioritize actions and investments to protect stored assets, customers, staff and, of course, service continuity. Assessing how different scenarios might impact your operation is essential.

## Being Prepared

Knowing the risks of potential natural disasters and understanding their unpredictable nature may feel intimidating to any self-storage operator, but it allows you to design strategies to protect your business. The following steps are essential to bolstering your infrastructure and establishing a comprehensive disaster plan. Take these concrete actions to reinforce your facility's resilience and ensure a swift, effective response in the event of an emergency.

- To thoroughly understand your risks, analyze your facility location and construction as well as historical data. The climate is shifting, and traditionally predictable weather events may no longer be so. Still, information is power.
- Build structures that can withstand extreme weather. Use durable materials, adhere to strict building codes, and regularly inspect and upgrade your property.
- Ensure your facility is always in top condition. Routinely check structural integrity, roofing, drainage systems and other critical infrastructure. Addressing issues promptly can prevent minor problems from becoming major vulnerabilities during a disaster.
- Protect critical business and customer data with robust backup systems and secure information-storage solutions. Ensure that records are easily accessible after an incident for a smooth recovery process.
- Use technology to enhance your disaster preparedness. You might install advanced security systems, backup power generators and water pumps. Technology can also facilitate communication and coordination during an emergency.
- Develop a clear, actionable emergency plan that details staff roles, evacuation routes, communication strategies and safety procedures. Your team should know how to act when a disaster strikes. Train them in crisis procedures and conduct drills

to ensure everyone knows their role and how to respond effectively. Address evacuation procedures, first aid, communication protocols and the use of emergency equipment.

- Engage with local emergency services, community organizations and other businesses to coordinate disaster-response efforts. Understanding the resources available and establishing partnerships can significantly improve response times and effectiveness.

Disaster preparedness requires a proactive approach tailored to the specific needs of your self-storage facility. Hopefully, it will never be needed, but readiness is its own form of insurance.

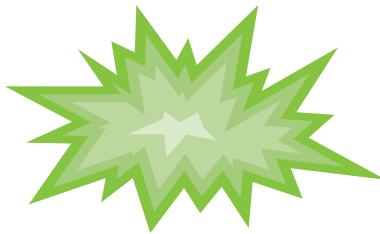
## Review and Update

As new threats emerge and your self-storage business evolves, regularly review and update your disaster-preparedness plan. This ensures that your strategies remain effective. Also, account for any changes in infrastructure, technology or external factors.

Being ready for emergencies is an essential part of successful self-storage operation. Your contingency plan acts as an extra insurance policy should the unthinkable ever become a reality. No respectable business owner would forego adequate insurance, and disaster preparedness is no less important.

With a little due diligence and some well-planned investment, you can be ready for extreme-weather events and other worst-case scenarios, and have the peace of mind that your property, staff and customers are protected. With luck, you'll never face an incident, but lack of preparation is a gamble that simply isn't worth the risk. **ISS**

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# Property Damage

**Summer is just around the corner**, and it's a notoriously busy time for self-storage operators as their customers relocate, embark on home projects and travel for recreation. More business is good news, however, the increase in foot and vehicle traffic also means greater risk of property damage, which can be a significant cause of loss. Let's not forget the impact of excessive heat and humidity, which can bring pests, mold and mildew, plus the seasonal increase in natural disasters including hurricanes, wildfires, tornadoes and floods.

Any of this can lead to operational disruption, unexpected expense, upset customers and staff, and harm to your business reputation. For this reason, it's wise to have a risk-management plan in place. Let's look at some scenarios you

may find yourself facing and how to prevent them, plus how to respond appropriately when property damage does occur, either at the hands of Man or Mother Nature.

## Types of Damage

Even if you believe that you run a tight ship and do everything possible to mitigate risk, accidents happen, and no one controls Mother Nature. That said, there are a few damage-inducing incidents that are common in the self-storage industry.

For example, tenants are often unfamiliar or uncomfortable with driving a moving truck. They might easily back into or clip one of your buildings, damaging wall panels, doors, gutters and more. Installing concrete bollards can help protect your structures. It also helps

to plan for wide drive aisles and turning spots during the layout phase.

Fire is another common cause of self-storage damage. Even though your rental agreement forbids tenants from keeping hazardous materials in their units, they will intentionally or unknowingly store batteries, oil, gasoline, paint and other flammable items. We've also seen tenants illegally use facility outlets to power fans, lights and space heaters inside their space. Any of these might lead to combustion under the right circumstances, and a fire can be devastating, creating significant business disruption and expense. It can take several months to clean up debris, get official inspections and permits, order materials, and line up contractors for rebuilding.

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There are many other types of damage your self-storage facility might suffer. Here are a few that have been seen in this industry:

- A car swerves off the road and drives into a self-storage office or unit.
- High wind from a hurricane or tornado tears the roof off of a building, or completely decimates the structure.
- Flooding damages several units and the contents stored within.
- A branch falls onto a roof, causing destruction and creating leaks.
- Excessive heat or moisture creates mold inside units.
- A thief cuts into unit doors or walls to retrieve items.
- A tenant attempts to “customize” their unit, drilling holes or driving nails into the walls. (In a recent story, a customer mounted a solar panel onto the facility roof to power a trickle charger for the motorcycle they were storing.)

## Mitigation Tactics

To protect your self-storage business from property damage, consider the following strategies.

**Site maintenance.** It's critical to perform routine facility upkeep that encompasses your roof, doors, flooring, windows, sidewalks, driveways, parking lot, security system and other key components. This topic could fill an entire article, but here are a few essential tips to help you start building a checklist:

- Conduct daily property walk-throughs to look for potential hazards.
- Regularly examine your roof and have it repaired as necessary.
- Keep the property clear of debris, and carefully maintain trees and shrubs.
- Keep your floors clean and dry, and post signs when surfaces are wet or potentially slippery.
- Have your HVAC and electrical systems regularly checked and repaired by a licensed technician.
- Get your fire extinguishers recharged and tested each year.
- Reinforce your buildings, doors and windows to minimize damage in the event of heavy wind or flooding.
- If you have a backup generator, have it serviced annually. If you don't, consider installing one to ensure continued business operation in the event of a security breach or power outage.
- Schedule regular inspections of your property's key components and systems. This not only ensures safety, it can be helpful when it comes time to renew your insurance policy each year.

**Emergency plan.** Develop comprehensive protocols for communication, coordination with emergency services and evacuation if necessary in the event of a crisis, then regularly review and update it to ensure effectiveness. It's important to establish clear communication channels with tenants, staff, vendors and other partners to provide timely updates on facility status and any necessary actions they should take. Use email, text messages and automated phone calls to ensure wide reach and timely receipt.

**Rental agreement.** Make sure each tenant has signed a lease and that your rental agreement is up to date. It should include verbiage that states the following or something similar: *“Tenant acknowledges that owner doesn't carry any insurance which, in any way, covers any loss whatsoever that tenant may have or claim by renting the storage unit. All property stored in the storage unit shall be at tenant's sole risk.”*

**Insurance.** Review and secure comprehensive coverage that encompasses fire, wind, hurricane and water damage. In addition, offer a tenant-insurance program. Your renters many have their own homeowners or renters insurance coverage, but encourage them to purchase additional protection for their stored belongings. Regularly review and adjust the coverage limits in these policies to reflect changes in tenant needs and property value.

## If an Incident Occurs

If you experience property damage at your self-storage site, first confirm whether anyone requires medical assistance. If so, call 911. Personal injury is another important topic that could fill an entire article, but the important thing is to ensure these needs are addressed promptly and competently.

Next, capture specifics of the event via photos and video and fill out an incident report, which provides a summary of the loss,

contact information for any witnesses, and other pertinent details. Once you've gathered all this information, submit it in a timely manner to your insurance agent. Keep this documentation on file for at least five years and make sure it's accessible by computer.

While you work with the insurance company, do everything possible to prevent further damage or injury. Some initial clean-up and repair may be necessary. If so, save all receipts for this work. You might not be reimbursed for all expenses, however, any failure to appropriately maintain the premises may reduce or void your insurance coverage, so it's important to act.

Next, start getting estimates for permanent replacements or repairs. However, if you plan to submit them as part of your claim, don't commission any work until you get approval on the scope of work from your insurance company. Your policy might contain certain limitations and exclusions and may not cover everything you'd expect, so it's important to review your coverage with an agent who's experienced and knowledgeable in self-storage.

In fact, you should be reviewing your insurance policy annually. The good news is there are national programs that carry unique coverages designed specifically for our industry. Make sure you get the protection that fits your needs and budget.

With a self-storage business, there's always a chance that you'll experience property damage of some kind, whether caused by nature or humans. Being prepared will give you peace of mind and confidence that your facility can remain operational. Timely action and meticulous planning are key to shielding your asset and minimizing the potential damage and loss during unpredictable events. **ISS**

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## Filing a Claim

To improve the speed and accuracy of any insurance claim, create a standardized incident report and procedure for all team members to use. This should be simple to complete and allow you to promptly capture all relevant information to support an investigation. Following is a list of information to include. These elements will be required to generate a claim number.

- Insured's business name and contact information
- Date and time of the incident
- Full location address
- Loss description, including photos, documentation and other supporting records

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), “Self-Storage Damage Control: Understanding Property and Liability Loss and How to File an Insurance Claim,” by Louie Gonzalez



# THE PAIN OF PERSONAL INJURY

**In 2022, liability verdicts** at trial for an injury on a business premises averaged more than \$600,000. The most common involved damage to the knee, while the costliest involved harm to the spine. In fact, slip-and-fall claims, just one category of negligence exposures, account for a large portion of personal-injury events in the self-storage industry.

Reviewing these exposures can help you identify the types of incidents that could occur at your facility as well as how to address these hazards so you can prevent or at least minimize them. Here's how to limit your risk.

## Types of Exposure

Though there are many types of personal-injury exposures at self-storage sites, slips and falls are the most common. Operators have a duty to maintain their properties in a reasonable and safe condition for tenants, staff and visitors.

Prevalent causes of slip-and-fall hazards are inclement weather and poor facility upkeep. Be on the lookout for slippery or wet surfaces, uneven surfaces, insufficient lighting, and broken handrails. These injuries can result in skeletal, muscular and head trauma. Settlement amounts can vary depending on severity, medical expenses, lost wages, and pain and suffering associated with the injured person.

Equipment malfunction can also contribute to injuries at self-storage facilities, for example a broken gate or unit door. If either were to fall on a user, it could result in head injury or lacerations from sharp metal edges. An insurance claim could escalate to legal action. If a defense theory can't be established or a settlement reached via negotiations, claimant attorneys typically proceed with filing a lawsuit to resolve the matter in the judicial system, which could be a costly battle for your business.

## Reporting Injuries

One question many self-storage operators ask is when to report an injury to their insurance company. How significant should it be? When in doubt, be prudent and contact your carrier as promptly as possible. You can report the incident as:

- **Notification only:** This will alert the carrier to initiate a claim and assign it a number and adjuster, in case the injured party pursues a claim against the policy at a future date.
- **Notice of claim:** In this case, a claim will again be initiated and a number and adjuster assigned; however, the adjuster will initiate a thorough investigation of the loss.

As a standard practice, complete an incident report to record the facts. Get names and contact information for all parties involved and take photos of the scene. Proper documentation is a crucial step that's often neglected, but an incident report can help establish the circumstances of the accident and be used as evidence in claim negotiations. At a minimum, your insurance-claims department will require:

- Insured's name
- Contact name, phone and email
- Date of loss
- Location of loss (full address)
- Claim description
- Documentation to support an investigation (e.g., incident report, video clip, photos, lease agreements, etc.)
- Claimant's name and contact information (or their legal representative)

Security-camera footage can provide valuable information during this kind of investigation. Therefore, verify that your cameras are functional and appropriately placed around your property.

## Reduce the Risk

Preventing personal injuries before they happen is in the best interest of every self-storage operator. Losses create undue hardship that requires time, money, energy and resources to resolve, particularly if you need to settle a claim or defend against a lawsuit. To reduce your risk:

- Conduct regular property walk-throughs to identify potential hazards, carefully inspecting your unit doors, flooring, bollards, sidewalks and driveways.
- Follow a strict facility-maintenance plan to address necessary repairs before they turn into serious problems.
- Be cognizant of how your facility might be affected by rain, snow and wind, then take measures to prevent dangerous conditions.
- Annually review insurance coverages with your carrier to ensure adequate protection in the event of a loss.

Personal-injury claims can be costly in self-storage, and they have an extensive investigation process that can take months, even years, to resolve. When there's a lack of supporting documentation and a settlement can't be reached, they tend to escalate to litigation.

Prevention is really the best policy. To avoid injuries at your self-storage facility, be intimately familiar with your property and keep it well-maintained. If an incident occurs, have reporting procedures in place that are clear and simple to execute. While it's impossible to eliminate all risk, these precautions can help reduce it. **ISS**

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# COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS

**Though self-storage facilities offer** a haven for people's belongings, they aren't immune to crises. When the walls come crashing down—literally or figuratively—due to a natural disaster, car crash, security breach or some other catastrophe, it's important that you're able to protect your employees, tenants, property and business reputation. A lot of this boils down to effective communication.

Over the course of several decades working with customers, risk managers and frontline

## The Importance of Public Relations

Depending on the incident, you may be contacted by local media or need to get them involved. If you're looking for community support in the moment, you need to get in front of the public narrative and correct any negative views toward your self-storage business. The media can help or hurt in this regard, so it's important to be proactive, communicative and honest.

Selecting a public spokesperson for your company ahead of time will allow you to prepare a confident message. It should express compassion for the community, especially if this is a wide-reaching disaster such as a hurricane or tornado. Communicate your plan of action and how you plan to support affected parties. Finally, if the police, fire department or emergency medical services are involved in mitigating the crisis, express your appreciation for their help.

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), "Managing the Message: Public Relations After a Crisis Occurs at Your Self-Storage Property," by Cassie Dodgen

field operators in the wake of disasters ranging from floods to snowstorms, I've learned that preparedness is everything. A robust communications plan is the life raft in this equation, keeping everyone afloat in choppy waters. Let's explore how to create one so your self-storage company is ready before a calamity occurs.

### Preliminary Steps to Take Now

The following critical steps should be taken now. Don't wait until an incident occurs!

#### Designate a crisis-communication team.

It must be led by a level-headed, articulate spokesperson who will oversee all aspects of the plan and guide other members. It's also important to include people with expertise in self-storage operation and public relations, so they can brainstorm potential scenarios, draft messages and navigate the storm as a collective unit. Clearly define everyone's roles, so they understand their unique responsibilities.

**Establish a series of action plans.** The aim is to anticipate all potential disaster situations you might face as part of your self-storage operation, including but not limited to fire, flood, tornado, hurricane, earthquake, power outage, security breach, act of violence, pest infestation and theft. The goal is to answer the following questions:

- Who will take charge?
- What information must be gathered and disseminated?
- When should communication begin and end, and how frequently should it be updated?
- Who should be notified and via which channels (phone, text, email, website update, social media, onsite signage, call-center notifications, etc.)?

Your crisis-communication team must be well-trained in all elements of the plan and follow it closely. Leave no question unanswered, no detail unaddressed. Your team

should also understand when and how often to convene. For example, if you're dealing with a hurricane, they should likely ramp up their communication activity as conditions shift from watch to warning to landfall.

**Create a toolkit.** Create a comprehensive communication toolkit containing contact information for key stakeholders such as company leadership, first responders, local authorities, media outlets, insurance providers, business partners, vendors and, of course, your valued customers. Include prewritten and customizable templates for emergency emails, website updates, press releases and social media posts.

When disaster strikes, immediate contact with emergency services can be paramount. Your strategy should ensure seamless communication with first responders, providing essential information and updates to facilitate their work.

### Crafting Your Messages

When writing any crisis-related message, think about your audience. Are you addressing your self-storage tenants or employees? Local authorities or business partners? Your tone and the level of information you provide may differ with each. But in all cases, clear and concise communication is crucial. Consistency and transparency are key to building trust and mitigating panic. Your messaging should convey:

- **Urgency:** Explain the seriousness of the situation and highlight the immediate steps being taken by your self-storage company.
- **Clarity:** Don't try to be a wordsmith. Use simple, accessible language, and avoid technical jargon and legalese. Communicate so everyone can understand.
- **Empathy:** Acknowledge the inconvenience, stress or potential losses your customers may face. Show genuine concern and commitment to resolving the situation.
- **Knowledge:** Build audience confidence by demonstrating competence and proactive problem-solving skills. Provide essential

information such as safety instructions, or access restrictions and alternatives. Share updates on repair efforts, and outline steps being taken to prevent similar events in the future.

During a crisis, every word carries weight. Be mindful of what you say or write, and avoid these communication pitfalls:

- **Downplaying the situation:** Don't underestimate the impact of the crisis on your self-storage customers. Acknowledge the seriousness of the event without causing undue alarm.
- **Shifting blame:** Avoid pointing fingers or assigning responsibility. Focus on addressing the situation and providing solutions.
- **Making promises you can't keep:** Don't give false hope by offering unrealistic timelines or guarantees. Under promise and over deliver.
- **Going silent:** The worst mistake is to say nothing at all. Communication, even if it's just to acknowledge you're working on a solution, is essential.

Finally, be cautious when dealing with the media, which can be both friend and foe. You want to avoid speculation and stick to the facts. To ensure consistency and minimize confusion, designate a single spokesperson from your self-storage staff to communicate on behalf of the facility. Make sure everyone on your team knows to whom media inquiries should be directed and how others within the organization should respond if contacted by reporters.

### Reviewing and Revising

Once the immediate crisis subsides, it's time to assess the damage and chart a course for improvement. Conduct a thorough debriefing with your communications team and key stakeholders, so everyone is clear regarding next steps. This might include assessing the safety of the self-storage facility for returning customers and employees, notifying insurers, addressing repairs and claims, etc. Discuss what went well and what could've been done better. Use this valuable feedback to update

and strengthen your plan, so you're better prepared for the next crisis (there might always be one).

Regularly review and update your crisis-communications plan. Don't let it gather dust. Adapt it to evolving threats and technological advancements. I can't stress strongly enough the need to conduct periodic drills. Simulate emergencies and test your plan in action. This will identify any kinks and ensure seamless communication when the real thing hits.

Finally, invest in communication tools as needed. Make sure your self-storage customers opt into text messaging and email, and constantly confirm their contact information. A well-crafted and frequently practiced plan can make all the difference between keeping employees, assets and customers safe and in place or losing one or more when disaster strikes. **ISS**

**Contributor:** Michael Baillargeon, Hearthfire Holdings, <https://hfireholdings.com>



## Is Your Security Up to Snuff?

**Regardless of how old** your self-storage facility is or how long you've been in the industry, one thing is certain: You must address site security. Not only that, but the stakes are higher today than in the past. Keeping your property safe takes more effort, and technology is now a big part of the equation.

You might be wondering, "Do I really need to invest in all kinds of expensive equipment when all I want to rent space?" Yes! This asset that you own or manage is worth a great deal of money, and it must be protected. Plus, your tenants believe their stored goods

are extremely valuable, and you need to safeguard them, too.

Here's an uncomfortable fact: Vandals and thieves are becoming more creative and daring with their tactics. We've all heard stories of tenants using their own facility access to steal items from other customers, either by cutting through a door or a shared wall, or even entering a unit through the ceiling. We've heard heartbreaking tales of people attempting to live in units, or using them to house children or animals. It isn't uncommon for storage to be used for illegal goods or activities.

There will always be people who approach your self-storage property with unsavory motives, but a strong, state-of-the-art, *visible* security system will help deter criminal activity. It'll also help tenants feel safe while on site and comfortable about leaving their items with you. Finally, it makes an excellent marketing tool, especially if it's better than what your competition has.

Not every transgression can be prevented, but a good security system coupled with vigilant staff will help protect your self-storage business and all the people who use it. Let's explore the key

components required in today's riskier environment and how to upgrade if your property needs more "juice."

## Best Foot Forward: Access Control

A key security element for every self-storage property is the access-control system, which has multiple components including an entry/exit gate and keypad. Modern options include convenient features that allow you to restrict tenant access to specific hours of the day or areas of the property. For example:

- You might wish to limit most tenants to standard business hours while giving "preferred" customers 24-hour access.
- You can set special holiday hours.
- You might have several buildings but only want each tenant to be able enter the one that contains their unit.
- Elevator access can be restricted to those renters who have units on the upper floors. Maybe each tenant can only reach their own floor.
- Limitations can be added for the wine-storage area or outdoor vehicle-storage spaces.

My personal favorite is the ability to set an automatic alert in relation to tenant activity. For example, you may wish to be notified when *any* customer passes through the gate or only when specific users do.

## Must-Have Components

Let's look more closely at the parts of a self-storage access-control system as well as some other components that are deemed essential in the industry today.

**Perimeter protection.** For your site perimeter, you have two main options. You can install various styles of fencing, or you can build a "fortress-style" facility in which the buildings are set around the outer limits of the property to act as a barrier. The latter approach is often more effective.

**Motorized gate.** Some self-storage operators use a single gate for facility entry and exit, while others keep these separate. The gate software allows you to track who's coming and going, making it essential.

**Keypads.** These come with a variety of modern options including a display screen, proximity-card reader, two-way intercom and pinhole camera. They can also be accompanied by a mobile app, offering site accessibility via a smartphone.

**Individual door alarms.** These are an inexpensive yet effective way to extend your access-control system. They alert staff to unauthorized intrusion through audible sirens, flashing strobes and text notifications. Moreover, it's a great selling point to tenants.

**Cameras.** These have played a vital role in self-storage security for decades, but now they're more affordable and widely available. The image quality has also greatly improved, providing clear footage of site activity day or at night. Pan-and-tilt cameras can automatically zoom in on activity in the field of view, while infrared night-vision cameras are good for low-light areas. Technological advances give you many more options when deciding where and how to mount cameras for the best protection.

**Video monitors.** Once your cameras are placed, run the security feed through video monitors in your self-storage management

office, where customers can see them. Tenants will feel safer knowing you're keeping an eye on the property. Plus, if you record the footage, you'll have documentation of site activity in the event of a crime or other incident, accessible by day and time.

**Intercoms.** These not only make a great complement to your security system, they provide a way for site staff to communicate with each other and tenants. Whether a customer is having trouble with a roll-up door or there's an emergency, intercoms with a few easy-to-read instructions are a good selling point and offer an abundance of safety features.

## Time to Upgrade?

Like any technology, your self-storage security equipment will eventually need to be replaced. How will you know when to upgrade? One of your first clues will be when the manufacturer is no longer updating the system with new features. Another is when technical support is harder to reach.

Are repairs and replacements still offered for your existing security system? If you haven't sought help in a while, you might one day be surprised to discover it's no longer available. This can leave your property unprotected in the event of a failure, and an issue can take several weeks to resolve. It's smart to check in with your security provider from time to time to avoid being caught off-guard and stay ahead of the game.

When it comes time for an overhaul, take your time and learn about the various self-storage security products on the market today. Many modern systems work similarly but with key differences. You also need to know what software is required to support the hardware and how this system will integrate the other technology in use at your site. Also, what is necessary to ensure your security will remain effective in the event of an internet outage or computer failure?

When it comes to shopping for self-storage security components today, there are no shortcuts. To find the right fit for your business, you must diligently research each company and product, talk with other facility operators, and connect with providers. Technology can certainly improve your business, but you must do the legwork.

Remember: The least expensive security system isn't necessarily the best. This is one area in which you can't afford to skimp on quality. In a time when criminals are getting craftier and more creative, your livelihood and your tenants' valuables depend on it! **ISS**

## Exploring Smart Locks

Self-storage smart locks use Bluetooth, WiFi or NFC (near-field communication) to enable secure access control. They can come in one of a few forms: a battery-operated or hardwired latch, a Bluetooth or battery-operated padlock, or an NFC padlock, cylinder lock and latch. Whichever style you choose, you and your staff and tenants will enjoy a host of benefits:

- Tenants no longer need to carry or keep track of a physical key.
- There's no more concern about lost keys, which can easily be copied and pose a security risk.
- Facility managers no longer need to cut locks on past-due units.
- Staff can track who accessed units and when, which enhances security and provides valuable insight to tenant activities.
- Tenants can manage unit access through a user-friendly mobile app, which simplifies their experience and ensures a higher level of security.
- Smart locks eliminate the possibility that a tenant will move into the wrong space or a manager will auction the wrong unit.

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), "The Great Transition: Embracing Smart-Lock Technology in Self-Storage," by Mason Shaw

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# MODERN-DAY SECURITY SYSTEMS



**Security technology is one** of the backbones of the self-storage business. It fosters trust with tenants while safeguarding the owner's business investment. A well-implemented system not only deters crime, it enhances a facility's reputation and reliability.

While facility operators have commonly relied on features like access control and video cameras, often with some recording ability, they're now taking a more sophisticated approach. Modern measures go beyond theft prevention to encompass data security, regulatory compliance and emergency response. Advanced security technologies are adaptive, which benefits the business and its customers, who benefit from enhanced protection of their valuables, more convenient access and the assurance that their chosen facility prioritizes their safety.

Operators today enjoy streamlined management via smart access-control systems, smart locks, integrated kiosks and surveillance capabilities driven by artificial intelligence (AI). Let's dig deeper into these options, their primary advantages, and how to choose the right solutions for your needs.

## Today's Security Components

A **smart access-control system** supplements a self-storage facility's traditional entry keycodes with advanced technology, allowing for remote management and integration with mobile applications. It also integrates seamlessly with your facility-management software. Not only can you more efficiently manage access permissions, enabling automatic lockout when necessary, you have more centralized control and monitoring of all entry points.

Tenants love the ease of smart access, with hands-free capability and an intuitive interface. They also like the ability to monitor their unit activity remotely. Real-time updates give them an increased sense of security, too.

An **integrated self-serve kiosk** facilitates round-the-clock facility operation without the need for additional staffing, which increases revenue and reduces costs. It also streamlines customer interactions and provides convenience via automated rentals and payments. A kiosk can even enhance site security via built-in cameras and user authentication.

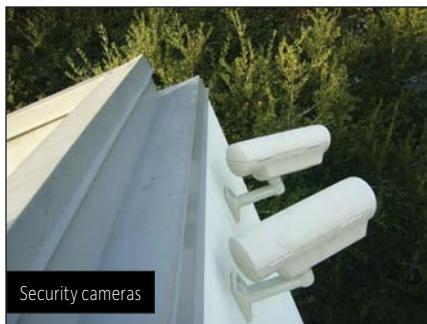
For tenants, the biggest benefit is the convenience of 24/7 access to payment and

rental services. The user-friendly interface paves the way for easy transactions.

**Automated door locks** use wide-area network (WAN) and long-range WAN to provide remote-management capabilities. They integrate with your facility-management software and can be retrofitted into existing units. The primary benefits are digital access control, an automated delinquency process, easier online move-ins, and enhanced unit security and monitoring. These result in increased operational efficiency and reduced operating costs. Customers love the convenient access without the need for a physical key and the ability to remotely manage and monitor their unit activity.

**AI security cameras** analyze video feeds in real time to detect unusual site activity and potential threats. In some cases, you may be able to add remote-monitoring services, which provide an additional layer of security in the form of human intervention when a risk is detected. Immediate alerts enable quick response to security incidents. Your customers enjoy all the same benefits, plus the piece of mind in knowing your facility and their unit are under continual surveillance.





## Determining the Right Fit

Selecting the appropriate technology for your self-storage facility is crucial in creating a robust and effective security infrastructure. Begin by assessing your operation and site for specific needs and vulnerabilities. Consider location, facility size, access points and typical value of stored items. This will set a baseline to help you identify potential threats and understand the unique requirements of your business.

Choose products that seamlessly integrate with each other and your existing infrastructure. A cohesive security system that operates harmoniously with your site and network will ensure efficient management by staff as well as quick response times when incidents occur. Also, look for products that are compatible with common management software. This'll allow for centralized control and monitoring.

Anticipate growth and potential changes to your business and opt for security solutions that are scalable, with the ability to adapt to evolving needs. You want a system that allows for easy expansion or modification to accommodate changes to facility size, layout and future security requirements.

Finally, while it's essential to invest in quality security products, you must also consider the cost-effectiveness of your choices. Evaluate the return on investment (ROI) of each solution, considering long-term benefits as well as how it'll improve security, operational efficiency and the tenant experience. Balance upfront costs with the overall value.

## Make the Most of Your Investment

While the advancement of self-storage security technology has been impressive, it isn't enough to buy and install it. To maximize the benefits, you must properly use and monitor your equipment. Consider:

- **Regular training:** Ensure staff is well-trained to operate security systems effectively and respond to issues as they arise.
- **Data protection:** Adhere to regulations by implementing measures that safeguard sensitive tenant and business data.
- **Community engagement:** Foster a sense of awareness among tenants by encouraging collaboration to maintain a secure environment.

- **Regular updates:** Stay informed about industry trends and advancements. Regularly update security systems to address emerging threats.
- **Emergency preparedness:** Develop and regularly review emergency-response plans, to ensure seamless coordination between staff, customers and local authorities.

The technology available in the self-storage industry today won't just improve site security, it'll enhance the services you offer and increase your market competitiveness. In this new paradigm, tenants benefit significantly. Real-time monitoring, instant alerts and user-friendly access elevate the storage experience and boost customer loyalty and trust, which is pivotal in fortifying your business reputation and long-term success.

Choosing the right security technology requires a careful assessment of your facility's unique needs. Account for factors like scalability, integration and ROI. By adopting a comprehensive and adaptable strategy, you can effectively safeguard your assets and tenant belongings, which will strengthen your competitive position in an increasingly security-conscious marketplace. **ISS**

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# Security Components: Operator Advice



**Self-storage security has evolved** significantly in recent years. As the owner of I-5 Self Storage and a former state prosecutor, I understand the critical importance of staying ahead in this arena. In this article, I'll discuss the fundamentals of site safety, and then delve into some of the more advanced technologies available today. Following are the tools and best practices I use to ensure security at my property in Tustin, California, plus some advanced ones to consider.

## The Essentials

Before we explore more advanced security options currently on the market, it's crucial to remind ourselves of the essentials. In my mind, these are the pillars that should be in place at every self-storage property:

- **Quality staff:** Having a well-trained and attentive site employees is fundamental. They should know how to recognize suspicious activity and be proactive in preventing and addressing it.

- **Physical fortification:** A robust perimeter is the first line of defense. Fencing, access gates and strong locks are essential components of a secure facility.

- **Superior lighting:** A well-lit property doesn't only deter criminal activity, it ensures greater overall safety for customers and staff.
- **Tenant screening:** Proper vetting processes can help prevent problematic individuals from renting at your self-storage facility in the first place.

## Advanced Options

While the above traditional security measures remain essential, advancements in technology have opened new avenues for self-storage security. My facility either employs or has completed a trial implementation of the following:

**Access control.** Modern systems use electronic key cards or biometric authentication to limit access to authorized personnel only. These can be integrated with surveillance cameras for enhanced monitoring.

**Camera monitoring.** I also encourage you to invest in high-definition security cameras and monitoring, as they help law enforcement efficiently capture and prosecute criminals. Your cameras should cover all critical angles including entrances, hallways and common areas. In addition to recording footage, some self-storage operators are exploring the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to detect suspicious behavior.

**Emergency network.** Integrating your camera system with shared hubs and speakers can improve emergency-response times. This approach allows for real-time communication with security companies, enabling swift and appropriate interaction in case of suspicious activity. Staff can be hired to watch security footage in real time and can then use a public-access system to communicate with anyone observed on the site. They can also determine or request deployment of first responders.

**Cybersecurity.** Self-storage facilities aren't immune to cyber threats. Implementing measures to protect sensitive customer data is paramount. This includes robust firewalls, encryption and regular security audits to identify vulnerabilities.

**Internet of Things (IoT) sensors.** These can be used to monitor environmental factors like



The keypad entry at I-5 Highway Self Storage in Tustin, California

temperature and humidity in storage units. Sensors can send alerts to staff or tenants if conditions deviate from the norm, helping to protect valuable belongings.

**License-plate readers.** This recognition technology allows for the automatic identification of vehicles entering and exiting the facility. This can be invaluable for tracking who comes and goes, aiding in investigations and ensuring that only authorized personnel access the premises. Additionally, the option to share this data with law-enforcement agencies can greatly enhance crime-fighting efforts.

**Tenant tools.** Many self-storage facilities are adopting mobile apps and tenant portals that allow customers to manage their storage units remotely. They often include features like digital locks and real-time access logs, increasing security and convenience.

## Moving Forward

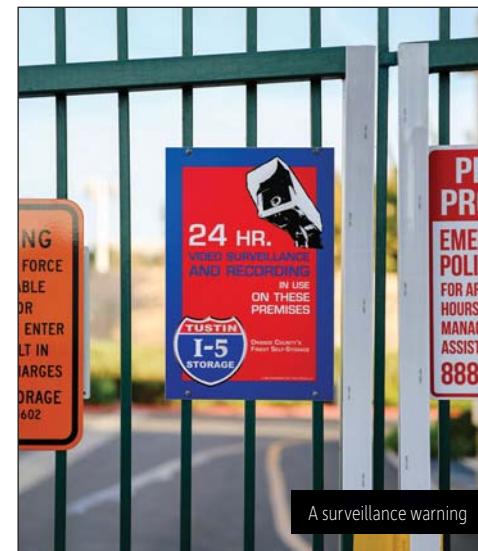
Studies show that effective security systems decrease crime rates and keep commercial facilities safer. The latest technologies, many including AI enhancements, are an absolute game-changer.

Self-storage security has come a long way, thanks to advanced technology and collaborative efforts with law-enforcement agencies. As we move forward, it's imperative for facility operators to stay current on the latest advancements and prioritize the safety of customers and staff. By combining traditional practices with cutting-edge technologies, we can create properties that aren't only secure but efficient and customer-friendly. Together, we can lead the industry to a safer and more secure future. **ISS**

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The license-plate reader at the I-5 gate



A surveillance warning



# 5 ENDURING LEGAL ISSUES

**Imagine if everyone always** did the right thing, no one ever lied, there was no need for lawyers and we all lived happily ever after. What a utopia that would be. However, we don't live in a Hallmark movie, and the legal process continues to be necessary. (Personally, I'm glad, or I'd be out of a job.)

Self-storage is one of those industries in which legal challenges persist and probably always will. In fact, I've been helping facility operators grapple with them for 18-plus years. Some issues come and go, but others endure. Following are five that still impact the industry today and are likely to continue being a nuisance in the future.

## Wrongful Sales

Wrongful-sale lawsuits will likely always be your No. 1 self-storage legal challenge. Even when you do everything right, it won't stop a tenant from filing a claim against you. Here in the United States, we favor access to the courthouse, but there's no one there checking to see if a lawsuit is legitimate when filed. That's what the lawyers have to point out later. So try as you might, you'll sometimes face problems, even if your actions are nothing short of angelic.

That said, there are some very practical measures you can take to avoid being *liable* for a wrongful sale:

- Attempt to contact any delinquent self-storage tenant more times than the law requires and document those attempts.
- Reach out to the alternate contact listed on the lease. If you don't, a jury will wonder why you collected that information but then chose not to use it.
- Develop a checklist of statutory deadlines and actions, and double check your math and calendar to ensure it's all correct. You should know when you can send out a notice of default or sale; what those notices must contain; how, when and if you publish the notice of sale; how many days must pass between each activity before you can conduct the auction, etc.

If something about the lien-sale process feels wonky or off, proceed with extreme caution. The self-storage industry has been given an extraordinary legal remedy to sell a tenant's personal belongings without a court order, but a court will not give you any break if you failed to follow the procedure perfectly.

## Community Violations

As self-storage facilities pop up in more suburbs and residential areas, operators need to be aware of the local deed restrictions and other such documents. For example, if you purchased or built a facility in a commercially zoned area of a large neighborhood, you may have signed a document at closing through which you promised to follow certain community guidelines. Some may even tell you how many trees and bushes you must have on your property and what certain species you can plant.

In an effort to keep their communities looking a certain way, many small cities are enforcing these commitments more rigorously. Though this isn't necessarily a bad thing, sometimes the power vested in these organizations is oppressive; and because these agreements are contractual in nature, courts will enforce them.

For example, I've seen an increasing number of commercial properties being charged with landscaping and signage violations. These can become lawsuits in which legal fees are generated and payable to the local homeowner's association. Insurance policies often don't cover these types of altercations, so you could be looking at hefty fines and penalties.

My advice is simple: Hire a landscaper *from the area* and have them look at the community guidelines and your self-storage property to ensure you're compliant. There's an age-old question: "If a tree falls in the forest with no one there to hear it, will it make a sound?" It has been answered: "Yes, the homeowner's association will hear it."

## Theft and the Promise of Security

Theft is like a birthmark—it never goes away. As a self-storage operator, you'll always face the risk of break-ins, and tenants won't understand why they aren't your fault.

Make sure your rental agreement is clear about the fact that you aren't responsible for loss of or damage to tenants' stored goods. Most courts in most jurisdictions will uphold those contract provisions. The problem comes when you provide security and it breaks down. That can subject you to liability.

In this industry, it's common to take *reasonable* measures to secure a facility. For example, you might have a fence, lights that come on at night, an access gate with coded entry, and perhaps coded building access. You want to ensure that your gate functions properly and your emergency door alarms work. However, if you have these measures in place and they fail due to negligence, you may have trouble getting out of a theft-related lawsuit.

Even though you aren't responsible for a third-party criminal breaking into a self-storage unit, if your actions (or inaction) made your property an easy target, a court may find you liable, even if you disavow security in your lease. For example, if there's a hole in your fence and you fail to fix it, and a criminal uses it to enter the facility and break into units, a jury could believe you were at least partially responsible for the crime.

Finally, don't tell customers that your self-storage facility is safe and protected. It may be construed as inducing them to rent from you based on the promise of security. I know that isn't what you intend, but words matter. So, be honest. Let your tenants know that security is *their* responsibility. That is why they need to buy a lock and check on their items from time to time.

## Personal Injury

It would not surprise me if the first lawsuit ever was Abel's family suing Cain for wrongful death. Unfortunately, there were no lawyers then and the case stalled out. The point is, that's about how long personal-injury claims have existed on our planet, and they'll be here until the end.

So, as a self-storage operator, do what you can to avoid them. Make sure your parking lot and floors are level with no holes, cracks or other tripping hazards. If they do, mark and block the problem areas off until you fix them. Make sure all unit doors function properly and the springs aren't rusted. Ensure the ceiling isn't falling down. In other words, make sure your property is safe for employees and customers as well as their families and friends.

That takes a daily walk around to check for issues that may have occurred the day before. Look for spills, cracks, holes, sharp edges, and popped out screws and nails. Do what you can to create a safe environment. Will you still get some injury claims? Yes, but if you've done your part to maintain your self-storage facility, the facts will be your defense.

## Bankruptcy

If the economy continues on its current path, we may see more self-storage tenants filing for bankruptcy. When a customer files, they're supposed to list you as a creditor so you receive a notice. If you do and the tenant is delinquent in their payments, *do not* sell the unit until you've obtained a "relief from stay" order. Stop all collection activity and late fees as of the date of the bankruptcy filing. Do not send demand letters, overlock the unit or do anything that would be considered a violation of the stay. There can be harsh punishments from the bankruptcy court if you do.

Your self-storage tenant is required to continue paying rent after they file bankruptcy, but most don't. So, if they filed chapter 11 or 13, call and offer them the opportunity to move out at no charge. It'll be better for you to remove them than to wait out what could be a long bankruptcy period. If it's a chapter 7 filing, call the trustee's number and offer the same thing. If the tenant won't move out, call an attorney to see if they can file a motion to lift the stay so you can auction the unit.

Bankruptcy can become a big problem very fast. Let's say a self-storage tenant owes you two months of rent at \$100. Then they file bankruptcy, and you wait six months to call an attorney. The court takes six months to give you the relief from stay order. That'll cost you \$1400 in rent, plus late fees you can't recover, plus attorney fees! The moral of the story is: If your bankrupt tenant refuses to move out voluntarily, get counsel involved right away.

Of course, there are other legal issues that plague self-storage operators; but the above five are the ones I see the most, and they're likely to persist. Consult an attorney when any of these arise. Don't wait! Legal problems aren't like a cold that can go away in a couple of weeks. Litigation is likely to endure in the world, but you don't have to let it derail your business. **ISS**

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# Rental-Agreement REVIEW

**If you haven't reviewed** your self-storage rental agreement in at least six months, it's time to take a fresh look. Part of this process is ensuring compliance with new or updated state laws and confirming that the big provisions are clear such as insurance, release of liability, owner's lien, etc. But there's more to it. These legal contracts also need to be current with industry best practices. Below are five critical topics that must be addressed in your lease this year.

## Limitation of Value

At this point, most of you know to include a limitation-of-value provision in your self-storage rental agreement. This sets parameters on the total aggregate value of the property allowed to be stored in a unit and, thereby, limits the value of any claim that can be asserted by a tenant. If your lease does not address this, go add it ... Right now.

While it's imperative that your rental agreement includes such a provision, it's also important to understand how it works.

Generally, a limitation of liability or value is frowned upon by the law. However, self-storage is an exception. Most states now expressly allow the lease to limit the value of stored property, which is significant since the enforcement of the provision in those states is backed by law.

If a tenant files a lawsuit against your business related to their stored property, your first line of defense against the claim is the limitation of value. You can file a motion with the court to essentially cap the

tenant's possible award in the case at the amount set forth in the rental agreement.

That said, you may need to relay this valuable information to your attorney or have your insurance company consult with a self-storage legal expert to ensure the issue is appropriately addressed. I've recently seen cases in which the attorneys and even the judge involved weren't aware that the state self-storage laws expressly permitted the limitation of value. One judge even tried to strike the provision from the rental agreement!

### Electronic Communication

Most people communicate through some sort of electronic means today, and most state self-storage laws now permit lien notices to be sent to tenants via email. Some even allow them to be delivered by text. Still, your rental agreement must specifically authorize you to communicate with tenants via these means.

Some states require specific language in the lease regarding the ability to email lien notices to tenants. Otherwise, it suffices to include a simple provision stating that by providing an email address to the self-storage business, the tenant consents to receiving correspondence and notices from the operator this way.

Consent to send text messages is a little different, as it falls under the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, a federal law that regulates telemarketing spam. The act sets several requirements for a business to be able to text customer, including but not limited to obtaining written consent, disclosing the full scope of the SMS (short message service) communications, and providing a method for customers to opt out. It's strongly

recommended that you consult with an attorney if you wish to text your customers for any reason.

Finally, Florida recently enacted a new law that targets after-hours interaction with customers. Section 559.72(17) of the Florida Consumer Collection Practices Act prohibits communication with a debtor between the hours of 9 p.m. and 8 a.m. without prior consent. Recently, I've seen lawsuits against self-storage operators for alleged violations after sending *rent invoices* via email or text. I strongly recommend that you include a provision in the rental agreement allowing for after-hours communication with tenants, even if you don't operate in Florida.

### Fees

The charging of fees is always a popular topic with self-storage operators. It's important to know what you can charge and when.

Most state laws put a cap on late fees. If your state doesn't, I recommend limiting it to the greater of \$20 or 20% of the monthly rent. This has become an industry standard. Remember, too, that *any* fee charged in the first 30 days of default is generally considered a late fee, so you must be careful not to fall out of compliance by charging excessively. Additionally, nearly all states have laws that limit the amount that can be charged to a tenant whose payment is returned due to non-sufficient funds.

All other fees are contractual. Thus, any that you want to assess must be explicitly stated in the rental agreement, including the amount and when it's charged. The fee should be a reasonable estimation of the costs incurred by the business for that action. In other words, it shouldn't be a penalty to the tenant; it should instead be a reimbursement for expenses incurred. For example, if it costs you \$10 to send lien notices, a fee of more than \$10 could be viewed as punitive.

With regard to timing, no fee should be charged before the event that triggers it actually occurs. For example, if you're charging a tenant for a lien-sale advertisement, it shouldn't be levied until after the ad is placed.

### Door Locks

As the self-storage industry makes way for new technology, it's important to address it in the rental agreement. One of the more recent trends is the implementation of Bluetooth smart locks. If your rental agreement calls for the unit door lock to be provided by the tenant, but smart locks are now in use at your facility, it's time for a revision. The updated language should state that no bailment

## Other Key Areas of Focus

A self-storage rental agreement contains many critical components to help define the scope and responsibilities of the business and protect the operator. Here are a few additional topics that should be addressed within your lease:

- Unit sizes
- Payments
- Prohibited items
- Property damage
- Insurance requirements
- Lien rights and auction remedies
- Climate vs. temperature-controlled units
- Special services
- Crisis response and access control
- Termination of tenancy
- Dispute resolution (arbitration)

is created by the locking system and the operator isn't liable for any loss or damage to property resulting from tampering, failure, defect or malfunction of the electronic-locking device.

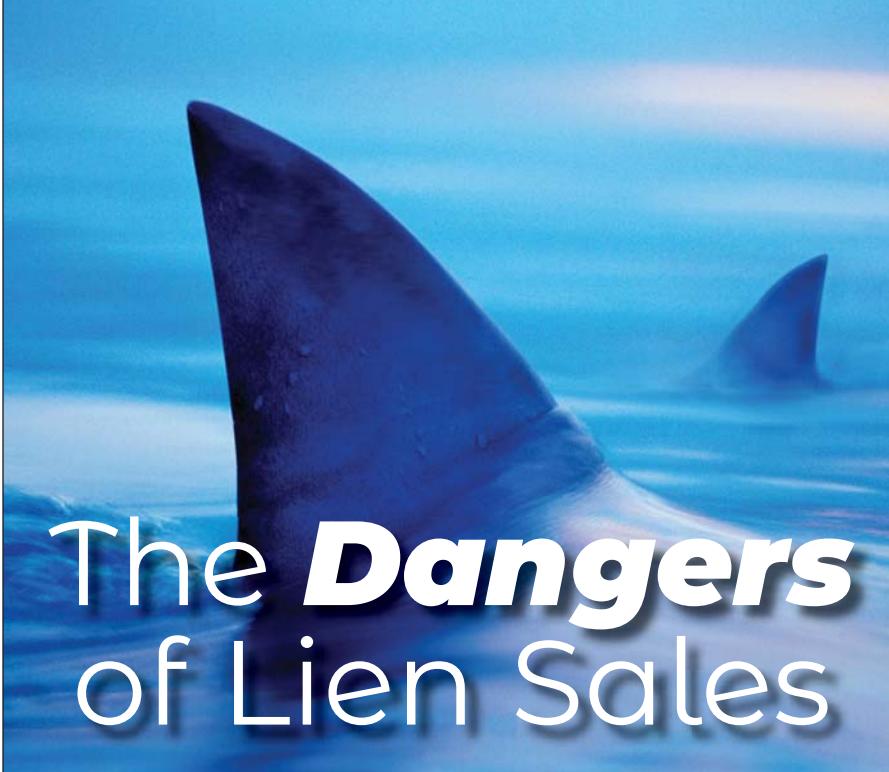
If your facility doesn't have electronic locks but does require a specific type of door lock, the lease should address this as well. Be specific in your wording so tenants clearly understand what kind of device is acceptable at your property.

### Tenant Conduct

Over the last few years, tenant conduct has become a major issue at self-storage facilities. Your rental agreement should state that the customers and their guests must conduct themselves and communicate with the operator, employees and other tenants in a professional, businesslike manner while on site. In addition, it should be noted that the operator has contract termination rights if the tenant or their guests fail to adhere to this requirement. This addition serves as both a warning and a legal path to terminating a rental if necessary.

Your self-storage rental agreement is a powerful document. It outlines your responsibilities as a facility operator and those of your tenant during their stay. Review your lease regularly, keep apprised of changing state laws that could affect your operation, and make changes as needed to thoroughly safeguard your business. **ISS**

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# The **Dangers** of Lien Sales

**For some reason, I keep seeing** social media reels of large sharks in various ocean settings. Maybe it's because the Internet somehow knows I'm terrified of sharks, or maybe it's because I keep watching them. What fascinates me is how the water in these videos often looks so clear, blue and inviting; you can't help but think about jumping in and relaxing. Then suddenly a large Great White appears within feet of a small boat or surfer. This is when I remember why I prefer swimming pools.

It's a great analogy for a self-storage lien sale (admittedly, an overly dramatic one). This legal remedy seems so appealing because it allows facility operators to bypass the judicial process and strict requirements that apply in other contexts, like confiscating a car or other personal property. It allows you to reclaim your storage unit from a tenant who can't or won't pay their bill and return it to money-making status. But there are sharks in the water! In fact, there's a whole family of them, as you'll read below.

We never want to take for granted the gift that the self-storage industry has in the lien-sale remedy. Courts view our ability to foreclose and sell personal property without a judicial order as an "extraordinary" resolution. As such, we must take *extraordinary care* to do it right.

## Baby Shark

(Sorry if I've put that song in your head. Truly.) The first "shark" you must get past

before conducting a self-storage lien sale is your state's statutory rules, particularly in regard to timing. When can you start the process that ends with selling a unit? Everything begins with the tenant's failure to pay rent, followed by the first lien notice. States vary, but most require that the notice contain the same basic information:

- A statement that the self-storage rent is in default
- The amount due and how it was calculated
- A statement that you intend to foreclose on the lien that exists on the tenant's stored property
- A statement indicating that if the rent remains unpaid for X days, the property in the unit may be sold at public auction

Also, check who must receive the notification. In Nevada, for example, you must send it to the tenant and the alternate address they provided on their rental agreement, if any, at least 14 days prior to sale. It's imperative that you know your state's requirements for the notice itself and that the format tracks the language of the law.

Remember, failure to pay self-storage rent is the first key. You can't auction a tenant's items if you want to terminate their lease for reasons other than failure to make payments.

## Mommy Shark

The next shark in your wake is the one that dictates how your notices should be sent.

Many states now allow for email transmission of the self-storage lien or sale letter. Some require that the tenant agree to this mode of communication in the rental agreement. Others mandate verified mail, and some still expect notices to be sent via Certified Mail. Make sure you do it the right way! Here are some tips:

- Keep a copy of the email you sent and any response you get from the self-storage tenant.
- Keep a scanned copy of the envelope, front and back, to indicate how and where you sent the notice.
- If your state requires that any notices also be sent to the alternate address or contact, maintain proof of that as well.

*Notice* is key (it might be two sharks). Self-storage tenants who claim that a lien sale was performed improperly regularly allege that they didn't receive any notification. Make sure that's something you can immediately disprove. Double-check the address(es), spelling of the names, the form you're supposed to use, and the timing of the notice itself.

Here's one more bite to avoid: Some states require that if you don't receive a delivery confirmation of the email you sent to the tenant, then you must *also* send the notice via verified mail. Swim carefully in these waters.

## Daddy Shark

Now the sharks are getting bigger. The next one you need to survive is the advertisement for the self-storage lien sale itself. Make sure you follow whatever state requirements exist for the format, timing and content of this ad. It must state the sale time and date and whether it's online or at a specific self-storage location. Some states are changing the rules on this because newspapers aren't exactly a growth industry. Nevertheless, a requirement is a requirement. You might need to publish the ad for X days or X consecutive weeks prior to the auction, so follow the rules.

Also, I know that newspapers charge by the word, and you might be tempted to minimize the number you use in your self-storage lien-sale ad. Some states require that the goods being sold be described "generally," while others want descriptions that are more "particular." You need to adhere to the letter of the law in your jurisdiction so there's no way to challenge the publication itself.

When a person is challenging the validity of a self-storage lien sale in court, scoring a 90% on following the directions is still a fail. To seize and sell someone's personal property without a judicial order, we must score 100%!

## Grandma Shark

Here she is, the mega shark. And here's how to survive her: Never move forward with a self-storage lien sale if there are any red flags, no matter how small, or any other reason not to proceed.

I recently got a call from a self-storage manager who was about to conduct a lien sale. He wanted to know, "Do I have to allow my tenant to pay the outstanding balance on auction day? I haven't started the auction, and he brought cash. However, this tenant has been horrible to my staff. He called them names and yelled at them. I just want the unit sold so he'll no longer be an issue." My answer was, "Yes, you have to allow him to pay, but you don't have to put up with a verbally abusive customer. Take his money and stop the auction, but simultaneously hand him a termination letter. If he doesn't leave by the date specified in the notice (as per the terms of the lease), then we will evict him."

Every self-storage operator has had tenants who regularly pay late or barely avoid auction by paying at the last minute. It can be aggravating. We forget that, in most cases, the lease is month-to-month and can be terminated without cause. If you don't wish to keep the tenant as a customer, pursue termination, even eviction, not a lien sale.

Here's another potential danger: Most states require that an auction be commercially reasonable, which generally means that you must have at least three bidders present (in person or online). They must be people who aren't related to and have no controlling or common interest with the self-storage operator or any other bidder. If these criteria aren't met at the time of the auction, you need to stop the sale and reset the process.

Also, know your state's post-sale laws. You may be required to send another notice after the auction. For example, if the unit sold for more than the outstanding debt, you'll likely have to notify the tenant or escheat the money to the treasurer of your state. Double-check these issues because they always have timing requirements.

If auction day arrives and you realize that any of your lien-sale notices were wrong, publications weren't timely or there's any other hiccup that would allow the self-storage tenant to challenge the process, *stop the auction and reset the timeline*. Failure to do so is just throwing chum in the water.

## No More Sharks

At the end of the day, you're in the self-storage business, not the auction business. Lien sales typically don't produce enough proceeds to cover the outstanding debt.

Plus, your business runs best when you have happy tenants who pay rent on time. When that's happening, you're standing safely on the shore instead of waist deep in water with circling sharks.

In every lien-sale scenario, do what you can to work things out with the tenant. If it makes sense to accept partial rent to allow them to move out, that's nearly always a safer option. If your tenant says, "Just sell the unit. I can't pay and don't want the stuff anymore," that's great, but get it in writing. Have them express that sentiment in an email or signed document that states something like, "I hereby release all of my personal items in unit X to [Self-Storage Company] and release [Self-Storage Company] from all liability for the disposition, sale or discarding of my personal property." An agreement between the parties to dispose of items is a shark-killer.

Lien sales are unavoidable for most self-storage operators. However, you can take extra measures to protect your business from a dangerous situation. Follow your state laws, triple-check your process, and consult with your attorney if you have doubts or questions. Otherwise, prepare to meet Jaws. **ISS**

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# The 3 Tenant Ds

**A self-storage operation can** present all kinds of interesting challenges to those who run it. Many stem from basic human nature. With tenants come the expected consumer-related problems. For example, many managers have encountered the "three Ds": divorce, death and disappearance. Each has its own legal risks. Let's explore each scenario and how you should respond to protect your business and your customers' rights.

## Self-Storage Tenant Divorce

Self-storage seems to be where property coming out of a divorce situation often ends

up. The question is, if one spouse rents a space to store stuff from the marriage, what right (if any) does the other person have to access it?

Typically, a self-storage operator isn't concerned with who's entering the unit so long as the rent is paid on time and the party has the proper access codes, cards or keys. But divorce often places managers in the middle when a tenant disputes the right of their spouse to enter the space. In such cases, it's best to defer judgment to the courts.

When two people are divorcing, they automatically subject themselves to the jurisdiction of the court to handle the dissolution of the marriage and the separation of their assets. This may include property kept at a self-storage facility. As the business operator, you must follow all instructions issued by a court concerning the turnover of items from one spouse to another. However, not all orders are written clearly, and it isn't your job to interpret court decisions.

For example, let's say the court order states that one spouse must turn over personal property from the storage unit to the other; however, it doesn't specify how the process is to be handled. You shouldn't cut the door lock simply because the order says the claiming spouse is entitled to the goods inside.

Most court orders are directed at the self-storage tenant, not the business operator. If your customer doesn't comply, their spouse may be forced to go back to court for resolution. That's their problem, not yours. There can be significant liability to you if you favor one party over another, even if that person is paying the rent.

### Self-Storage Tenant Death

Unfortunately, it isn't uncommon for a self-storage operator to learn that one of their tenants has died. Often this comes to light when the rent hasn't been paid and late or lien notices are sent to the tenant's last known address. Relatives and friends may come forward seeking to access the unit and retrieve the deceased's property. There are a couple

of different scenarios that can occur under these circumstances. The good news is you have options for helping relatives and friends retrieve their loved one's belongings.

Unless otherwise notified of a court order addressing rights to the deceased's property, if a family member has the facility access code and key to the unit (meaning they require no assistance from you to enter the space), they can enter and, if warranted, move out. Again, this access is only permitted when you don't need to be involved in providing gate-code access or cutting the lock.

If the family member doesn't have the items they need to access the storage unit, they must provide you with a copy of the death certificate and a court order stating that they've been appointed as the administrator or executor of the estate. At that point, they can access the unit and decide if they wish to continue renting it in the name of the estate or terminate the agreement and remove the items.

If the deceased tenant had a small estate (no court probate involved), the family may be able to obtain and prepare an affidavit, which is a sworn document that provides, under oath, that there are no competing claims being made by others concerning the property and the signing party indemnifies the self-storage operator should a competing claim arise. Some states that use this affidavit also require that it be filed with the court and an order issued to verify the fact. This is called a summary probate administration.

If you learn of a tenant's death via some means other than notification from a family member and the unit is delinquent, attempt to reach the emergency contacts listed on the rental agreement. You should also call the local probate court to determine if the tenant's estate has been probated and an executor has been named. If so, you can contact them to determine what to do with the unit.

If you're unsuccessful in contacting the people listed on the rental agreement or any relatives or friends who are willing to resolve the tenant's debt, you may then send

a Certified Letter to the renter's last known address and proceed with the foreclosure process. Depending on the state, there may be a waiting period to allow the estate to be probated before the sale can occur.

Just because a self-storage tenant dies doesn't mean their obligations to their creditors end. Someone must pay the rent on the unit or it'll eventually go into foreclosure. But if someone is attempting to resolve the matter, you should delay any enforcement of your lien rights, since the estate process can sometimes take weeks to complete.

### Self-Storage Tenant Disappearance

The last scenario is simply the disappearance of the tenant, meaning that all contact with them is lost. Not only are they not paying rent (credit card disabled), but all emails are bounced, phone numbers are disconnected and letters are returned. This situation is even more disconcerting when the property stored in the space is unique or presumed valuable. It can leave you wondering what happened to this person and what you're supposed to do now.

The law doesn't presume that you have a duty to track down your tenants when they stop paying the rent. In fact, most self-storage lien laws simply require you to send a letter and post a few ads before enforcing the right to foreclose on the tenant's property. Certainly, the law doesn't expect you to initiate a search for your customer.

Most self-storage disappearances are defaulting tenants who've presumably abandoned their property and disconnected themselves from creditors. Yet, there have been situations in which renters who've "disappeared" have later been found to have died, been imprisoned, or suffered an injury or medical crisis that prevented them from contacting the facility or meeting their rent obligations. These circumstances have led some operators to reconsider immediate enforcement of their lien rights. Though it isn't required by law, many will "red flag" those units and conduct further research. If you do so, you might be surprised at what you find!

The three Ds of self-storage—divorce, death and disappearance—are really quite common, and yet they can feel unusual when they happen at your own facility. The best approach is to proceed with caution. Follow the law and any court orders. At the end of the day, your goal is to protect your tenant's rights and your business. **ISS**

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**66** If you learn of a tenant's death via some means other than notification from a family member and the unit is delinquent, attempt to reach the emergency contacts listed on the rental agreement.

# DOS AND DON'TS OF TENANT BANKRUPTCY

**It isn't uncommon for a self-storage tenant** to file for bankruptcy. Often, the customer has gone into delinquency status with your facility. It can even happen on the eve of a pending lien sale of their stored goods.

As a self-storage operator, there are things you must do—and avoid doing—as soon as you learn of a tenant's bankruptcy status. Proper handling of the matter will ensure you comply with the law and allow your debt-collection efforts to continue (if applicable). Following are some things you need to know and steps to follow.

## Stop Any Lien-Sale Proceedings

When you first learn of a self-storage tenant's bankruptcy status, you must immediately stop any pending lien sale of the their stored goods. At the moment of filing, a "stay" is imposed, which pauses all actions by creditors. Foreclosing on a self-storage lien is considered a creditor action. The stay prohibits you from sending notices, placing advertisements and conducting the auction. If you go forward with the sale, you could be found liable for violating the law.

Even though the lien-sale process may be paused, you can still charge ongoing rent for the tenant's continued use of the space as well as any applicable late fees. The money owed prior to the bankruptcy is the "pre-petition debt." The rent accruing after the filing is the "post-petition debt." The distinction is important, especially if the tenant fails to pay the post-petition rent on time.

## Determine the Tenant's Intentions

Once any self-storage lien-sale proceedings have been halted, communication with the tenant—likely through their attorney—is crucial. The lawyer's contact information should be on the bankruptcy petition filed with the court and served to you as one of the debtor's creditors. The objective is to

determine the tenant's intentions in regard to their storage unit and any debt owed to you.

Their options are to continue to rent with you and pay the rent, or they can terminate the lease and vacate the space. If they choose to leave, you have to let them go; you can't demand payment to release their stored property. You can, however, file a proof of claim for the pre-petition debt.

If the tenant elects to keep their self-storage lease, this is known as "assuming an executory contract." They must continue to pay monthly rent. This post-petition debt is considered an administrative cost of the bankruptcy and should be paid to you throughout the process. The tenant must also pay off their past-due rent. If they don't, you can contest their right to continue the lease.

## Address Refusal to Leave or Pay

Challenges can arise during the bankruptcy process that impact you as the self-storage operator. For instance, if the tenant decides to keep their lease but stops paying rent, they're breaking their agreement. In this case, you may request to lift the legal hold (stay), allowing you to foreclose on their stored property.

You can also ask the court to order the bankruptcy trustee to abandon the tenant's property. The request must show that the goods are a financial burden on you as the self-storage operator and of little value to the tenant. If the court agrees, you'll be allowed it to sell the stored items to recover the unpaid rent and clear the space.

Sometimes, instead of letting a tenant keep their stored goods, the court may require you to hand them over to the court or a bankruptcy trustee, so the court can collect the debtor's assets for distribution to other creditors. In this case, you'll receive a notice that requires a response. While you can challenge the request, it often isn't worth the cost, especially if legal fees exceed the amount of rent owed.

## Focus on Reality

The most difficult and expensive aspect of a self-storage tenant bankruptcy is you must retain a lawyer to represent your business. These matters are handled in federal court, and you can't represent yourself. This is the primary reason why most facility operators don't pursue debt in these situations.

Typically, if a self-storage renter files for bankruptcy to stop a lien sale (and yes, it happens), they'll collect their belongings and vacate the unit. You can pursue the unpaid rent with the court, but it's usually recognized as an unsecured claim, meaning there are insufficient funds available to pay the debt. The silver lining is the space is empty and can be rented to someone else who'll hopefully pay on time.

## Watch the Court Filings

Another important tip is to keep a close eye on the court filings. Bankruptcies can be dismissed if the debtor misses critical deadlines. If that occurs, the legal stay is lifted, and you can resume foreclosing on the delinquent renter's self-storage unit.

Dealing with tenant bankruptcy can be difficult for a self-storage operator, but understanding the process helps reduce risk. Once you become aware of a filing, pause any pending lien sale and keep open communication with the renter or their attorney. Be aware of the options available to the tenant. If they stop paying rent, you have ways to seek relief through the court, though this often requires legal assistance. By staying informed and proactive, you can effectively manage the situation and protect your business. **ISS**

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# SEARCH WARRANTS AND SUBPOENAS

## If you operate a self-storage

facility long enough, you'll eventually find yourself on the receiving end of a subpoena, search warrant, demand for documents or request for property inspection. It usually comes with very official-looking paperwork that say things like "Failure to respond may result in contempt," "This is a court order and there are consequences for failure to respond" or "You better do what we ask or all kinds of fire and brimstone will be rained down upon you." At least, that's how it can feel when reading them.

When a request of this nature arrives, there are things you *should* do right away and those you *can* do to make the process easier. Most important, just because "someone" is asking for information doesn't always mean you must comply. If you receive documents, whether from an attorney, process server or law-enforcement officer, there are practical steps you should immediately take to protect your self-storage operation and its customers.

## Law-Enforcement Subpoena

Recently, one of my self-storage clients received a grand-jury subpoena from the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York seeking copies of everything in their possession related to several units rented by a certain individual. The operator, who's in a small Texas town, was worried because they believed they'd have to travel to New York and present these documents in person. I told them to pack their bags! (No, I didn't.)

Most, if not all, grand-jury subpoenas from district or U.S. attorney's offices state that you have a certain date on which to produce documents in person at the courthouse. However, 99% percent of these don't truly require that. So, what do you do?

First, call your outside counsel. I don't mean your insurance company but your independent attorney. Send them a copy of the document. Simultaneously, let everyone in your self-storage operation know that they need to take steps to preserve any documents, written or electronic, that are responsive to the request. You don't want anything to be destroyed or deleted.

Your attorney should immediately call the party that filed the subpoena (the district attorney or U.S. attorney) and work out a schedule for electronic delivery of the documents. This communication is key to ensuring you don't have to physically appear at the courthouse or in the state that originated the summons.

Whatever you do, do not ignore the subpoena! If you do, or the documents "disappear," the court can issue orders of contempt, which can include fines and even jail time. This is a problem that won't go away.

Also, do not contact the affected self-storage tenant about the situation until you've consulted with an attorney. Most grand-jury subpoenas specifically state that you may not contact the subject of the document without violating the law. If it's an order for an ongoing criminal case vs. an investigation, it may not have such a requirement. In any case, double check with your counsel.

## Civil-Document Subpoena

It's also common for a self-storage operator to receive a request for documents in a civil matter, often a family-law case. These come from process servers or private document-retrieval companies seeking files.

related to a dispute between other parties. These need to be dealt with similarly to a subpoena. The difference here is there's a duty to protect your tenant's information, and it's easier in this situation.

Once again, call your attorney and take all the steps necessary to preserve documents. Check to see if you have a duty to inform the tenant. It's likely that you'll be able to let them know, and they may want an opportunity to fight the request before you comply. Your attorney may also choose to challenge the subpoena on a number of grounds, for example, to safeguard sensitive customer information such as driver's license or Social Security numbers.

Where these become tricky is in family-law matters such as a divorce or child-custody case. Years ago, I handled one in which an ex-wife emptied her ex-husband's house while he was out of town and put everything into four self-storage units. She then purposely quit paying rent so everything would go to auction. The ex-husband found out and was able to stop the sale by paying the rent but then wanted access to the spaces and the tenant information. The self-storage operator correctly refused to give it.

In response, the ex-husband filed suit against his former spouse and subpoenaed the records. To be super-tricky, he sent the subpoena *before* he served her with the lawsuit so that she wouldn't know about it.

There can be many reasons why someone wants information from a self-storage operator. Often, they're honorable, but there's no way for you to know the difference. What is undeniable is that if a court orders you to produce information, you're well-protected. Your counsel can guide you on these scenarios. Did I mention that you should contact your attorney? Is there an echo in here?

## Search Warrants

We all want to assist law enforcement in catching bad guys when we can. But what is your responsibility to your self-storage tenant who may be accused of a crime and the police want your assistance in helping their investigation? This can be muddy.

“Whatever you do, don’t ignore the subpoena! If you do, or the documents “disappear,” the court can issue orders of contempt, which can include fines and even jail time.

Imagine a scenario in which an ex-boyfriend is vengeful toward a former girlfriend. He knows she has a storage unit in which she keeps her deceased father's baseball-card collection (which shouldn't be in a storage unit, but that's another article). He gets this really awesome idea to report "his" baseball-card collection to the police as stolen and tells them he has reason to believe his former girlfriend is hiding it in her self-storage unit. The investigators believe him because he's really convincing. So, they show up at your facility demanding access to the space. What do you do?

This isn't an emergency situation requiring you to provide immediate access. Further, you have no idea that this is all a big lie. When one of my clients was confronted with this exact scenario, they called me and put me on the phone with the police officer who was at the facility. I explained that we have a duty to our tenants and we're not allowed to provide anyone

information about a unit or access without written authority from them, an order from a court or a search warrant. I requested that the officer and tenant meet at the unit the next day so they could exchange the warrant. It was during that event that everything was cleared up.

But what if what the police believed that what was in the unit was a dangerous, toxic substance or illegal drugs? If you have law enforcement provide you with a search warrant rather than simply opening the unit for them, you are protected.

Remember, search warrants aren't difficult to obtain. Police must swear under oath that they have reason to believe there's a legal basis for searching the premises. The request must be in furtherance of an ongoing criminal investigation for which the search will be helpful. If they really believe there's justification, they should simply have a judge bless it with a warrant. Otherwise, you may be opening the door to liability as well as the self-storage unit.

Another good idea with search warrants is to be present when they're executed and record it on video. Then place that recording in the tenant's electronic file. It'll show that you weren't the one rifling through the self-storage unit looking for those baseball cards.

The lesson here is that just because you get a written or verbal request to open your self-storage tenant's information or unit to a third party, even the police, there could be an enormous number of circumstances at play of which you are ignorant. Contact your legal counsel, have them review the subpoena or whatever form the request is in, and get some advice before you unwittingly throw yourself into other people's drama. You never want to be a part of it if you can avoid it. **ISS**

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# Issues of Physical and Digital Accessibility



**Self-storage operations aren't immune** from the expectation that any customer who seeks to use the service should be able to do so, regardless of any physical conditions that limit their personal abilities. In fact, the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted in 1990, made it a requirement. Title III of the act focuses on "public accommodations" and states that properties that are open to the public—restaurants, hotels, schools, doctor's offices and even self-storage facilities—must not permit exclusion or unequal treatment to those with physical incapacities.

Initially, the law focused on enhancing architectural standards for buildings. However, the ADA was revised in 2010 to incorporate new standards, including specific measures for self-storage facilities. They address not only

access to the office, retail area and bathrooms but storage units themselves.

The ADA's "scoping requirements" dictate how many units at a self-storage facility must be designated as accessible. The rule is 5% if the facility has fewer than 200 units, and 10 units plus 2% if the facility has more than 200. There's also a stipulation that these units must be dispersed among the various "classes" of spaces provided, for example, drive-up vs. climate-controlled.

When the law was updated, self-storage operators had two years to bring their properties compliant. Since 2012, all new construction and most renovations or conversions have also been required to meet the new standards. The ADA demands that all businesses meet the requirements if it's

"readily achievable" to do so. This means "easily accomplishable without much difficulty or expense," a definition based on a company's size and resources. Businesses with more money are expected to comply, whereas those with less may be granted certain exceptions. This is especially true for older properties.

## Complying With ADA

Though self-storage operators are within their rights to contend that the ADA mandates aren't "readily achievable," there are always interim solutions you can use to address accessibility concerns, such as call boxes or signage offering assistance for disabled customers. To avoid possible litigation for ADA violation, make sure you've answered the following questions. The text in italics is lifted from the Act.

- Has your facility designated which units are accessible? Are they marked?
- Does your roll-up door meet the ADA standard for opening and closing? (*The maximum force for pushing or pulling open a door shall be 5 pounds.*)
- Does the rain lip prevent access to the space? Is a ramp needed? (*Thresholds at doorways shall not exceed three-fourths (19 millimeter) in height for exterior sliding doors or half an inch (13 millimeter) for other types. Raised thresholds and floor level changes at accessible doorways shall be beveled with a slope no greater than 1:12.*)
- Does the roll-up door have a handle that'll allow it to be opened and closed per ADA standards? (*Handles, pulls, latches, locks and other operating devices on accessible doors shall have a shape that is easy to grasp with one hand and doesn't require tight grasping, tight pinching or twisting of the wrist to operate. Lever-operated mechanisms, push-type mechanisms and u-shaped handles are acceptable designs.*)

## Web Accessibility

Physical site accessibility isn't the only concern for self-storage operators. In 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) issued "Guidance on Web Accessibility and the ADA,"

which is focused on allowing visually impaired users to use a company's website. Included in the directive is an explanation of why this type of accessibility matters:

*Inaccessible web content means that people with disabilities are denied equal access to information. An inaccessible website can exclude people just as much as steps at an entrance to a physical location. Ensuring web accessibility for people with disabilities is a priority for the Department of Justice. In recent years, a multitude of services have moved online, and people rely on websites like never before for all aspects of daily living. For example, accessing voting information, finding up-to-date health and safety resources, and looking up mass transit schedules and fare information increasingly depend on having access to websites.*

Though the DOJ doesn't provide specific regulations to follow, it has outlined principles such as "Web Content Accessibility Guidelines" (WCAG) and "Section 508 Standards," which are used by the federal government for its own websites. There have been numerous lawsuits over the past few years regarding whether physical businesses like self-storage facilities are subject to these standards, but the courts are split on the matter.

Until this question can be resolved, you should anticipate that your self-storage

business will be included within the umbrella of companies that are required to comply with WCAG, especially with customers who are visually impaired and seek to use their website to rent a unit or pay their bill. Certainly, as storage operations evolve into a more unattended model that leverages the use of mobile applications and other virtual-management tools to facilitate rentals, payments and facility access, it's unlikely that you'll be excluded from scrutiny.

The good news is there are industry vendors who can assist with website compliance, making your online content accessible for people with disabilities. Solutions include an artificial-intelligence-powered widget that audits websites for ADA violations.

It's important for self-storage operators to understand these physical and digital accessibility guidelines and act accordingly. Stay vigilant to recognize your ongoing legal requirements and any regulations that may impact your business on a federal and local level. **ISS**

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# UNDERSTANDING STATE LAWS



**While each state has its own laws** regarding the operation of a self-storage business, there are often similarities among them. Every few years, we see nationwide trends in industry legislation and how it evolves. Let's explore some of the common updates from the last few years, how they might affect your business, plus the modifications on the horizon.

## Recent Changes in Self-Storage Legislation

Some years back, many states proposed and eventually passed laws that allowed self-storage operators to send lien notices to tenants via First-Class Mail instead of Certified Mail. Eventually, this became the standard in almost every state. Soon thereafter, state laws began to change again, allowing operators to send lien notices to tenants via email. Over time, that has become an accepted practice.

National and state self-storage associations also began pushing state legislatures to adopt laws that allow operators to place a limit on the value of the property stored in a unit, thereby also

limiting business liability. This change has been wildly successful and is now a cornerstone of any rental agreement.

Another widespread change occurred as a result of issues operators faced when they had to auction off a vehicle that was stored in a defaulted space. Several state self-storage associations were successful in getting their legislatures to pass new laws permitting operators to have the vehicle towed instead of selling it. This change has taken a little longer to take hold and is still an ongoing battle in some regions.

Over the last few years, a number of states have passed laws allowing self-storage operators to advertise lien sales online instead of requiring an advertisement to be published in a local newspaper. This has been a noteworthy development due to the significantly increasing costs of media ads. This shift will allow operators to avoid expenses that have generally proven difficult to recover through the lien process.

## Up and Coming Modifications in Self-Storage Legislation

The push to modernize state self-storage laws hasn't stopped. In fact, a new wave of updates is taking hold. Here's a summary of the most recent changes.

**Non-monetary default.** A *monetary* default occurs when a self-storage tenant fails to pay rent. The operator's recourse is the lien-foreclosure process, eventually ending in the sale of the tenant's property. A *non-monetary* default occurs when a tenant breaches *any* provision of the rental agreement other than the requirement to pay rent or fees, for example, they commit a crime at the facility such as living in their unit. A lien sale is never an option for these cases, however, the operator can terminate the rental agreement and tell the tenant to vacate the space.

This is where things can get complicated. If a self-storage tenant fails to move out after receiving a termination notice, the operator must file an eviction action with the local court and go through the hassle of removing them. This is often an expensive and time-consuming process that can tie up the space for several months. However, a recent wave of legislative changes directly addresses this issue.

California, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas and Utah have all enacted legislation that entitles self-storage operators to terminate a tenant's rental agreement and dispose of their property if the tenant doesn't vacate the space within a certain amount of time. Each of these laws requires the operator



to send notice to the tenant clearly stating the demand timeline. This is a significant industry development. The statutes will allow operators in these states to remove troublesome tenants and free up their storage units much quicker and at a fraction of the cost.

**Unsigned rental agreements.** Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Utah and Virginia have passed laws that make it possible to enforce an unsigned self-storage rental agreement. If the requirements in the statute are met, the contract and its terms can be enforced simply by the act of the self-storage tenant continuing to rent the space.

Any new contracts generally require specific language and must be sent to the self-storage tenant, but they don't have to be signed. This new legislation will allow operators to change the terms of their rental agreements without the worry of getting each tenant to sign a new one before it becomes enforceable.

**Junk fees.** This is a new topic that's becoming more popular. Junk fees are generally defined as unexpected or hidden fees that a company charges customers for a service. They're used widely in the airline industry as well as in sports and entertainment ticketing. California recently passed a law making it illegal for a company to advertise a product at a low price but then add mandatory fees. It's important to note that California isn't the only state to move in this direction, as multiple others have proposed similar laws.

This new focus on junk fees will have a direct impact on the self-storage industry

as more operators offer discounted pricing through internet advertising. If you charge additional fees on top of that initial rent discount without previously disclosing them, you may soon find yourself on the wrong side of the law. As such, it's important to update your website to clarify your pricing and any additional charges, making sure to disclose any administrative or other fees that are added on top of the rent.

The lynchpin of new junk-fee laws is disclosure and transparency. It's become a trend self-storage to lure customers in with low web pricing and then increase their rent within a few months of lease signing. When offering an initial, discounted rate, you should disclose how much it is, how long it'll last and the rent the tenant will be charged once it ends. Additionally, update your website and other marketing materials to explain your right to increase the monthly rent with 30 days' written notice to the tenant. More than ever, it's important to be transparent about move-in rates, the right to increase rent, and any and all fees that can be charged to the customer.

The self-storage associations have done a remarkable job at lobbying to modernize industry laws. The most recent updates are reminders to stay current. It's imperative to ensure that your rental agreement is up to date so it complies with and takes advantage of any new legislation or best practices. **ISS**

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# Data Privacy and Your Level of Risk

**Self-storage operators are increasingly** becoming the targets of potential litigation as well as state and federal scrutiny, especially in relation to cybersecurity and data liability. Due to growing consumer-privacy laws and their enforcement, you must carefully consider your data-collection and -management practices, particularly your privacy disclosures. Below is insight to help you mitigate this risk.

## Your Legal Exposures

What types of legal risks do self-storage companies face when failing to accurately communicate their data-privacy practices to customers? When you tell people you'll safeguard their personal information, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) can and does take action to make sure you live up to the promise. It has brought legal action against organizations that have violated consumer-privacy rights, misled customers by failing to maintain security for sensitive information or caused substantial consumer injury. In many of these cases, the FTC has charged defendants with violating Section 5 of the FTC Act, which bars unfair and deceptive acts and practices in or affecting commerce.

The agency also enforces other federal laws relating to consumer privacy and security. To the extent a company misrepresents its data practices, it's exposed to potential regulatory investigation and action by the FTC or its state attorneys general. The most recent case involved InMarket Media, which failed to fully inform its consumers and obtain their consent before collecting and using their location data for advertising and marketing. The company is now prohibited from selling or licensing any precise location data.

In its complaint, the FTC said InMarket failed to obtain informed consent from users

of its shopping-rewards app CheckPoints and shopping-list app ListEase. When the company requested to use a consumer's location data, it stated that it would be used for the app's function. It failed to mention that the information would also be combined with other data obtained about those users and implemented in targeted advertising.

The FTC claimed that InMarket also failed to ensure that third-party apps that incorporate the company's software-development kits obtained informed consent. In fact, the company neglected to tell third-party apps that the location data provided through InMarket's kits would be combined with other data to create profiles of consumers.

## New State Privacy Laws

There are new privacy laws in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, New Jersey, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Utah and Virginia, though only five are currently effective. The rest went into effect in July.

All of these states require companies to include specific contact information for consumers who seek to exercise the rights to access, correct, delete or opt out of certain types of processing and other rights they have under these statutes. Some of these laws require that specific disclosures be made within a company's privacy policy so consumers are aware of their new rights. California, Colorado, Connecticut and Virginia also require companies to conduct written risk assessments if they're processing specific types of data. For example, Virginia law Section 59.1-578 E states:

*A controller shall establish and shall describe in a privacy notice one or more secure and reliable means for consumers to submit a request to exercise their consumer rights under this chapter. In addition, we also*

*confirm with web-design teams the correct display so the company can represent consent is obtained when a consumer clicks through to the website and banners are appropriately drafted to obtain such consents.*

## Reduce Website Risk

Internet cookies are small pieces of data that are created and stored while a user is browsing a website. They're placed on the consumer's device to help the website remember them and their activity. Cookies can create convenience for users, however, they're also considered to be personal data under most privacy laws.

Now's the time to meet with your self-storage web-design and marketing teams to identify which cookies may be in use on your website, how they're being used, and how to properly explain such use in the context of your company's privacy policy. You must disclose any use of cookies to your customers and obtain consumer consent.

In general, cookie banners and click-through consents are used to ensure customers are aware of any online tracking that may occur across multiple websites. For example, cookies might identify a consumer's geolocation data or serve them with third-party advertising. The states take various positions on whether consumers should be given the opportunity to "opt out" of any tracking and ad serving that may occur. For example, in Colorado, there's a universal opt-out method for targeted advertising. In Connecticut, section four of the Act gives the consumer the right to opt out.

## When to Update Your Privacy Policy

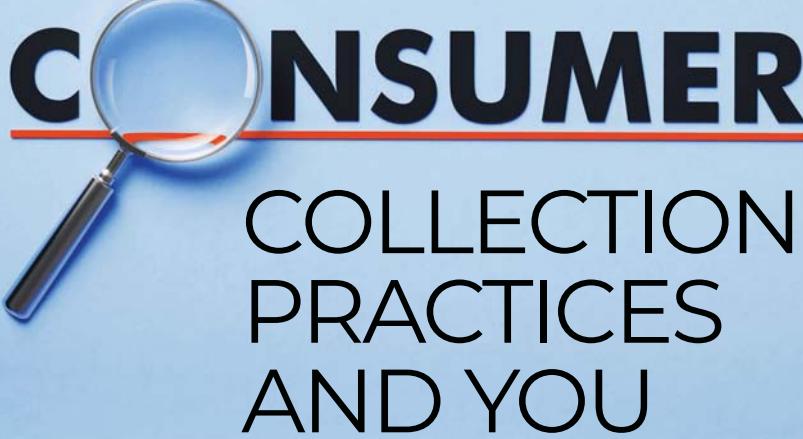
To help manage your risk around data privacy, consider consulting with an attorney to fully understand the laws that may impact

your operation and update your privacy policy. Your policy should be revised any time there's a material change in the way your company handles the data it collects from customers. It should also be specific about how such updates will be communicated to consumers and trigger the renewal. It needs to be a living and breathing document that's always reflective of the company's data practices.

In addition, it's important that your privacy policy reflects changing legal requirements that are applicable to your business and that it's consistent with your compliance obligations regarding consumer privacy rights. Review it every six months to account for new legislation and internal processes that may evolve because of innovation, new customer-engagement

initiatives, technology implementation, or any other changes that may involve the way consumer data is being managed by your self-storage operation. **ISS**

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# CONSUMER

## COLLECTION PRACTICES AND YOU

**In mid-2023, the Florida** legislature amended the state's Consumer Collection Practices Act. One of the changes it made was to prohibit any debt-collection communication between the hours of 9 p.m. and 8 a.m.

When we first saw this modification, we didn't believe it applied to self-storage operations; and even if it did, that it would only impact lien-sale noticing activities. We didn't think it would ever affect payment-reminder notices that might be sent to tenants via electronic communication including email and text. However, some industrious class-action attorneys have filed lawsuits against storage operators in the state. In fact, one facility was sued for sending an automated billing-reminder email.

Though we shouldn't be shocked to see these types of legal complaints, as a self-storage operator, you should take precautions to protect yourself, regardless of your facility locations. At the time of this writing, the legislation impacts Florida only,

but other states could eventually follow suit. Below are a few strategies you can employ to help ward off litigation.

### Update Your Rental Agreement

One step to consider is to insert a clause to your self-storage rental agreement through which the renter grants you permission to send payment reminders and other debt-collection messages during prohibited hours. In the meantime, make sure all such communication with your customers occurs between 8 a.m. and 9 p.m. This includes but is not limited to emails or texts related to upcoming or past-due bills such as prebill notifications, invoices, collection reminders and lien notices.

In addition, if you do not already have a Waiver of Class Action in your rental agreement, particularly if your self-storage operation is in Florida, this situation is a perfect example of why you need one. That said, some states don't permit such a waiver, so consult with your attorney. They can help you fashion the proper language and outline the

appropriate way to notify existing tenants of this contract change so it's enforceable.

This is an excellent reason and time to review your entire rental agreement with an attorney. If nothing else, make sure it contains the class-action waiver, if permitted. Then, at least in theory, your facility could be protected from becoming a test case in your state should this type of law go into effect and a class-action litigator brings a claim against you.

### Prevention = Protection

We couldn't have predicted that Florida would make a change like this to its Consumer Collection Practices Act, and I'm not certain that this law or one like it can be applied to whatever you're doing at your own self-storage operation. However, it pays to act with an abundance of caution.

Self-storage operators in all states should take a lesson from what happened in Florida. Innocuous changes in state laws could easily be expanded into claims against your facility, no matter where you're located. Class actions are a particular threat. Often, your insurance doesn't cover this type of litigation, which usually results in large attorney-fee rewards. These lawsuits are much easier to settle than fight, but settling is still often extremely expensive.

Take the appropriate precautions to protect yourself and your self-storage business. Facility owners and managers in Florida were caught off guard. Let their experience serve as important guidance to all operators nationwide. **ISS**

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author. The content should not be construed to constitute legal advice or to create any sort of attorney/client relationship between the author and the reader. Before undertaking any change to your self-storage policies and procedures, consult with your own attorney and insurance agent or broker.*

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# The Corporate Transparency Act



## Business owners don't usually

get enthusiastic about federal reporting requirements, so to some of you, this may come as bad news: On Jan. 1, 2024, the Corporate Transparency Act (CTA) went into effect. Under this landmark legislation, most small businesses are now required to file an annual report with the U.S. Department of Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN).

While the CTA isn't exclusive to the self-storage industry, it will affect many operations, particularly smaller, independent ones. Let's explore what this means for you as an owner or investor.

## A Critical Overview

Enacted in 2021, the CTA is intended to aid law enforcement in combating illicit or illegal activity conducted through anonymous shell companies. As a requirement, it compels certain privately held business entities to report "beneficial owner information" (BOI) to FinCEN once per year or any time there's a significant change. Here are a few important things you should know about the legislation and its verbiage:

**Reporting company.** This is any business entity required to submit BOI reports under the CTA. The category includes domestic and foreign corporations, limited-liability companies and other entities created by filing a document with a secretary of state, a division of corporation or similar office, and Indian tribes.

**Beneficial owner.** This is any individual who directly or indirectly exercises substantial control over the reporting company (this includes most senior officers), or owns or controls 25% or more of the ownership interests.

**Exemptions.** The CTA outlines 23 specific categories of entities that are excluded from the definition of reporting companies. These include, for example:

- Larger, highly regulated companies that are publicly traded

- Federally registered investments or advisers
- Certain tax-exempt entities
- Highly regulated entities like banks, securities broker-dealers and public utilities

For more guidance on exemptions, refer to FinCEN's Small Entity Compliance Guide and FAQs, both found at [fincen.gov](https://fincen.gov).

**Company applicants.** For reporting companies created or registered on or after Jan. 1, 2024, only company applicants must be identified in the CTA report. An applicant is an individual who creates a domestic reporting company or first registers a foreign company to do business in the United States, or who's primarily responsible for directing or controlling the filing of the documents providing for the company's formation or registration. Up to two individuals can qualify as company applicants.

**Inclusions.** Reporting companies must provide detailed information in their CTA filing, including legal names, trade names, addresses, a unique identifying number (with image evidence such as a passport or a driver's license), and the company's taxpayer-identification number, including an employer-identification number.

**Filing timeline.** If your reporting company already existed when the CTA went into effect on Jan. 1, you must file your initial BOI report by Jan. 1, 2025. If it was created after Jan. 1 of this year, you have until 30 days after its creation or registration to file; however, FinCEN is considering an extension to 90 days.

Your CTA reports must also be updated within 30 days of any change in beneficial ownership. This might be due to a company sale, merger, acquisition or death of a principal, for example. Additionally, reporting companies are obligated to update their information within 30 days upon becoming aware of or even having reason to suspect an inaccuracy in previously filed information. My advice is to try to get it right the

first time, and remember: Timely updates and corrections are crucial to compliance.

**Compliance.** Owners of reporting companies must proactively initiate their own compliance measures. For example, your internal program should include triggers for timely report updates when necessary due to changes in a company's governance or ownership.

There are civil and criminal penalties for any person willfully providing (or attempting to provide) false or fraudulent BOI, or failing to report complete or updated BOI. These can include fines of up to \$10,000, imprisonment of up to two years or both. Translation: Don't ignore the requirement, regardless of what you may think about it.

Also, if you're acquiring a new self-storage facility by means of an entity purchase, be sure to supplement your traditional due diligence with a review of the target's CTA compliance history.

If you're concerned about CTA compliance or don't have the staff or infrastructure to establish it, consult your legal counsel or other advisers for assistance. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to see a cottage industry grow around this effort. You can also refer back to the FinCEN guide and FAQs referenced above.

## Be Prepared

As an industry encompassing many small, independent operators, self-storage is significantly impacted by the CTA. As the legislation ushers in a new era of transparency and accountability, owners and investors must prepare for a new set of reporting obligations. By proactively addressing compliance, conducting appropriate due diligence in acquisitions and working with the right team, you can position yourself for success in an evolving regulatory landscape. **ISS**

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# A Refresher on *Insurance Coverages*



**Spring is the beginning** of peak move-in season for many self-storage operators. It's also a great time to reassess your business needs. For example, do you have the right property and casualty insurance coverage in place?

Self-storage facilities face unique risks. When it comes to insurance, many operators choose a standard policy for commercial buildings, however, it may not be enough. It's critical to have the right coverage to protect your investment, and following are 10 you absolutely need today. Most aren't included in a typical "off the shelf" policy. Even when working with a carrier that specializes in this industry, some products must be specifically requested or increased to be effective. I'll also talk about when and how to review and update your coverage.

## The Products

**1. Customer goods legal liability.** Even though your self-storage lease agreement states that you aren't responsible for stored property, tenants can sue you for damage to or loss of their belongings. In these cases,

customer goods legal liability will pay for the related legal fees and settlements. You can typically select limits from \$25,000 to \$1 million. A good way to determine your coverage needs is to multiply the number of units at your facility by the value limitation in your contract. Note: This coverage is only available from insurance providers who specialize in our industry.

**2. Wrongful-sale liability.** Also known as sale and disposal liability, this is another important coverage that's only offered through self-storage specialty insurers. When selling or disposing of a customer's property to reclaim a delinquent unit, it's critical to follow the state-specific lien law. If you miss just one step, even if a tenant frivolously claims you were negligent, wrongful-sale coverage will pay for any related legal fees and settlements. Human error is always a possibility when it comes to a lien sale, so having the right coverage is vital.

**3. Cyber liability.** Data breaches are a regular occurrence these days, and self-storage operators have an increased risk due to the

collection of customer information including driver's license numbers, Social Security numbers and credit card information. In the case of a breach or other cyber-related crime, it's beneficial to have a separate policy that specifically addresses these types of exposures. Some insurance companies offer cyber enhancements as inexpensive add-ons to a package policy. Just check them carefully, as most only cover expenses related to a data breach.

**4. Pollution liability.** Vehicles, equipment, machinery, hazardous waste, contamination, dangerous chemicals ... Oh, my! There are many hidden risks that can leave you with significant out-of-pocket expenses for cleanup and legal fees. Most general-liability policies exclude pollution. Even if you see a coverage enhancement for "pollutant cleanup," there needs to be a covered cause of loss (fire, for example) for it to kick in. Luckily, some insurers cover pollution liability. This policy is highly recommended for all operators, and an agent who specializes in self-storage can help place it with ease.

**5. Employment-practices liability.** Even with today's trend toward remote facility management, self-storage owners can be exposed to employment-related lawsuits, whether it's a team member suing for wrongful termination, discrimination or sexual harassment, or a third party suing for discrimination. An employment-practices liability policy with third-party coverage will pay legal fees and settlements for these types of claims, subject to terms and conditions. Pay careful attention to the wage-and-hour sublimit, and consult with your insurance agent to ensure your coverage matches your operation.

**6. Hired and non-owned auto liability.** When you send a self-storage manager out to run an errand on company time, perhaps

## Don't Forget About Floods and Earthquakes!

Flooding is the most common and costly natural disaster across the United States. It can occur anywhere, anytime, and flood maps are constantly changing. In fact, more than 20% of insurance claims come from outside high-risk areas.

Don't make the mistake of thinking you can rely solely on government disaster assistance to recover from a flood-related loss. In addition to the National Flood Insurance Program managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, there are private-insurer options available; however, flood and earthquake coverages aren't typically included in a package commercial policy. If you're interested, you can request to add them by endorsement or obtain a separate policy.

**Source:** *insideselfstorage.com, "The Business-Insurance Coverages You Need to Save Your Self-Storage Operation From Disaster,"* by Brian Bogdanoff

**“** The standard self-storage insurance policy with replacement-cost coverage will pay to repair or replace damaged property with “like kind and quality” materials.

to the bank or on a marketing visit, you have auto-liability exposure. However, if they get into an accident in their personal vehicle and their limits are exhausted, your company could face a lawsuit. Hired and non-owned auto liability is an easy coverage to add to most policies.

**7. Business income.** There are various forms of business-income insurance on the market, but a program dedicated to self-storage may be able to offer you extended coverage. The typical policy will pay for 12 months of rebuilding after a covered claim; however, it can take 18 months to two years or longer to rebuild after a significant loss, so ask your agent about options. Additionally, after you rebuild, it's important to have “extended period of indemnity” to continue recouping lost income until you get back to your previous facility occupancy. Your agent will be able determine which companies can offer you this coverage.

**8. Ordinance or law.** The standard self-storage insurance policy with replacement-cost coverage will pay to repair

or replace damaged property with “like kind and quality” materials. If a town, city, state or federal code states that upgraded materials or specifications are required to rebuild, a basic policy won't pay for them, so it's important to consider ordinance or law coverage. Note: The older the facility, the more likely that you'll encounter code changes.

**9. Outdoor property.** Most insurance policies have very little coverage for outdoor property, which can include fences, gates and signs. It's critical to review your self-storage policy for these items and increase the limit accordingly.

**10. Employee dishonesty.** Self-storage isn't immune to corrupt acts by internal team members. Employee-dishonesty coverage will reimburse you for any funds stolen by staff. These types of offenses add up over time, sometimes many years, and most standard policies don't include this coverage, or they have a small limit. Evaluate your options for crime coverage to safeguard your business against these losses.

## Review and Update

As you prepare for the busy self-storage rental season, evaluate your insurance coverage to ensure your business is properly protected. At a minimum, assess your policy annually, typically 60 to 90 days prior to renewal. This is also when your agent will go over your coverages and request quotes from your current insurer and other potential providers. Reaching out before your policy expires will give them time to update their files and request quotes that include the proper coverages.

Always notify your agent immediately if there's a significant change in your business, for example, you start renting commercial or office space in addition to self-storage, or you want to add a new ancillary product or service such as mailbox rentals or wine storage. Anything outside the scope of typical operation should be reviewed with your agent in advance. Additionally, alert them before embarking on an expansion project and again once you receive your Certificate of Occupancy. This includes adding portable-storage units. The goal is to always ensure you have the proper insurance coverage.

By working with an agent who specializes in self-storage, understanding the coverages available, reviewing your policy annually, and making note of any changes in your business, you can feel confident that you're well protected for many of the special hazards that exist in our industry. **ISS**

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# UNDERSTANDING CAPTIVE INSURANCE PROGRAMS

**Are you a self-storage owner** looking for a more effective way to manage insurance costs? It can be daunting, but there's a solution that could be game-changing: an 831(b) captive insurance program. This specialized product allows you to self-fund and take control of your tenant-protection and deductible-reimbursement programs.

A captive is an insurance-licensed company created specifically to cover the

risks of its parent company or owners. In self-storage, it enables a facility operator to self-insure and customize coverage according to their unique risks and needs. This unique entity operates under Internal Revenue Code Section 831(b). To qualify, it must collect annual premiums of \$2.3 million or less (adjusted for inflation).

In this article, I'll walk you through the ins and outs of 831(b) captives, including the two types specifically suited for self-storage

businesses, plus how they work and the benefits they offer.

## Tenant Protection

A tenant-protection program covers costs associated with customers' property damage, offering you control over claims. Imagine you own multiple self-storage facilities. A warranty protection advisor assists you in creating a subsidiary company, XYZ Insurance Co., to provide

tenant-protection plans. By offering them at a reasonable price, this becomes a profit center and establishes a tax-efficient retirement-savings pool.

Here's how it works: When your managers lease a self-storage unit for \$100 per month, each tenant must show proof of coverage or buy it at \$15 per month from XYZ Warranty Protection Program. Over the course of 15 years, your self-storage business pays the premiums to XYZ Insurance, which is 100% owned by you and becomes part of your investment portfolio. (By the way, these premiums are corporate tax-deferred with deductions for claim expenses.) By year 16, when you sell your portfolio, you wind down XYZ Insurance and distribute the cash to yourself, taxed at capital-gains rates.

### Deductible Reimbursement

A deductible-reimbursement program allows your insurance captive to combine your business' commercial property and casualty policies to cover the deductible. When a loss occurs, the captive reimburses your self-storage company, providing cost savings and reducing risk.

For example, consider Cameron, the owner of a plumbing company. His traditional insurance deductibles kept increasing despite minimal claims. Worried about the cost of insurance and its impact on cash flow, he contacted his property and casualty agent, who suggested an 831(b) plan managed by a warranty-protection advisor. Cameron used tax-deferred funds from his plan to meet high deductibles when two of his service trucks were involved in accidents, limiting the impact on his cash flow.

### The Benefits

Now that you understand what 831(b) captives are, let's dive deeper into the benefits.

**Customized coverage.** One of the most significant advantages is the ability to tailor your insurance coverage to your exact needs. Have you ever found that commercial policies fall short in covering self-storage-specific risks, such as business interruption or staff loss? With an 831(b), you can fill those gaps.

Let's look at a success story. Dan owns Johnson Self Storage and RV Storage, with 30 locations and 500 units per site. To stay competitive and offer peace of mind to customers, he creates DJ Insurance Co., which only provides protection plans for his tenants. After adding \$15 to every tenant lease to cover the plan, his annual revenue of \$1.8 million results in \$1.6 million in



premiums (after claims) paid to the captive. Again, these are corporate tax-deferred with deductions for claim expenses.

Over 15 years, Johnson Storage pays DJ Insurance \$24.3 million in premiums, now part of Dan's investment portfolio. When he sells the storage business at the beginning of year 16, he winds down the insurance company and distributes the cash to himself, taxed at capital-gains rates. In doing so, he gives clients peace of mind, turns an expense into a profit center, reduces taxable income, and creates financial reserves for unexpected claims or even "rainy day" funds.

**Greater claims control.** How often have you felt frustrated with the insurance claims process? An 831(b) captive gives you more control, which means efficient claims management tailored to your business needs.

**Tax advantages.** One of the most appealing aspects of an 831(b) is it results in no corporate taxes collected on your protection-program profit. All premiums remain under your control and can be passed through your ceding insurance company (provided through your warranty protection-program provider) with corporate tax deferral. The captive only pays taxes on investment income, letting more premium dollars go toward covering risks than taxes.

**Investment income.** Premium funds aren't just sitting there. They can be invested to earn interest income. The investment creates an additional revenue stream for your self-storage business.

**Secured loans.** The surplus in your captive can serve as a source of funding to

your operating business, secured against the captive's reserves.

**Dividends.** In profitable years, your captive can return dividends to your operating self-storage company, following 831(b) captive guidelines. These can be distributed efficiently after one year and one day of deposit aging.

### Implementing a Program

Before you jump into the world of 831(b) captives, there are important considerations:

- **Upfront formation and administrative costs** should be weighed against the benefits.
- You'll need knowledge of insurance, tax and business law.
- **Compliance with regulations and detailed documentation** is essential to prove good faith operation as an insurance company.

The 831(b) captive program empowers self-storage owners like you to self-insure, fill coverage gaps, and enjoy tax and cash-flow benefits. However, it requires considerable knowledge. Working with experienced advisors is crucial to successfully forming and operating an 831(b) captive. A feasibility analysis should determine if the benefits outweigh the costs for your business. When implemented strategically, this type of program can give you customized, self-funded insurance to better manage risk and protect your operation. **ISS**

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# Workers' Compensation



**Operating a self-storage facility** involves a range of risks and responsibilities, not just for the owner but for their employees, too. Workers' compensation (comp) insurance is an essential component to safeguarding the business.

In most states, it's also a legal requirement. Failure to comply can lead to fines, lawsuits or even business closure. That alone is a compelling reason to purchase a policy, but it also protects your self-storage facility against financial liability and loss. Either way, it's critical to understand your state's specific regulations.

Stemming from the employer's legal and ethical duty to protect staff, workers' comp insurance offers a compromise: Employees give up the right to sue for negligence in exchange for guaranteed benefits if they suffer a work-related illness or injury. The policy covers medical expenses, lost wages, rehabilitation costs and, in severe cases, death benefits. It also ensures that the business is protected from lawsuits, as team members generally can't sue their employers if they're receiving workers' comp benefits.

Let's explore more specific reasons why workers' comp is important to

your self-storage operation as well as considerations for choosing a policy and best practices for minimizing claims.

## Why You Need Workers' Comp in Self-Storage

Self-storage facilities may seem like relatively low-risk environments, but there are threats to employees' physical well-being, for example:

**Machinery and equipment.** Self-storage employees often move heavy items or operate machinery to maintain the premises. Performing these duties can lead to sprains, strains or more serious injuries. Repetitive tasks can lead to hidden musculoskeletal issues that may result in costly claims over time. Equipment malfunction or improper use of machinery can lead to serious harm.

**Site safety hazards.** Uneven surfaces, poor lighting or extreme weather conditions can increase the risk of slips, trips and falls. In regions with frequent ice, snow or rain, the risks are even greater. Self-storage employees may also interact with harmful substances during site maintenance such as cleaning chemicals or pest-control products, potentially causing respiratory or skin damage.

**Customer interactions.** On occasion, a self-storage employee's interaction with a customer can lead to assault or an accident. For example, the customer may become confrontational or violent. The team member may attempt to help a tenant lift a heavy item or navigate the facility and an accident could occur.

## Choosing a Workers' Comp Policy

When selecting a workers' comp policy for your self-storage operation, consider the following factors:

**Local requirements.** Each state requires different businesses to have workers' comp coverage and may set different minimum-coverage levels or penalties for non-compliance. Some states also offer variations in coverage based on the number of employees or the nature of the work, so it's important to choose a policy tailored to your specific needs. Make sure that your policy meets or exceeds your legal obligations.

**Scope of coverage.** Choose a policy that covers all risks related to your self-storage facility. Also, make sure it includes all full- and part-time staff as well as temporary or seasonal workers who may face higher risks due to shorter tenures and less training.

**Policy limits.** This is the maximum your insurer will pay for a claim. It should be enough to cover medical costs, lost wages and legal fees. High expenses from severe injuries can quickly deplete a low-policy limit, exposing your business to additional financial risk.

**Premiums.** Workers' comp insurance costs are usually based on payroll, number of employees and work-risk level. While price is a factor, don't skimp to save money. Poor coverage can lead to significant out-of-pocket expenses. Some insurers offer discounts for strong safety programs, which can help lower premiums over time.

**Experience modification rate (EMR).** Your EMR is used by insurance companies to determine your workers' comp premium. This figure reflects your company's safety record compared to other businesses in the self-storage industry. A lower EMR can result in lower premiums, so investing in team training and maintaining a safe work environment is beneficial.

### Minimizing Workers' Comp Claims

While having workers' comp insurance is crucial in self-storage, minimizing the number of claims is equally important. Here are some best practices for reducing workplace injuries at your facility:

- Offer employees ongoing safety training for proper equipment use, safe lifting techniques and correct handling of hazardous materials. Tailor it to the specific risks of your facility and update it regularly.
- Conduct routine facility inspections to identify potential hazards such as wet

floors, uneven surfaces or faulty equipment. Document everything, and promptly address any issues.

- Ensure that all equipment is regularly maintained and inspected for defects or wear and tear that could lead to accidents. Keep a detailed log of these activities, as it might be beneficial in the event of a claim.
- Use clear and visible signage to indicate potential hazards such as slippery floors or areas where heavy machinery is in use. Place it at eye level and in multiple languages, if necessary, to ensure all employees and customers understand the warnings.
- Foster a workplace culture where employees feel comfortable reporting unsafe conditions or potential hazards without fear of retaliation. Encourage anonymous reporting, if necessary, to ensure all concerns are addressed.
- In the event of an injury, ensure that the employee receives prompt medical attention. This helps their recovery and reduces the likelihood of the wound worsening, which can lead to higher workers' comp costs.
- Implement a return-to-work program that helps injured employees transition back into the workplace as soon as they're medically able. This might involve modified duties or reduced hours, which can reduce the overall cost of a claim. Such programs can also help the team member feel valued and supported, which can aid in their recovery and reduce the time they spend away from work.

### Protecting Your Business

Workers' comp insurance isn't just a legal requirement for self-storage facilities, it's a

**66** Workers' comp insurance costs are usually based on payroll, number of employees and work-risk level. While price is a factor, don't skimp to save money.

critical component of protecting your business and employees from the financial and legal consequences of workplace illness or injury. By understanding the risks, selecting the right coverage, and implementing safety measures, you can minimize claims and maintain a safe environment for your team.

Investing in comprehensive coverage is an investment in the long-term success and stability of your business. A proactive approach can save significant costs and ensure that your self-storage facility operates smoothly, even in the face of unexpected challenges. **ISS**

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# Tenant Insurance vs. Protection Plans

**Protecting your self-storage business** should always be a top priority, and it includes your customers and their stored belongings. One way to do this is to offer a tenant insurance or tenant-protection plan, but it can be tough to know which product is the best fit for your operation. It's a complex decision.

This article will help you understand the individual programs, why you should offer one or the other, and how to choose the right provider.

### Understanding the Programs

Though tenant insurance and tenant-protection plans appear to be

the same from the renter's perspective, there are key differences to the self-storage operator.

Tenant insurance is the original model used to cover customers' stored goods. It's more highly regulated than tenant protection, with the program terms and pricing set by insurance regulators in



each state. Most states will allow you to sell this product with a valid license. The self-storage facility is issued a master policy, and each tenant receives a certificate of insurance. The owner isn't involved in the risk transfer; tenants go directly to the carrier to file a claim.

Tenant protection is a new product that's rising in prominence within the self-storage industry. No one from your facility has to be licensed to offer it. This program also offers more control over pricing and terms. Under this model, the owner accepts limited liability for tenants' stored items. They then insure that liability through a Contractual Liability Insurance Policy. The named insured is the facility, not the tenant; but the policy still offers the same level of individual coverage in most cases.

## Why Offer Either Program?

Whichever program you choose to offer your self-storage tenants, there are many advantages to you as the facility operator. First, these products help reduce the risks associated with storing peoples' belongings such as theft, damage or loss, thereby minimizing potential liability.

All facilities deal with issues from time to time; it's part of the business. By implementing one of these safeguards, your customers won't come to you when something bad happens. Instead, they'll file a claim with the program provider. In the unfortunate event of a theft or property damage, a tenant can receive reimbursement for the value of their stored items up to a specified limit.

The No. 1 reason why self-storage operators participate in tenant insurance

or a tenant-protection plan is to generate revenue from the share they earn from enrollment. Depending on the provider, the income you generate can be significant. Not only will you make a bit of profit from every sale, you'll have more satisfied customers, which helps your business in other ways.

## Finding the Right Fit

Now that you're informed about the two types of programs—tenant insurance or a tenant-protection plan—and why it's important to offer one, it's time to choose the best option for you and your self-storage customers. Consider what's most important to you and your business. To effectively evaluate providers, consider these key factors:

**Coverage.** Make sure each provider clarifies what's covered. Not all programs are the same. The most comprehensive ones include protection for risks including mold, mildew, rodents and other vermin. Some include coverage designed specifically for outdoor boat/RV storage.

**Cost and limits.** Determine the monthly cost to your self-storage tenants and the

coverage limits available. On average, providers typically offer \$2,000 in coverage for \$9 to \$12 a month. Here's a good rule of thumb: The cost of your base coverage amount to customers should not exceed 15% of their monthly rental rate.

**Risk.** Understand how risk is transferred. Compare the insurance carriers behind different providers and check their credibility. Look for programs backed by carriers with strong financial ratings.

**Enrollment and revenue.** The revenue share a provider offers for enrolling customers in their program is only part of the equation. Understand how the company will help you drive participation, and know the average enrollment percentage. A high revenue share with low enrollment means nothing. You can anticipate expected revenue by factoring in anticipated tenant engagement.

**Ease of implementation.** Select a program that operates efficiently with minimal burden on you and your staff. Evaluate each provider's technological capabilities to determine the best fit.

**Claims process.** How easy is it for tenants to file a claim? Look for providers who deal directly with your customers and don't need to involve the store or its staff. Efficient claims handling is pivotal to a seamless operation, so prioritize companies that offer a streamlined process with an in-house adjuster, sparing you the headache of angry tenants. This approach offers full transparency into what's happening but shouldn't require any direct involvement from you.

Tenant-insurance and tenant-protection programs are valuable additions to any self-storage business, offering benefits such as risk mitigation, enhanced customer experience and revenue generation. With careful consideration and strategic planning, the right product can contribute to your facility's success and longevity. **ISS**

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**“** All facilities deal with issues from time to time; it's part of the business. By implementing one of these safeguards, your customers won't come to you when something bad happens.

# A Shift in Leadership Philosophy

## The self-storage industry is experiencing a significant

transformation in its leadership practices, largely driven by the increasing presence of women and younger generations in the workforce. These changes are reshaping organizational culture. Owners who adapt will realize enhanced facility performance, increased employee satisfaction and improved customer experience.

This article explores how shifts in leadership philosophy are manifesting in our industry, their primary benefits and how to implement best practices.

## Emphasis on Work-Life Balance

### Benefit: Improved employee satisfaction and retention

Women and younger workers prioritize work-life balance, recognizing that employees who can manage their personal and professional lives effectively are more satisfied and productive. To embrace this philosophy, consider:

- Flexible scheduling:** Allow employees to choose their own work hours within an approved range. For example, they might start earlier or later in the day depending on their needs, which can help reduce burnout and increase job satisfaction.
- Remote work:** Implement new policies for roles that don't require a physical presence at the self-storage facility. For instance, customer-service representatives can handle inquiries from home using cloud-based phone systems and management software.

## Focus on Purpose and Values

### Benefit: Enhanced brand loyalty and customer trust

Aligning your self-storage operation with broader social values can strengthen brand loyalty and build tenant trust. Customers are increasingly drawn to companies that demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility and ethical practices. To embrace this philosophy, consider:

- Corporate social responsibility initiatives:** Engage in community projects or partner with local charities. For example, offering free self-storage units to organizations or hosting community events can create a positive image and foster community ties.



- Ethical practices:** Ensure transparent pricing and fair customer treatment. Display these commitments prominently on your website and marketing materials to build trust with potential tenants.

## Technological Savvy and Innovation

### Benefit: Increased efficiency and customer convenience

The younger generations' comfort with technology translates into greater efficiency and an enhanced customer experience. Self-storage operators can benefit from adopting the latest tools to streamline processes and improve service delivery. To embrace this philosophy, consider:

- Digital-management systems:** Use software to manage rentals, payments and customer communication. Automated systems can handle routine tasks, freeing up staff for more complex issues. Implementing a robust online rental system can also make it easier for customers to reserve units and manage their accounts.
- Smart solutions:** Implement self-storage locks and surveillance systems tenants can control via a mobile app, providing added security and convenience. This can differentiate your facility from competitors and attract tech-savvy customers.

## Inclusivity and Diversity

### Benefit: Broader perspectives and enhanced creativity

Diverse leadership teams bring a variety of perspectives that can lead to more innovative

solutions and better problem-solving. An inclusive work environment also attracts a wider talent pool and fosters a more positive work culture. To embrace this philosophy, consider:

- Diverse hiring practices:** Make a conscious effort to recruit employees from various backgrounds and experiences. This can be done by advertising job openings in multiple forums and removing bias from the hiring process through blind recruitment.
- Inclusive policies:** Support diversity through initiatives such as language-inclusivity training and diversity-awareness programs. Regularly review these policies to ensure they're effective and current.

## Collaborative Leadership Style

### Benefit: Higher employee engagement and better decision-making

A collaborative leadership style encourages teamwork and open communication, which can lead to more effective decision-making and better staff engagement. To embrace this philosophy in your self-storage operation, consider:

- Brainstorming sessions:** Regularly hold team meetings in which employees can share ideas and feedback. For example, discussing ways to improve customer service or streamline operation can generate valuable insights and foster a sense of ownership among employees.
- Open-door policy:** Encourage staff to voice their concerns and suggestions directly to management without fear of retribution. This can be facilitated through anonymous suggestion boxes or regular one-on-one check-ins.

## Focus on Continuous Learning and Development

### Benefit: Skilled workforce and adaptability

Continuous learning and development ensure that your self-storage employees stay current with industry trends and acquire new skills, making the workforce more adaptable to change. To embrace this philosophy, consider:

- **Training programs:** Offer regular sessions on new technologies, customer-service best practices and safety procedures. Online courses and workshops can provide convenient learning opportunities for employees.
- **Mentorship programs:** Pair experienced employees with newer staff to provide guidance and support. This can help with knowledge transfer and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

## Transparency and Authenticity

### Benefit: Trust and credibility

Transparency and authenticity in leadership builds trust and credibility with your self-storage employees and customers. Clear communication and honest practices create a reliable and respected business. To embrace this philosophy, consider:

- **Clear communication:** Keep employees and customers informed about business changes, policies and updates. For example,

send out regular newsletters or critical information through email and social media.

- **Authentic leadership:** Lead by example, demonstrating integrity and honesty in all business dealings. Share successes and failures openly with your team to build a culture of trust.

## Environmental Consciousness

### Benefit: Positive community impact and customer appeal

Environmental sustainability is increasingly important to customers and can enhance a self-storage company's reputation within the community. To embrace this philosophy, consider:

- **Green practices:** Implement energy-saving measures like LED lighting, solar panels, and efficient heating and cooling systems. These initiatives not only reduce operational costs, they appeal to environmentally conscious customers.
- **Recycling programs:** Offer recycling services at your facility and use eco-friendly materials for office supplies and packaging. Promote these efforts to your customers to demonstrate your commitment to sustainability.

## Agility and Adaptability

### Benefit: Resilience in a changing market

The ability to quickly adapt to market changes is crucial to the long-term success of every self-storage operator. And as it happens,

women and younger workers often exhibit higher levels of agility and resilience. To embrace this philosophy, consider:

- **Market research:** Conduct this regularly to stay ahead of industry trends and tenant needs. This can involve surveying customers, analyzing competitors and keeping up with industry publications.
- **Flexible business models:** Be willing to pivot based on market conditions. For example, you might adjust your pricing model or offer new ancillary products and services.

## Modern Leadership Leads to a Brighter Future

Modern leadership practices are transforming the self-storage industry for the better. By focusing on the above areas, you won't only meet the evolving expectations of your employees and customers, you'll position your business as forward-thinking and socially responsible, which will ensure it thrives in a competitive market. These new philosophies not only enhance organizational performance, they create a more inclusive, engaging and resilient workplace. Embracing them will build stronger, more sustainable self-storage businesses poised for long-term success. **ISS**

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**There's been tremendous evolution** in the workplace over the last few years, and current world events may drive that evolution further. Many potential barriers lie before us, including the U.S. presidential election. We can expect it to be a time of caution, not only in the self-storage industry but across the business world.

In fact, caution will be a running theme throughout the human-resources (HR)

sector this year, according to experts. Let's look at the three biggest trends emerging in the workplace in 2025 and how you can successfully navigate them.

## Dealing With Economic Uncertainty

At the start of 2023, many economists warned of a recession fueled by high inflation, rising interest rates and other factors. However, the economy outperformed

# WORKPLACE TRENDS TO WATCH

expectations. Now no one knows for certain what to expect this year.

What we do know is economic uncertainty can stir up fear that causes businesses to re-evaluate their decision-making. Here are a few examples of items that might be impacted:

- Growth initiatives supported by employee hiring and development may be shelved as companies take a more risk-averse approach to staff management.

- Open positions may be left unfilled, leaving existing employees to juggle more responsibilities and potentially reducing morale.
- Expenses may be scaled back, which can halt or curtail initiatives such as customer-acquisition programs.
- Operating costs may continue to be unpredictable, which can make it difficult to set budgets or pricing.

This year, employee retention should be a top priority for self-storage operators. Replacing lost staff—and the institutional knowledge they take with them—is time-consuming and costly. Ultimately, stronger retention leads to a robust organization and happier team members, which often has a direct correlation with improved profitability.

### Preparing for Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Since the launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT in late 2022, generative AI has quickly stirred up curiosity—and fear—among business owners, HR leaders and workers. For companies, the idea of leveraging AI to improve productivity, customer service and innovation is attractive. However, employees may be concerned about the impact on their jobs.

AI isn't new to the workplace or our everyday lives; but as more companies tested and adopted it in 2023, it became clear that it's most beneficial to an organization

when accompanied by a system of checks, balances and brainpower that only humans can provide. That said, its use should allow employees to shift their focus from mundane or repetitive tasks to more meaningful strategic and innovative efforts. In short, when used with proper guidance and training, AI presents a variety of exciting opportunities for self-storage owners and their staff.

As a facility operator, you'll be challenged to weigh the benefits and risks of AI and determine how it can be useful for your company. You'll also need to craft policies and training to guide employees on how to use it properly.

### Catering to a More Informed Workforce

Today's employees have more access to information than ever before, making them more knowledgeable about their rights and, therefore, more empowered. They also have the ability to immediately share their experiences and feelings with large audiences via social media. For this reason, self-storage employers need a well-considered and intentional approach to team engagement and communication. The goal is to foster trust, which increases worker satisfaction and productivity.

With this new reality in mind, carefully assess your self-storage company's existing policies and procedures and update them as necessary. If possible, work with a legal team or employment lawyer to ensure everything is

up to date, and there's a clear understanding of what new developments and regulations impact the workforce. It's also important to review employee job descriptions for accuracy.

After your handbook is updated, inform your staff. Start by educating your supervisors on employment rights and equipping them with the resources they need to foster an environment of openness with their teams. This'll help staff feel more comfortable about bringing issues or concerns directly to their superiors, which is key to maintaining a positive company culture.

In fact, revisiting your culture and assessing your employee-engagement efforts will go a long way toward building trust. A company that builds a reputation as a great place to work is attractive to prospective employees, enabling you to hire more qualified, loyal and productive people.

Navigating this workplace evolution during uncertain economic times may seem overwhelming. However, it's important to remember that steps to improve employee retention and engagement can be implemented over time. Start by evaluating where improvements can be made, then put a plan into action. The goal should always be to retain your top talent, which will ensure your self-storage business enjoys long-term success. **ISS**

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# The **NEW** Hybrid Manager

**As the self-storage industry** continues to modernize, the job of the facility manager is evolving. Traditional, onsite employees who handle everything from unit rentals to customer service to marketing and more are less necessary at stores where automation, online tools and other technology are being used to streamline operation and increase



# 66 A hybrid self-storage manager has a more specialized and streamlined role that combines the efficiency of remote management with a human touch.

efficiency. In some cases, they're being replaced by a new breed of industry professional: the hybrid manager.

This shift reflects trends in other industries where technology enables more specialized roles and responsibilities. By leveraging digital tools, self-storage operators can streamline many processes that once required manual oversight, such as billing and reservations. This reduces costs and provides customers with a more seamless and convenient experience.

Let's explore this new role of the hybrid self-storage manager including what it entails, the skills required and how it fits into the existing business model.

## What the Role Entails

Traditional self-storage managers are full-time employees responsible for a range of tasks, including but certainly not limited to:

- Managing the rental process from start to finish
- Addressing customer inquiries and concerns
- Collecting payments and managing accounts
- Making collection calls and handling lien sales
- Maintaining site security
- Overseeing property maintenance, including repairs and cleanliness

These employees handle virtually every aspect of facility operation. While this level of involvement can be a strength, it also requires a broad skill set and the ability to juggle multiple responsibilities simultaneously.

In contrast, a hybrid self-storage manager has a more specialized and streamlined role that combines the efficiency of remote management with a human touch. Spending 10 to 40 hours per week at each facility, they sometimes cover multiple locations, focusing on two main goals: First, they act as a concierge to assist customers; second, they're responsible for ensuring the property remains clean and presentable.

A typical day for a hybrid self-storage manager might include:

- Traveling between facilities to confirm cleanliness and maintenance. This includes checking common areas and ensuring all systems are functioning properly.
- Answering customer questions. They might help prospects understand their rental options and facilitate sales using a kiosk, tablet or a QR code that links to an online portal.
- Providing facility tours and showing prospects their unit options.
- Communicating with remote-management teams to address issues and ensure smooth operation. This may involve relaying customer feedback, coordinating maintenance schedules or updating inventory systems.
- Checking security systems and addressing potential concerns. This includes reviewing surveillance footage and access-control functions, and responding to security breaches or alarms.
- Providing regular reports to supervisors and ownership on the status of each facility. This helps in tracking performance, identifying potential issues and planning future improvements.

## Required Skills

A hybrid self-storage manager needs a unique skillset to succeed. They are:

- **Customer-service excellence:** While their onsite presence is limited, they must provide outstanding client interactions.
- **Technical proficiency:** Familiarity with online rental systems, payment platforms and other digital tools is essential.
- **Time management:** The manager must have excellent organizational skills and the ability to prioritize tasks.
- **Problem-solving:** They must be able to address issues as they arise, often with limited resources. This can range from handling customer complaints to troubleshooting technical issues.
- **Adaptability:** The ability to adjust to new technologies and processes is crucial. This also extends to working with different teams and understanding each facility's unique needs.

## Ideal Candidates for Hybrid Management

Not all self-storage facilities are suited for hybrid management. This business model is most effective for:

- **Large facilities with more than 500 units:** Though they might leverage remote resources for administrative tasks, their scale often demands an onsite presence for certain activities.
- **Facilities transitioning to automation:** When an operator doesn't feel ready to move to a fully remote management model, hybrid staff provides a middle ground. This allows for a gradual transition, providing onsite support while increasing reliance on automated systems.
- **Remotely managed facilities with special needs:** Some properties need more onsite support. For example, they might have high customer turnover, heightened security needs or premium services that require personal attention.

## The Trend Toward Specialization

Specialization will be a core principle in the operation of self-storage moving forward. Having people or entire departments dedicated to specific tasks, such as revenue management or marketing, allows for much higher performance. For example, why would you rely on a single facility manager to take a few sales calls per day when a central sales team can field hundreds?

The self-storage rental process and most customer-service transactions can be handled remotely through online platforms or call centers. Even lien sales and other administrative and technical tasks can be handled by teams who have expertise in a particular silo. This division of labor allows a hybrid manager to concentrate on delivering an exceptional customer experience and keeping the facility in top condition. It enhances efficiency and ensures that tenants have access to immediate assistance when needed.

The hybrid-manager model represents a significant shift in self-storage, combining the benefits of automation with those of onsite management. As the industry evolves, this crucial role will ensure that facilities operate efficiently and customers receive the high level of service they expect. Embrace the change and see how this innovative approach can transform your business. **ISS**

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# Exploring a Remote-Work Model



**At the beginning of my recruiting career,** I was taught to determine how far and long of a commute a job candidate would have if they were hired for a position I was promoting. If the office was too far away or it took too long to get there, the applicant would generally not be interested. In fact, it was sometimes a primary reason that a person wanted to leave a job. Still, commuting was the norm back then. Employees had to drive to work and interact with peers every day.

Fast forward to 2025. Instead of desiring a shorter or easier commute, job candidates are often not interested in an opportunity unless they can work from home at least part-time. If they have to report to an office daily, they may eventually change positions for one that offers

more flexibility. Generally speaking, at my firm, we promote each position to 30 potential candidates before finding one who is qualified and interested. I tend to find that if the role requires the person to go into an office daily, that number jumps to at least 60.

March 2024 marked four years since COVID lockdowns were first issued, ultimately redefining the way many employees worked. The work-from-home phenomenon spread like wildfire through multiple generations. Initially, there was panic about the technology, finding childcare and setting up a home office; but as the dust settled, people came to appreciate the improved work-life balance that gave them additional time for family and friends, household projects, and hobbies.

Whether it's a CFO with 20 years of experience or an analyst with only two years under their belt, employees who have embraced the work-from-home culture are not going back to traditional daily office life if they can help it. In fact, there are now many college graduates who have never even had to go into an office. Though there are companies that want their employees to commute and return to the workplace, that concept is completely foreign to some job candidates.

The question you're now wondering is, what does this mean for me and my self-storage business? If you're an owner, you're concerned about hiring and employee expectations. If you're a manager, you're maybe hoping it opens new doors of opportunity. Let's explore the notion further.

## New Hiring Challenges

There is certainly value in collaborating with peers in an office setting. A lot can be learned from your teammates and mentors, not to mention the connections that can be made with members of your work family. Those relationships are not quite the same when your only interaction is through a computer monitor. However, the payoff for the at-home worker is the work-life balance provided by a hybrid or fully remote business model.

Promoting a full-time self-storage office position can be challenging today. If one employer doesn't allow working from home, another probably will. Recruiting is essentially a numbers game. You just keep promoting the open position until you find someone who enjoys daily, in-person interaction. The potential obstacle is it may take longer to find that person. Secondly, and even more important, is that you can miss out on some very talented people who are holding on to their home office with all of their might.

I can say that I've seen highly successful real estate professionals function in both a fully remote environment as well as a hybrid role. If you hire a responsible, experienced person with initiative who takes pride in their job, you should not have any issues. The freedom a home office provides is truly empowering to some employees. They thrive when they don't have a commute to navigate or the distraction of the common interruptions inherent within a shared office.

That said, some roles just aren't well-suited for remote work, even part time. Self-storage manager may be one of them, depending on your operational model and the technology you use. Also, some employees genuinely prefer to work in an office every day; however, it's less than half of the applicant pool among office-based employees. What I've observed is that for roles that are commonly remote or hybrid,

approximately 30% of the available candidates will still go into an office five days a week.

In short, it isn't impossible to attract candidates to a full-time, in-office role, but the search can take longer, and you'll miss out on talented individuals who currently have—and are not willing to give up—the ability to work from home.

### Work-From-Home Tips

If you are fortunate enough to be allowed to work remotely, you should understand what constitutes a productive home office. First, you must have a space designated specifically for work, preferably with a door. If you have kids, childcare provider is imperative during your work time. It's also important to establish guidelines with your family to limit interruptions. Mentally, you need to be at work, not doing laundry or making dinner.

Also, get up early and get ready for work as though you are going into an office. Pajamas are not allowed. Though your commute may be a flight of steps instead of a 40-minute drive, you must still make a mental shift and be fully engaged in your job. Save the dinner prep or grass-cutting for your lunch break.

### Being a Good Employer to At-Home Workers

If you have a trustworthy, productive employee, they'll appreciate your faith in them to work independently. If you're concerned about a lack of in-person interaction, schedule specific days for everyone to be in the office together. This helps create a balance that satisfies the needs of both staff and employer. Being open-minded and offering this kind of flexibility increases the talent pool when

you have an open self-storage position. If a candidate has a history of working remotely, that's even better, especially if they have strong references because they've proven they can be effective in a home-office setting.

Employees who have never been required to report to an office and those who have embraced the flexibility of working from home will likely not return to the days of commuting. The privilege of working from home is now a real selling point for some employers and positions, while companies that are more rigid and want traditional office employees face more obstacles. Once you consider hiring a fully or partially remote employee, you open the doors to a much broader selection of experienced self-storage professionals. **ISS**

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# Diversity, Equity and Inclusion



**In today's evolving work environment,** the concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) have become vital for businesses across all industries, including self-storage. But what does it all mean, and why is it important for your company? Let's break it down and explore how prioritizing DEI can benefit your business and the people it employs.

### What DEI Is All About

Diversity is about recognizing and valuing the differences among people in your self-storage workforce. These can include race, gender, age, sexual orientation, abilities, backgrounds and much more. A diverse team unites unique experiences and perspectives, which can help your leadership see things

in a new light and address challenges in creative ways.

Equity is about ensuring fairness by providing everyone in your self-storage organization with equal access to opportunities, regardless of their background. It's also about recognizing that some individuals face more barriers than others and striving to level the playing field, guaranteeing that everyone has a fair chance at success.

Inclusion connects these two concepts by fostering a work environment in which everyone feels valued and respected. It's about making sure every voice is heard and every team member can fully contribute, regardless of who they are or from where they come.

When diversity, equity and inclusion are combined, you build a work culture where people feel like they belong and can excel.

### Why DEI Matters

DEI isn't just a trend; it's a business strategy that delivers results. An emphasis on this set of core values is good for your self-storage business. Here are just a few reasons why:

When employees feel like they're part of an inclusive and fair workplace, they're more likely to be engaged and satisfied with their jobs. They feel respected and appreciated for who they are, which leads to better morale and greater engagement. The end result is lower team turnover, stronger collaboration and higher productivity.

DEI opens opportunities for professional growth. When equity is a priority, employees see a clear path to advancement, knowing their hard work and talent will be recognized.

Diversity fuels innovation. When your team includes people from different backgrounds, you're bringing together a variety of perspectives that can spark creative ideas and new solutions to challenges. This can help you stand out from the self-storage competition.

Having a diverse workforce helps you connect better with your self-storage customers. The more your staff reflects the diversity of those you serve, the better you can understand their needs, communicate effectively and provide top-notch service.

When DEI is ingrained within your company culture, your self-storage organization and its employees benefit. It involves fostering a work environment where innovation thrives, employee satisfaction is high and teamwork flourishes. Your company can also build a reputation as a forward-thinking and inclusive employer, making it easier to attract top talent.

### Steps to Achieving DEI in the Workplace

Creating a self-storage workplace that truly embodies DEI doesn't happen overnight. It takes thoughtful action and commitment. Start by assessing your current work culture. Take a close look at your hiring practices and company policies as well as the makeup of your team. Are there deficiencies or gaps? What needs to change?

Review your hiring processes to minimize bias and promote team diversity. You might create a hiring panel or use blind-recruitment techniques in which candidate names and identifying information are removed from resumes during the early stages. It's also important to establish clear diversity goals and measure your progress over time.

Training and education are crucial. Offer regular workshops on topics like unconscious bias and inclusive leadership to help ensure that everyone is on the same page. This isn't just about hiring diverse employees; it's about cultivating an environment where everyone feels empowered to bring their whole selves to work.

Consider setting up Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). These provide a platform through which team members from different

backgrounds can connect, support one another and have a voice in shaping company policies. ERGs can be especially effective in ensuring that all employees feel a sense of belonging.

Finally, understand that a DEI-forward work culture starts at the top. Company leaders must be vocal champions of this approach, setting the tone for the entire operation. For example, they should set terms for equitable pay and develop programs that support underrepresented groups.

### Measuring Success and Making Improvements

Implementing DEI initiatives within your self-storage organization is only the first step. To ensure your efforts are making a real impact, you need to track your progress and adjust your program as needed.

Start by setting clear goals. Perhaps you want to increase the number of people from underrepresented groups who are hired into leadership roles. Maybe you want to boost employee engagement scores or improve the diversity of your new hires. Data is your friend here. Regularly analyze your hiring, retention and promotion rates to see how various groups are progressing within the company. Surveys, interviews and focus groups can also provide valuable insight to how employees feel about your workplace.

Also, conduct regular audits of your DEI initiatives. This will help you pinpoint areas for improvement and ensure that you're moving in the right direction. Remember, this is an ongoing process. Keep learning, adapting and refining your programs as your self-storage company and society evolve.

### Legal Requirements

As you ramp up your self-storage company's DEI efforts, be mindful of potential legal ramifications. It's important to follow all state and federal regulations, for example:

- Establish clear policies on harassment and discrimination, including a transparent reporting process. Ensure that any complaints are handled promptly and fairly.

- Ensure that your policies are in line with anti-discrimination laws. This includes providing equal opportunities in compensation, hiring and promotions.
- Be mindful of bias in decision-making. Regularly review your promotion and termination processes to ensure they're equitable.

By staying vigilant, you can create a fair and just workplace for everyone.

### Additional Tips for DEI Success

Achieving DEI in the self-storage workplace isn't a one-time effort; it requires a long-term commitment. To foster a positive and welcoming environment for all team members:

- Encourage open conversations about DEI throughout the company. This can help uncover hidden issues and create a culture of continuous improvement.
- Consider engaging and partnering with local organizations that promote DEI. This helps enrich your company's culture and builds stronger ties to the community.
- Celebrate diversity within your workforce. You might recognize holidays from various cultures, host social events or simply acknowledge the different backgrounds of your employees.

DEI isn't just a moral imperative, it provides a strategic business advantage. In the self-storage industry where competition is stiff and customer expectations are high, it can be the key to standing out from the crowd. By committing to these concepts, you aren't only creating a better workplace for your employees, you're setting up your company for long-term success. Take the steps to build a more DEI-focused culture, and watch as your business—and people—thrive. **ISS**

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# HIRING TOP TALENT

### Finding and hiring capable

employees for your self-storage facility can be a real challenge today. During the pandemic-fueled hiring boom of 2020 and 2021, companies were paying top dollar for talent—in some cases, overpaying—due to a shortage of candidates. Now that everyone is being more conservative about compensation, there's a deeper pool of applicants.

You may be seeing more resumes flood into your self-storage operation, but that doesn't mean the candidates are qualified ... or reliable. What's the best way to source and hire talented employees? I'm about to tell you.

## Know What You Want and Where to Find It

When looking to fill a position at your self-storage facility, the first step is to define what it is you want in the new hire. Create a job description that considers the specifics of the region, your property and the unique responsibilities of the role. Avoid generic language that might apply to other company positions, as one size doesn't fit all. Specificity helps you set clear expectations and filter out unqualified applicants.

Also, clearly define the job requirements. Consider which skills and experience are *crucial* and which are simply *preferred*, then define the qualification parameters. If you later realize that your expectations are unrealistic, you can always adjust; but don't settle for an underqualified candidate. If you don't have immediate success, keep looking.

Compensation is an important factor in the self-storage hiring process, so know what you're able to offer by way of a competitive package and set reasonable expectations for what you can require in terms of candidate experience. Sometimes the budget doesn't align with your desires and you have to be flexible—meaning you either have to pay more or accept less. After you talk with a few "ideal" self-storage manager candidates, you'll quickly know if you're in the right ballpark money-wise.

Here's another critical decision: Will this person need to be in the office five days a week, or are you open to them working from home part or full time? The more flexibility you can offer, the broader your talent pool will be.

Once you know precisely what you're looking for in a self-storage employee, you need to consider where you'll find quality candidates. What types of jobs are they likely in now? Are you looking for someone who's currently working in a similar role or someone with a different professional background? For example, perhaps you want someone with retail-sales experience. Does it make sense to look only at the local market, or are you open to relocating someone from outside of the area?

## Post the Position and Narrow the Field

Now that you've defined the position you're attempting to fill at your self-storage facility and know where to look for

candidates, the next step is to post your job opening. Just keep in mind that your post is only likely to be seen by people who are actively looking for new employment. There may be great potential hires currently working for your competitors, but unless they're unhappy and actively searching the market, they may never learn about your opportunity.

Other effective ways to promote your self-storage job post are in-person networking, staff referrals and social media. Industry events and associations can be good resources for sharing opportunities, too. If these approaches are unsuccessful or you don't have the time to devote to the process, consider hiring a recruiter.

Be aware that all job postings generate at least some resumes from unqualified candidates, possibly a lot of them. While you've done the work to define the requirements of your self-storage position, don't count on your audience to only apply if they meet the criteria. Plan to spend a lot of time evaluating applications.

## Schedule Interviews and Evaluate Candidates

Once you've shortened the pile and have a list of promising self-storage job candidates, you'll schedule interviews. First, know what the process will look like. Who from your company should participate? A word of caution: Avoid involving too many people, as it can prolong the proceedings and result in too many differing opinions.

Be consistent and apply the same interview procedure to all applicants, including those from inside the company. Remember that the interviewee is evaluating the role on offer and your organization every bit as much as you are appraising them. The best prospects are probably already in a position and may be interviewing for other opportunities, too. It's important to promote your job offering in a way that'll appeal to a potential hire. Consider including a strong team member in the interview who can tell your company story and "sell" it.

In my experience, most job seekers are looking for an increase in compensation, a career boost, a bigger challenge or more flexibility. In addition, a culture that values people and new ideas is often appealing. Applicants also want to know what their future would look like if hired and if there are opportunities for advancement. Be honest about all of these things as well as any challenges related to the position. You don't want to make a hire only to lose them too soon due to poorly set expectations.

Evaluate each candidate thoroughly:

- Ask about their motive to change jobs, why they're interested in your self-storage position and why they've made past job moves.
- Communicate with them via email or text during the process to evaluate their response time and writing skills.
- Ask for examples of their writing or other work.
- Consider having them mystery shop a self-storage competitor and report their findings back to you.
- Obtain the candidate's permission to check professional references, and meet with the top prospects at least twice. The more work you can do on the front end to ensure the fit is right, the less likely you'll make a poor hiring decision.

## The Offer

Once you've chosen your desired self-storage hire, it's time to present an offer. If you've already had a conversation with them about compensation, don't extend an offer that's lower than what you discussed. A lowball proposal can quickly sour the relationship. Ideally, you'll present a verbal offer and convey your enthusiasm about adding this person to your self-storage team. Follow up with an official letter or email that details all compensation and company benefits.

If the candidate accepts, determine their start date. If they're currently employed, they'll need time to extract themselves from that position. Be aware, it's possible they could receive a counteroffer to stay. The best thing you can do to improve your chances is keep them engaged. Stay in touch as they work through their notice period. Invite them to breakfast or lunch and keep them focused on and excited about their new role.

If the candidate ultimately declines your self-storage employment offer, ask about their concerns or reservations. You may still be able to work things out. If you can't, go to the next person on your list. In fact, you shouldn't officially eliminate other applicants until you've filled the position and the new hire successfully reports to work.

If you don't have any other candidates to consider, continue your search. Rushing this process can be costly. Hiring the wrong person can negatively impact your self-storage business in several ways, not only financially but by damaging your team and company culture. While any hire can be a gamble, you can avoid expensive mistakes by planning, paying attention to detail and dedicating time and effort to this crucial process. **ISS**

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# Essential Interview Tips



## When hiring new employees

for your self-storage operation, your goal is to build a strong, productive team. The interview process is critical in this regard. As an owner or supervisor, your ability to identify the right candidates can significantly impact the overall success of your department or company.

To that end, it's essential to master the art of interviewing, which goes well beyond asking basic questions. Following are tips to help you make the most of these crucial interactions, so you can also make smart, productive decisions.

## Be Prepared and Set the Stage

Being prepared for the self-storage hiring process allows you to conduct focused and insightful interviews. In advance of meeting your candidate, review their résumé, cover letter and any other relevant documents. Understand their professional background, abilities and experience. Develop a list of questions that addresses both the hard and soft skills required for the role.

Interviews can be stressful for applicants, which can affect their ability to showcase their true potential. By creating a comfortable and welcoming environment, you can help them feel more at ease. In fact, a relaxed setting can lead to more genuine and insightful responses. This is true for both in-person and video-conference conversations. When on video, focus on the camera to show that you're looking at and paying attention to the interviewee.

It's important to implement a structured interview process to ensure consistency and fairness. Develop a set of standardized questions and ask them of everyone, allowing for a more objective evaluation. This approach helps eliminate bias and ensures that each candidate is assessed based on the same criteria.

Finally, be ready to provide a realistic job preview. The idea is to offer candidates a

glimpse into the role and your self-storage work environment. Be transparent about the tasks, challenges and opportunities associated with the position. This helps manage expectations and ensures candidates fully understand what the role entails.

## Ask Astute Questions and Listen Actively

Start the conversation with your potential self-storage hire with a brief introduction. Explain the format and encourage questions. Practice active listening to fully understand your candidate's responses. Avoid interrupting and give them ample time to express themselves. This not only demonstrates respect, it allows you to gather more information about their experiences and thought processes.

Behavioral questions provide valuable insight to a candidate's past behavior and may even help you predict future performance. Ask them to share specific examples of how they handled challenges, collaborated with a team or demonstrated leadership. This approach helps you assess their skills, competencies and cultural fit

within the organization. I recommend using the STAR method in which you ask:

- What was the **situation**?
- What was their **task**?
- What **actions** did they take to overcome the challenge?
- What was the **result**?

By following this path, it's much easier for candidates to share a focused, real-world example of their work history. In turn, this can help you decide if they're right for the position.

Beyond technical skills, assess whether the candidate aligns with your self-storage operation's mission and values. Consider how well they'd integrate into the existing team and contribute to a positive work environment. Cultural fit is a crucial aspect of long-term employee satisfaction and success within the company.

## Close With Next Steps and Manage Expectations

Conclude the interview by discussing the next steps in the self-storage hiring process. Provide a timeline for when candidates can expect to hear back from you. Clear communication helps manage their expectations and reinforces a positive experience with your company.

Interviewing is a skill that can significantly impact your self-storage team's success. By preparing thoroughly and asking insightful questions, you can make informed hiring decisions that contribute to the growth and success of the individual and your organization. The process isn't only an opportunity for candidates to showcase their abilities but a chance for you to select the right talent that'll propel your business forward. **ISS**

**“** Beyond technical skills, assess whether the candidate aligns with your self-storage operation's mission and values.

**Contributor:** Tyler Jacobsen, Extra Space Storage Inc., [www.extraspace.com](http://www.extraspace.com)

# The Question of COMPENSATION



**I'm about to tell you something** you should already know: Facility managers are critical to success in the self-storage industry. Sure, there's lots of talk about remote management and the role of technology in minimizing staff needs and payroll; but the fact is, no site can function without *some* human intervention. Even in a highly digital world, owners need humans to provide the best customer experience and keep their properties in top shape.

But what do you offer those humans by way of compensation? It's quite a question, the answer to which can depend on many factors including facility location, size, products and services offered, technology, labor-market conditions, and others. Paying your people fairly and addressing their workplace-satisfaction needs is crucial for good business. It can mean the difference between saving money through retention and spending it on recruitment.

Here's another thing you should already know: Compensation is often about a lot more than money. If you're wondering what to include in your package to ensure you're able to hire and retain top self-storage talent, the following strategies can help.

## Current Compensation Insights

When you're hiring staff for your self-storage facility, ask yourself, "What is the top priority for today's employees?" While a focus on salary is important, there are additional factors that job seekers value nearly as much.

According to a 2022 Gallup poll, 64% of U.S. employees rank an "increase in income and benefits" as very important

when shopping for a new job. Nearly as many mentioned work-life balance (61%) and having the opportunity to do what they're good at (58%). With that in mind, it might be time to take a fresh look at compensation when it comes to hiring and retaining self-storage employees.

Paying your workers well remains essential, but it's also important to stay up to date on current standards for benefits and perks.

"Compensation is certainly important, but it's not always the deciding factor," says Michael Baillargeon, chief operating officer of Hearthfire Holdings, the parent company of Hearthfire Capital and Hearthfire Self Storage. "In the self-storage industry, candidates are increasingly interested in work-life balance, growth opportunities, job security and company culture. Potential hires often ask about benefits, flexibility in scheduling and career-development opportunities in addition to pay. So, while a competitive salary is critical, it's only one part of what makes a job attractive."

## Why Money Matters

As the cost of living rises and in-person jobs compete with an increase in remote and hybrid positions, it's more important than ever for self-storage operators to advertise competitive wages if they hope to attract quality candidates. "For store managers, we're [offering] between \$15 to \$18 per hour depending on experience. Associate managers start at \$14 to \$15," says Monty Rainey, chief executive officer at RPM Storage Management, a self-storage consulting and management firm.

Rainey believes that paying more will result in a positive return on investment. Compensation has increased across the self-storage industry over the past decade. Operators who undercut the salary they offer will lose reliable employees to better-paying businesses. They'll also miss out on meeting great candidates when seeking new hires. "In the past five years, we've seen compensation increase as much as 50% in some markets," Rainey says.

You not only need to ensure that your wages are competitive within the self-storage industry, you must consider the salaries offered in other fields where potential candidates might seek employment. In the case of customer-facing roles, it's likely that job seekers with skills you desire may be applying for similar roles in many sectors.

"The food chains have increased their hourly wage from \$17 to [as high as] \$22," says Riddhi Chakraborty, human-resources director at Vivriti Asset Management. "That has a significant impact on the turnover rate for us, because there are employees who have left us, or who are in search of the increased hourly wages that are currently available in the food industry. In California, compensation is trending upward."

This financial component to self-storage hiring isn't just about paying employees a competitive rate but retaining them with regular pay increases. "Typically, raises can range from 3% to 5% annually," Baillargeon says.

As an owner or supervisor, you should offer your employees an annual raise to meet cost-of-living increases, but you

should also consider other factors such as job performance and seniority. Carol Mixon, owner of self-storage management and training company Skilcheck Services Inc. uses mystery shopping to determine additional compensation. After employees' sales techniques are anonymously evaluated, they're offered a percentage of the gross income of the property on a sliding scale.

"We're looking at several areas," Mixon says of the evaluations. "They greet the customer, they ask inquiry questions, they counsel them on the features and benefits of the property, and they need to invite the person to visit."

### Hourly or Salary?

Beyond meeting or surpassing industry standards, self-storage operators must determine how to structure their employee compensation. Many believe it's sensible to pay store teams an hourly rate while reserving salaries for corporate roles.

The important thing is to consider the unique circumstances of the self-storage manager. Geoff McGregor, president of McGregor Interests Inc., a commercial real estate investment firm that operates the Lockbox Storage brand, is a strong proponent of paying them an hourly wage due to the extra, and occasionally unpredictable, hours they work.

"The onsite manager is one of our most valuable assets. If a customer walks in right before closing and wishes to rent a unit, we want to make sure our staff feels justly compensated if they need to stay an extra 30 minutes or hour to make the sale," McGregor says.

If you pay your staff a salary instead of an hourly wage, evaluate the actual hours worked each week. If the resulting hourly rate is insufficient, team members may depart or lack the motivation to put extra effort into sales and customer service. This could adversely affect the facility's occupancy, reviews and overall revenue.

Compensation trends have also evolved beyond hourly vs. salary. Self-storage operators are starting to offer hybrid packages that include hourly pay and a percentage of profit.

"We've found that this hybrid [package] aligns the onsite managers' goals with the owners' goals," McGregor says. "It incentivizes them to make collection calls, sell merchandise and protection plans. Ten years ago, it was rare to see other facilities offering a share of the monthly receipts as compensation. At Lockbox Storage, we started this about 15 years ago and have seen the trend grow nationally."

**66** If you want to attract and retain excellent self-storage employees, it's important to think of compensation as more than just a number on a paycheck. It's also about benefits, both expected and creative.

### Getting Creative With Benefits

If you want to attract and retain excellent self-storage employees, it's important to think of compensation as more than just a number on a paycheck. It's also about benefits, both expected and creative. Lots of companies offer health insurance, paid time off and retirement savings plans. If you want to be a desirable employer, offer all of them and more. But what does "more" mean?

"It's also becoming more common to offer mental-health support, flexible working hours and remote-work options for certain roles," says Baillargeon. "Creative perks might include profit-sharing, wellness stipends or even access to online training and development programs. Some companies are offering additional time off or bonuses for staff retention as well."

Rainey offers employees "a very liberal incentive-based bonus structure" and the opportunity to take business-related continuing-education classes at no cost.

Mixon likes to take a personalized approach when it comes to benefits. She understands that for some store managers, a free trip to a Las Vegas self-storage conference including a nice hotel room and spending money might be incredibly appealing, while those who dislike gambling and big cities might not see the appeal. "Not everybody is rewarded by the same thing," she says. "That's why you need to ask, 'What do you like to do?'"

Mixon recalls a store in Florida where an owner was looking to reward the managers—a couple—for exemplary work. She encouraged him to talk with them about what they might like, and by doing so, discovered that they enjoyed fishing and had always wanted a Jon boat. "He got them one," Mixon says. "And those people were so thrilled with that."

### A Modern Approach to Compensation

A lot has changed in the last five years, not just in the self-storage industry but

across the workforce, with a rise in flexible work arrangements. In 2024, operators need to update their hiring and retention strategies beyond the approaches of 2019. For some employees, offering options for remote or hybrid work is now an integral part of the compensation package.

Applicants from younger generations may even choose lower-paying jobs with better work-life balance over higher-paying jobs with long hours and little time off. They also value work that feels meaningful to them.

"They want more autonomy," Chakreboroy says. "They want innovation in the workplace. They want to make it interesting. They're coming in with ideas, and they want those ideas to be reflected."

When determining the best staff compensation for today's self-storage industry, you have to consider a wide range of important factors. However, when weighing the various issues and ideas that affect a total package, one commonality emerges: the importance of asking current and potential employees *what they want*. If you listen and adjust accordingly, you'll hire candidates that are a good fit and be able to retain them.

"Store staff will make or break a facility," Rainey says. "If it's the difference between [paying] \$30K per year for a so-so manager or \$40K per year for a top-notch manager, pay the extra amount for the top-notch manager and your life will be much easier."

Proper compensation is key to attracting and retaining top talent, and it involves balancing competitive salaries with benefits, incentives, and opportunities for growth. By prioritizing fair wages and understanding employee preferences, you can enhance retention, attract top talent, and ultimately strengthen your self-storage business. **ISS**

**Contributor:** Kate Ramsey, Freelance Writer



# Team Training: A Strategic Imperative

## The role of the self-storage facility manager

is critical and complex. This employee must balance customer service with sales, marketing with maintenance, and so much more. As the first point of contact for customers and the linchpin of daily operation, they significantly influence the success or failure of the business.

This is why training is so crucial. Without proper instruction, even the most dedicated self-storage manager can struggle to meet the demands of this multi-faceted role. It isn't just helpful education, it's a strategic imperative.

## More on Why Training Is Necessary

At its core, a self-storage training program should help your facility managers develop essential skills that allow them to contribute meaningfully to company success and become trustworthy, confident team members. Here are just a few competencies to consider:

- Leadership:** The ability to inspire and motivate others, fostering a culture of accountability and high performance
- Decision-making:** The ability to balance short-term needs with long-term strategic goals, ensuring sound choices are made under pressure
- Conflict resolution:** Techniques to handle disputes calmly and effectively, transforming potential disruptions into opportunities for improvement
- Strategic thinking:** The ability to analyze market trends, anticipate customer needs and position the facility for long-term success

Training enhances performance across your entire self-storage organization. A well-educated manager boosts team dynamics, leading to better collaboration, higher productivity and improved customer

service. They also contribute directly to the facility's bottom line by streamlining processes and using resources wisely.

Staff turnover is costly and disruptive, particularly in an industry like self-storage where facility knowledge and customer relationships are key. Training plays a vital role in creating a positive work environment that fosters employee satisfaction and retention. Your managers will thrive in a supportive workplace in which they feel valued and motivated to contribute to the organization's success. In short, education reduces turnover and saves the company the costs associated with recruiting and onboarding.

## Training Essentials

The self-storage industry is subject to rapid change driven by technology, customer behavior and expectations, and market dynamics. Your managers must be able to effectively identify and navigate these shifts. Training will ensure that they can:

- Adjust operational strategies to keep the facility competitive
- Use and get comfortable with new tools and platforms
- Help customers embrace company technology
- Align their mission and values with those of a growing, evolving business

A comprehensive self-storage training program should cover:

- Operations:** The manager's day-to-day responsibilities and how they impact facility efficiency
- Budgeting:** Facility income and expenses as well as financial tracking and reporting
- Communication:** Strategies and methods for interacting with owners, supervisors, coworkers, competitors and customers

- Customer service:** How to create a positive experience and handle conflict when it arises
- Problem-solving:** Decision-making frameworks and crisis-management strategies
- Technology:** Tools and techniques to create a more efficient business such as property-management software, CRM (customer-relationship management) systems, kiosks, access-control systems and more
- Leadership:** Strategies to envision their future with the company, stay motivated and monitor their performance

## Accommodating a Diverse Team

To ensure that your self-storage training program is accessible and effective, it must cater to employees' various learning abilities and styles. Keep participants engaged by incorporating a diverse range of options, from self-paced e-learning modules to workshops to interactive sessions that allow for peer-to-peer education and collaborative learning.

Technology can enhance learning through immersive experiences like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). VR can simulate real-world self-storage scenarios, such as customer interactions or emergency situations, and provide a safe environment in which managers can practice their skills. AR can overlay information about the property's settings, helping staff learn about the physical aspects of their facility in a more interactive way.

Customized options and mentorship programs allow employees to tailor self-storage training to their specific needs. For instance, they can choose from different modules based on their role, experience level or interests. Offering one-on-one coaching sessions provides personalized feedback and advice, further enhancing the education's impact.

## Ensuring Success Through Follow-Up

To maximize the effectiveness of your self-storage training, include follow-up activities that reinforce learning and measure its success. Here are some suggestions:

- Feedback surveys can provide valuable insight to a program's effectiveness and areas for improvement.
- Assessment tests help measure knowledge retention and identify where further instruction may be needed.
- Regular performance reviews can link training to actual improvements in performance, allowing your company to measure its return on investment.
- Refresher courses ensure that skills and knowledge learned during training are retained and applied on the job. They're also essential for keeping employees up to date with the latest trends and technologies.
- Regular team meetings can keep staff informed about industry insight, allow them

to share best practices, and provide updates on company policies and procedures.

- Annual all-hands meetings are an excellent opportunity to bring everyone together for strategic alignment and team-building activities, reinforcing the organization's goals and values.
- Encouraging employees to participate in courses, webinars and other online resources allows them to continue developing their skills at their own pace. This approach supports continuous development, ensuring they remain knowledgeable and capable of handling new challenges.

These strategies are crucial for ensuring your self-storage training has a lasting, positive impact on each employee and the organization as a whole.

## Bolstering the Business

To ensure the success of your self-storage training program, align its objectives with the company's overall business strategy. It should be relevant and contribute directly to

the organization's success. Engaging senior leadership demonstrates the program's importance and encourages participation from all levels of the operation.

Regularly assess the impact of your self-storage training on individual and organizational performance. This not only provides documentation and support if you ever need to justify the continued investment in education, it identifies areas for improvement. By measuring the impact, you can confirm that your efforts remain effective and meet the company's needs.

A well-structured training program isn't just an education tool, it's a strategic asset that can significantly enhance the effectiveness of your team and the overall performance of your self-storage facility. By providing it, you're investing in the long-term success of your operation, ensuring that your employees are equipped to lead, inspire and drive your business forward. **ISS**

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**What a great time to be** in the self-storage business! Tools for staff training are plentiful these days. That wasn't the case when I started my industry career in 1993.

The owner for whom I worked had a small portfolio and knew nothing about day-to-day operation. Neither did any of his facility managers, including me. We could handle renting units taking payments, but when it came to rate management or legal matters, we were lost. We didn't even have

a computer to manage the business; it was all done by hand! I couldn't simply Google "self-storage manager training" and learn on my own, either.

Shortly after I was hired, the owner was kind enough to bring in a self-storage expert to train us for a day. I'll never forget the experience. She was smart, knowledgeable and willing to share a wealth of information. We left that session ready to take on the world! I carried that feeling with me for the next 30

years, and training became the single most important task to me.

Today, there are so many more options to help your self-storage team learn and grow. Let's look at what each type offers, so you can find the right platform for your operation.

## In-House Training

Your first option is to create an in-house training program. As my family's self-storage portfolio grew, it became apparent that

# 66 Successful self-storage facilities don't run themselves. Without professional staff, you'll struggle to compete in today's market.

we needed to develop one. Now, each new staff member is required to complete it. We also have mandatory follow-up training for seasoned employees.

An important consideration is what your training should cover. One area of focus that should be included in every program is sales. Every self-storage manager we hire gets sales training, but it's important to determine the types of selling techniques you want to use at your location. Whether your approach is "making a connection" or "high pressure," consider any and all forms of training materials.

In addition, consider making videos on unit cleaning, online reviews, maintenance schedules, customer service and more. Don't forget about specific platforms and tools.

For example, most self-storage operators use management software these days, but if the manager doesn't know how to use it, they won't be able to provide the exceptional customer service needed to meet your aggressive income projections! In my operation, every one of our team members is required to provide a certificate of training completion from the software company within seven days of employment. If you're new to the industry and haven't decided which software to use, consider going through a potential vendor's training platform to help you make an informed decision, as you want to provide the best tools for your team's success.

To build your training program, involve your self-storage staff. Ask questions related to what they do every day and find out where they feel the need for more guidance. Next, develop written job descriptions and an operations manual. These resources can serve as ongoing tools employees can reference when needed.

## Third-Party Trainers

If you own a handful of self-storage facilities, consider hiring a third-party

company to train your managers. With this approach, there are two options: onsite and online.

If you bring the trainer to your location, employees receive individual, hands-on coaching with an industry expert. You can also have this person examine your policies and procedures, to help hedge any potential legal or operational issues. A professional can typically provide lots of advice on how to improve your business. These sessions tend to cost more than some of the other options available, but the investment usually pays off immediately. Plus, you won't have to invest time or money into developing your own program!

There are also many vendors who produce online forms of training. They tend to provide a different type of insight. Often, this approach can spark ideas or help create a better way of accomplishing various tasks. Plus, providers are always introducing new modules and updates that can improve your operation.

Before hiring any kind of trainer, in-person or online, it's important to set your expectations. You should both be on the same page, so your staff receive the proper guidance. Do you want sales training, or do you need to focus on auctions or marketing? Sessions can often be customized for your business.

## Other Online Resources

Even though I've been in the self-storage industry a while, I still look for new podcasts, webinars and articles weekly. Our team of managers and leasing agents often receive emails from me with links to online knowledge. Most of them always respond with a big "thank you." They're just like I was once: running a facility and searching for guidance.

Many self-storage associations offer a variety of education resources. Regularly visit their websites for new content and sign up for their newsletters. There are other organizations that provide all kinds of free information, too. For example, Inside Self-Storage offers articles, blogs, videos, podcasts, galleries, whitepapers, case studies, newsletters and more at [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com).

Don't limit yourself or your staff! There are many places and ways to learn about critical topics like customer service, marketing, sales and technology. Anything you and your team learn can help your improve performance and the business.

## Conferences and Tradeshows

These events offer in-depth learning opportunities from industry experts. When our managers attend, they're excited to soak up the knowledge and always bring home a suitcase full of motivation. Plus, there's all the

networking, which isn't only a lot of fun but can provide enrichment for your staff, as it gives them an opportunity to learn from peers.

These live education platforms cater to managers as well as owners and can be a huge benefit to your business. Look for any opportunity to attend national and state conventions. I promise that your team will appreciate your investment in them. There's also an opportunity for you to offer the trip when certain goals have been achieved by your staff.

## Making the Choice

By now you're probably wondering about the best approach to training for your own self-storage team. Should you develop your own platform? Take advantage of online options? Outsource? To arrive at an answer, consider how much time you have, how much money you're willing to invest and where you see the most value.

My company manages 37 properties, so it made sense for us to invest in an in-house program, which is created by our education and administrative staff. However, if we owned just a couple of facilities, it wouldn't be reasonable to spend the time or money. There are several professional companies that could meet these needs. Again, there are even free resources online.

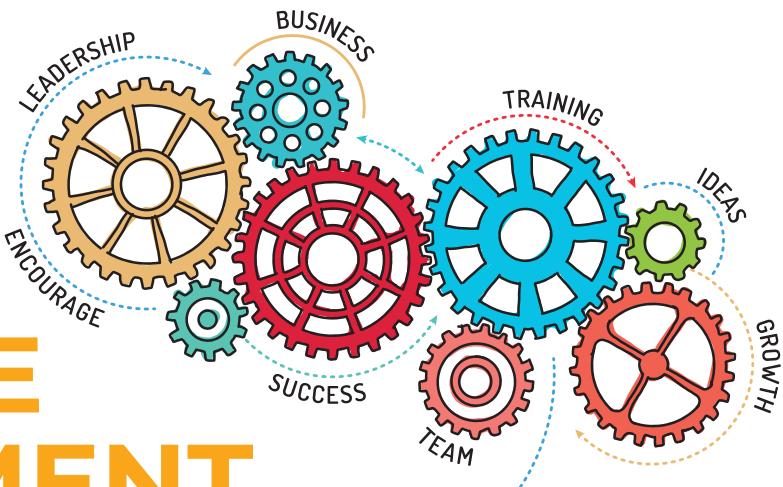
## Make It a Priority

Remember: You don't know what you don't know! I recently discovered that a client of mine was using a self-storage lease that didn't contain the necessary lien-law language. They assumed the software company had uploaded all the appropriate forms. Without experience or training, they had no way of knowing that the documents they were using were generic and it was up to them to add the correct ones. They had units that needed to be auctioned but no legal right to sell them. This is why consistent training is so critical!

Whether you have one self-storage location or 100, ongoing training should be a priority. Especially if you're a new owner or investor, you owe it to yourself and your onsite staff to implement required training for everyone. There's nothing like seeing a freshly trained manager put their new knowledge to work!

Successful self-storage facilities don't run themselves. Without professional staff, you'll struggle to compete in today's market. An investment in training will produce positive results, and the return will be greater than you might think. **ISS**

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# Training for MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

**In 2012, I was handed the keys** to nine self-storage facilities. At the time, I knew nothing about operating these properties, as I was new to the industry and had a lot to learn. Luckily, there were resources I could turn to for help, and more than a decade later, I'm still thankful for it.

The self-storage industry has evolved significantly from its humble beginnings, having grown and become more institutionalized. The real estate investment trusts and other large operators have introduced sophisticated methods, data analytics, tools and strategies, making facility management more complex. They have dedicated departments for just about every aspect of the business, and many tasks are managed from a central office rather than the individual sites. This is great if it improves efficiency; but it also creates a disconnect between day-to-day operations and overarching corporate strategies.

As a result of this new business model, many responsibilities and tasks have been shifted away from facility managers. When challenges arise at a property, the tendency is to defer to the corporate office rather than empower onsite staff to act. When changes occur within the organization, they aren't always communicated to the entire team, or the "why" behind the change gets lost.

In the end, the roles of self-storage site manager and district manager have changed. Today, district managers focus more on people management, scheduling and basic operational tasks, often without a deep understanding of the broader business picture. They're chasing short-term goals and keeping people in line, but they often can't see the forest for the trees. From all of this, the need for specialized training programs that address the needs of self-storage middle management has become increasingly evident.

## The Case for Comprehensive Middle-Manager Training

Many self-storage companies teach their staff the essentials, for example, how to complete the lease and take payments. However, ongoing operational training is severely lacking, and there's rarely comprehensive education on the more intricate aspects of the business that are crucial for advanced decision-making and operational excellence. To help further the company's success, a district or regional manager must understand the why behind tactical decisions.

For example, beyond the fundamentals of revenue management, they must understand self-storage supply and demand, how to create and set their own goals, and how to provide valuable site-level feedback. Typically, facility reports and metrics only go to owners or top-level leaders, but that information should also be shared with—and explained to—middle management for greater insight and visibility.

Middle managers can significantly impact a self-storage business, but they're often left handling basic, routine tasks. The lack of advanced operational training geared toward portfolio management must be addressed. It can transform an employee from someone who simply follows orders from a large corporate office into a strategic decision-maker who understands the nuances of the business and can help make strong recommendations for improvement.

Investing in comprehensive training programs for your mid-level self-storage managers offers numerous benefits. It will empower them to:

- Gain a clear understanding of business goals and the strategies needed to achieve them
- Grasp performance metrics and operational strategies, including why they matter
- Rely less on the corporate office for day-to-day decisions and take the initiative
- Make more informed decisions and provide valuable feedback to decision-makers

## Effective Training Methods

Practical training for self-storage middle management can take various forms. The first is peer-to-peer learning in which managers shadow more experienced members of the company and learn best practices. This hand-on approach can be delivered through group training and field trips on which staff visit other facilities. You can also hire an industry consultant to provide in-depth, specialized training. Finally, you can explore a hybrid approach that integrates leadership development, big-picture portfolio management and continuous updates on operational strategies.

To implement these programs effectively, organize team summits and get-togethers to facilitate knowledge-sharing and team-building. Provide video training and in-person workshops that offer flexibility and cater to different learning preferences. Finally, offer ongoing education opportunities that keep managers informed about the latest industry trends and practices.

## A Pressing Need

The call to action is clear: We need to prioritize comprehensive training for middle management! As the self-storage industry transitions into a more institutionalized business model, many managers may be left behind. They need to be educated and informed to make better decisions.

By investing in the development of middle managers, self-storage organizations can ensure sustained growth and success. The feedback loop is incredibly beneficial and can be eye-opening. By integrating these training initiatives, we can bridge the knowledge gap in our operations while empowering our managers to drive performance and contribute to the overall success of the business. **ISS**

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# Understanding Work Culture



**When I was first asked** to write this article on work culture for self-storage operations, I immediately began to wonder if the staff at my own company are aware of or give any consideration to it. We have a mission statement, but how many of our employees have read it, believe it and are guided by its values? I was so intrigued by these questions that I decided to ask everyone on my team. The responses were both eye-opening and gratifying.

Work culture is defined as a collection of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that make up the workplace environment; and whether you know it or not, it can have a serious impact on business success. Give that some thought. What's the culture of your self-storage company, whether you operate a single facility or several or hundreds? If you aren't sure what work culture is or why it's important, read on. I'll also explore some culture types and workplace factors that influence it.

## Why Is Work Culture So Critical?

**It leads to better service.** Every self-storage operator strives to hire and train employees who possess exceptional service skills. Those who show respect, a willingness to help and empathy will gain you more renters, even over price.

**It improves employee satisfaction and retention.** Employee turnover comes with significant costs and directly impacts daily operation. Training expenses are substantial, plus it's necessary to keep things running during staff transitions, adding to the financial burden. When team members feel valued and appreciated, they're more likely to stay long-term and deliver exceptional performance.

**It bolsters teamwork.** It takes an exceptional team, one that works in sync, to

achieve business goals. Working as a cohesive unit increases success in problem-solving and meeting customer needs.

**It enhances brand reputation and referrals.** The best word-of-mouth comes from your existing self-storage customers. Tenants who see that your employees are treated fairly and are committed to ethical and responsible business practices are more likely to refer your company to others.

## Types of Work Culture

If you aren't sure where to begin in terms of establishing a healthy work culture for your self-storage business, a clear mission statement is a good place to start. Write a short paragraph to explain why your company exists and define its values and ethics. Be thoughtful, clear and precise in what you want to convey to employees, the public, and potential or current customers.

This statement should ultimately reflect the type of culture to intend to exemplify. Here are some examples you could emulate:

**Service-driven.** This type of culture prioritizes connecting with each customer. The goal is to understand their needs and expectations and strive to exceed them whenever possible.

**Hierarchical.** In this culture, which is very focused on chain of command, decision-making authority rests at the top, with clearly defined policies and procedures that employees are expected to follow.

**Collaborative.** Teamwork, open communication and cooperation are paramount within this culture. There's also a strong emphasis on sharing knowledge, ideas and resources to reach company objectives.

**Results-oriented.** This work culture is based on measurable performance. Employees are expected to meet goals and deliver results, with an emphasis on accountability.

**Innovative.** Creativity, experimentation and risk-taking are encouraged in this environment. Thinking outside the box is standard, as well as encouraging everyone to explore new ideas and how to approach them.

**Flexible.** Adaptability is essential in this culture where change is constant and employees must be able to make quick yet appropriate decisions.

## Influences on Work Culture

Now that we've explored some of the directions you might go when shaping your self-storage work culture, it's important to recognize the circumstances and factors within your organization that could impact its evolution.

**Organizational chart.** Your company hierarchy will hinder or support your chosen work culture. Having a structure that clearly defines everyone's roles and responsibilities helps everyone achieve company goals.

**Corporate values.** Your company's core beliefs should shine through your culture and become ingrained in its DNA. Each value provides a blueprint for all decisions made throughout the organization.

**Leadership.** The ethics and leadership style of your key team members set a tone and greatly influence the work culture. Leaders who project and prioritize transparency and employee growth while genuinely caring about team well-being will create a more positive environment.

**Communication.** Effective practices in this area are essential for a positive work culture. Open-door policies and transparency create trust, teamwork and a sense of ownership for each employee. Listen to concerns and ideas and always encourage feedback. Miscommunication is the primary reason people become discontented with their jobs.

**Employee satisfaction.** Organizations that recognize and celebrate team achievements, provide opportunities for growth and focus on well-being tend to have motivated and trusted employees.

**Environment.** Making sure your workplace is comfortable, inclusive and—now more than ever—flexible, can help keep your work culture positive and productive.

**External stimuli.** Factors such as market competition, industry trends and changing regulations can also impact your work culture.

### A Path to Success

Now that you've read examples of work-culture types and understand the factors that can affect a self-storage workplace, you're better equipped to design one that'll work best for everyone within your own organization, all the way from the owner to your part-time facility employees. The goal is to cultivate an environment that upholds your operation's values and objectives.

Creating and maintaining a strong work culture is essential for the success of a

self-storage business, but the process takes time, effort and commitment from everyone within the company. It won't only enhance productivity, longevity and morale, it's a huge factor in customer satisfaction and loyalty, which ultimately sustains business growth and success. **ISS**

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### Organizational structure

**serves** as the backbone for any business, including a self-storage operation. Whether you own a single facility or run a large corporation, robust policies and procedures are crucial for streamlining facility management. They not only mitigate risk, they help foster a culture of accountability, one in which employees are empowered and customers can use storage with clarity and confidence.

Both policies and procedures should be created with efficiency, compliance and consistency in mind, but they aren't the same. Policies are high-level guidelines that outline general business principles, values and rules. They provide the framework for decision-making and set expectations for employee and tenant behavior. Procedures are detailed, step-by-step instructions that

describe how specific tasks or processes should be performed.

Let's look at how to create these guiding principles for your self-storage business that are clear and effective, and best practices for keeping them up-to-date.

### Creating Policies and Procedures

To start developing protocols for your self-storage operation, you must identify the risks and needs inherent within your business. Risks are potential liabilities that could impact your investors, owners, employees and customers. They are addressed by policies. For example, there are policies about work hours and how employees should interact with customers. Needs are corporate expectations outside of risk but still required within your organization. They are built into your

procedures. Your company dress code is a good example.

Once you've identified your risks and needs, it's time to create comprehensive policies and procedures that address them. Neither should be made for one-time occurrences. In self-storage, they address things like security practices, the rental process, late fees and customer conduct.

It's important to remember that they'll impact your overall work culture, team performance and operational efficiency.

Take time to research industry best practices, regulatory compliance standards and legal requirements to understand effective guidelines across other organizations similar to your own. Then write clear and concise rules that outline your expectations. Use simple language that anyone can read and follow. Incorporating visual aids is also beneficial. Include details for how to handle various situations, including how to document them and expected emotional behavior while addressing them.

For example, let's say a self-storage manager arrives at the office in the morning and realizes there's been a break-in. The *company policy* is that the incident should be documented and reported to the proper authorities. The specific *procedure* should include chronological instructions for how to respond. It might look something like this:

- Stay calm.
- Call the police.
- Call the supervisor.
- Take photographs of the affected area and damages.
- Take inventory of the office to see if anything is missing.
- Receive a case number from the police officer.
- Fill out an incident report and send it to the supervisor.

## The Review Process

Once your policies and procedures are written, they should be reviewed by multiple people within your self-storage organization. This might include human resources as well as key stakeholders and legal or department heads. The goal is to ensure everything is logically in order and covers the risks and needs you've previously identified. Internal review also allows you to evaluate how well policies align with the objectives, internal mission and values of the company while promoting desired behaviors.

## Implementation and Training

After the review is complete and necessary adjustments have been made, it's time to educate your self-storage team and customers on these new rules and expectations. Create an implementation plan for each policy and procedure and distribute the information through multiple channels. For staff, these might be meetings, newsletters, and live or virtual training sessions. For tenants, you might use snail-mail notices, signage and your rental agreement. Don't simply send out an email and hope for the best! The goal is to make sure the message is effectively received by those people it affects.

Depending on the urgency to put a specific policy or procedure in place, you might roll it out to various groups gradually or all at once to everyone at a specific time. The goal is facility- or company-wide adoption.

Explaining the reasoning behind your new self-storage rules will help staff and customers

understand them and transition into the new way of doing things. It's important that everyone understands their responsibilities, how to implement the new policies and procedures, and the consequences of non-compliance. A simple Q&A will help verify that the intention is understood and proper education was achieved across the organization. Allow a transition period to give everyone time to process, ask questions and adjust to the new protocols.

Finally, get internal feedback. It's the best way to understand the impact your new policies and procedures are having on your organization. A small adjustment may result in a large benefit to the culture and growth of your business.

## Enforcement

All staff should have access to your new business standards for reference at any time and sufficient guidance and support from management. This creates accountability. To maintain a safe and orderly environment for your self-storage team and the customers they serve, it's important to enforce your company's policies and procedures and address any violations. Just make sure you do so consistently and fairly.

This may involve conducting regular facility inspections and watching security footage. You can also monitor compliance with checklists, performance evaluations and audits.

It's important to address any non-compliance issues promptly and take corrective action. Again, be consistent and fair.

Any deviation from policy needs supervisor approval, or a written explanation to justify the reasoning. The consequences for those who are non-compliant should be clear and relayed to all parties.

## The Best Outcome

Your self-storage policies and procedures do not fall into the category of "set it and forget it." Their creation and enforcement is an ongoing process. They should be periodically reviewed and updated to reflect importance changes in business practices, industry standards, laws, regulations or technology. Solicit feedback from staff and customers to ensure your rules remain relevant and effective. Any updates need to be communicated across your entire organization, and training should be provided to ensure understanding and compliance.

These critical guidelines are the backbone of your self-storage business. With a systematic approach and some internal collaboration, you can craft ones that work for ownership, staff and customers alike. Just remember: Policies and procedures aren't carved in stone and are subject to change as the industry evolves. By being ready and willing to pivot, your company will be positioned to mitigate risk while empowering employees and allowing customers to use storage with confidence and clarity. **ISS**

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# Motivation and Engagement

**In a competitive labor market** where it seems job seekers hold all the cards, it's important for self-storage operators to hold on to their well-trained and knowledgeable staff. Turnover is expensive! But with so many employment opportunities available, how do you convince your best people to stay?

Let's explore the reasons why team motivation and engagement are so important in today's self-storage industry and the many benefits of investing in retention. I'll share strategies for

keeping your people happy and productive and rewards you can offer them beyond pay increases and bonuses. I'll also discuss what to do when you're concerned that a valued employee may be on the way out and the role of work culture in maintaining a productive workforce.

## The Benefits of a Happy Team

Motivated, engaged team members tend to stay in their jobs for longer. According to a recent blog post by Quixy, a cloud-based

platform that specializes in no-code web and app development, "A highly engaged team can experience a 41% reduction in absenteeism, 50% less turnover and 28% less internal theft." That's good news for self-storage owners, as it's expensive to replace staff.

U.S. employers spend \$2.9 million per day searching for replacement workers, Quixy reports. Global analytics and management-consulting firm Gallup estimates that employers are losing \$1 trillion per year due

to voluntary turnover, and the cost of replacing an employee can conservatively range from one-half to two times that person's salary.

There's an additional cost to staff loss in the self-storage industry. When your facility managers leave to work for the competition, those other operators gain an advantage in your market. There can be a domino effect, too. Often, when one valued employee leaves, others follow, demotivating the entire team.

It makes good sense to invest in retention. Not only are there financial advantages, it helps you build and sustain a corporate culture in which team members thrive and want to remain, according to Don Wenner, author of "Building an Elite Organization."

### Keeping Them Content and Productive

To motivate your self-storage team members and inspire loyalty, you must focus on compensation and career development. This includes competitive pay and financial incentives for achieving key performance indicators (KPIs). When everyone has KPIs, they know exactly what they're aiming for, "what a win looks like," says James Reid, owner StorCo Storage, which operates three self-storage facilities in two states.

Offering opportunities for increased responsibility, authority and promotion

keeps self-storage employees motivated and striving for success. No one wants their career to stagnate. Strong staff seek growth and advancement. Offering training, mentorship, and professional development helps them grow, enhancing their power and productivity.

One extremely effective strategy for keeping your people happy is to find out what motivates each one individually. Wilson Learning Corp., which helps companies improve employee engagement, has identified four main personality types:

- **Drivers** are motivated by results such as more money, a promotion or power.
- **Expressives** desire applause in the form of publicly celebrated wins and gratitude.
- **Amiables** like attention, such as words of affirmation, whether in public or private.
- **Analytics** like activity and just want to be left alone to focus on their work.

Other personality indices use different names like Beaver, Golden Retriever, Lion and Otter, but they all require different types of rewards. The goal is to find out what matters most to each of your self-storage team members. You can ask them directly or use a digital survey. When onboarding new hires, inquire about their preferred gifts. Here are a few popular answers:

- Amazon or Starbucks gift card
- Donation to a charity of their choice
- Flowers, food or beverage delivered to home or office
- Team parties or cultural events
- Tickets to a sports event or concert
- Travel points for airfare or hotel
- Extra time off

Pay attention to your team and use what you learn to reward them in a personal way. For example, if an employee loves flowers and is celebrating a milestone birthday, send a special bouquet to their home. If you know they love the beach and they blow their quarterly KPIs out of the water, surprise them with a trip to the Bahamas. Being observant shows people you care. When they know you care, they're more likely to stick around.

Another very obvious but often overlooked way to reward your self-storage employees without having to offer money (or things that cost money) is to simply celebrate their achievements. Everyone appreciates being appreciated.

Finally, don't forget about benefits like health insurance. Subsidize as much as you can and, if possible, extend the offer to family members. An advantage like this can have tremendous value in today's economy, fostering strong loyalty and attracting top talent. If cost is a

## LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

### Demotivators

- Belittling and berating, especially with yelling or profanity
- Talking down to the team
- Disregarding their suggestions or input
- Blaming team members
- Failing to acknowledge your own mistakes
- Bullying team members
- Gossiping and slandering
- Excluding team members from group events
- Saying one thing and doing another
- Setting unattainable goals
- Micromanaging
- Withholding praise and support
- Denying financial rewards
- Blocking career development
- Discriminating based on sex, race or other factors

### Motivators

- Offering respect, kindness and praise
- Making the team part of the bigger vision
- Welcoming ideas and suggestions and acting on ones that benefit the company
- Providing support before frustration boils over
- Offering humility and honesty
- Hosting celebrations and parties inspire team camaraderie
- Actively listening
- Creating activities to bring the team together
- Following the rules and setting the example
- Setting goals that are specific, measurable and achievable
- Offering empowerment and trust
- Providing public recognition
- Financially rewarding the team for success
- Providing encouragement and opportunities for professional growth
- Acknowledging and respecting team members' unique attributes

concern, consider using a professional employer organization (PEO) to offer top-notch benefits to your team. PEOs leverage economies of scale to provide superior benefits that might otherwise be out of reach.

### In the Face of a Potential Exit

If you think one of your valued self-storage team members might be preparing leave, address it directly. Have an open conversation to ask if they're satisfied and how their experience with your company could be more fulfilling.

Gallup reports an 18% decrease in staff turnover for businesses that regularly engage their employees. Hubspot adds that 69% of employees would work harder if their efforts were better recognized. So, regularly interact with your self-storage team. Ask for their feedback, and acknowledge and reward their efforts.

After getting input from your employee, do something about it. You aren't just trying to placate them. Alignment between what you say and what you do is critical. Respond with positive changes that increase motivation.

If your staff member has been offered a new opportunity and you can't counter with a

competitive offer, celebrate their success and bless their departure. Deliver this message publicly and within your company. It's great when companies do this on LinkedIn, bidding farewell to team members who are moving on to new challenges.

Just remember, there's official messaging and then there's the undercurrent—what people say beyond the owner's or supervisor's earshot. Watch for this and address unhelpful messages while reinforcing the core value of open and honest communication without gossip or retaliation. This is a value every self-storage organization should have.

As President Barack Obama said, "Never let a crisis go to waste." Use it to advance your agenda: to build and sustain a happy, motivated and productive self-storage team with staying power. Use turnover to perform a career health check with your employees so you can help them achieve their personal and professional goals.

### The Impact on Work Culture

Fifty years ago, it was common for companies to host picnics, parties and trips to bring families together. Society was more family-centered, and so were

employers. Honors and award banquets used to be regular events, as were local news articles honoring employees' personal and professional achievements. That was just how businesses operated if they wanted to keep good employees.

Yesterday's basic standards are now seen as exceptional corporate culture. Employers should remember what made jobs fulfilling for previous generations. Even in our high-tech world, old-school wisdom still plays a crucial role in retaining good staff.

Whether viewed as common sense or a trendy business ethos, corporate culture is increasingly vital to employees. It's more than just words; your daily actions as a self-storage owner or supervisor shape your organization. How you treat people sets the tone for your entire company, and people will follow your lead.

What type of self-storage leader do you want to be, and what kind of corporate culture do you want to create? By being a strong supporter who celebrates success, you'll foster a more motivated team and enjoy better retention. **ISS**

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in delivering on the business purpose and impact. Creating a world-class team is a vital component of achieving massive success and fulfillment in any organization.

So, how do we actually do this? Below I share insight to finding key people, attracting them to your vision, empowering them for success, and improving your own skills to become the best leader you can be, based on experience with my own team.

### Sourcing Talent

When searching for exceptional people to join your self-storage team, it's crucial to identify the skills and qualities that align with your organization's vision and values. This requires looking beyond resumes and qualifications. Relentlessly pursue those who not only possess the necessary technical

# Ways to Support Staff

**Fire walker. Dream weaver. Vision caster.**  
**Manifesting leader.**

**Being a self-storage owner** calls upon all our human resources, plus a fair amount of the superhuman and divine, to deliver the otherworldly endurance, creativity

and humility required to learn the inevitable lessons that come along the journey. We must adjust and continue ever onward toward the end goal. No matter how limitless our own potential may be, each of us needs a team of others to move the vision forward. Every individual plays their own vital role

expertise but demonstrate a growth mindset, passion and a strong cultural fit. Our world is so quickly changing that growth-focused psychology and work ethic are equally important—if not more so—than technical skills.

How and where the job posting is publicized varies depending on the role. At my company, we source individuals through industry networking and referrals as well as traditional job postings and specialized recruiters. Current team members can also be wonderful advocates and help source candidates who might share our values and vision. After all, who better to recruit than someone already on board and who “gets it”? For a location-specific or specialized role, perhaps an online community group post will garner some solid local referrals.

After our first few attempts to source key team members by ourselves, we learned to delegate and leverage experts. Depending on the role, we now also use recruiters and benefits consultants. These resources help us not only identify top talent, but also craft custom compensation packages unique to each individual, their role and contribution to moving the company vision forward.

### The Mission and Values

With quality individuals identified, the next step is attracting them to our mission and differentiating our company from the rest of the employer options in the marketplace. This is where the visionary shines (if this isn’t you, it’s usually the company founder). Cast the vision of the future, the larger impact and purpose of the business. People want to be part of something meaningful, so it’s important to clearly communicate the mission and values. Share stories that illustrate the business’ positive impacts on customers, team members and the broader community.

We balance this with the tangible nuts and bolts—compensation, benefits packages, career trajectory, continuing education—to ground the bigger-picture vision to the reality of capitalism and costs of living in our current reality. We believe in the adage “pay peanuts, get monkeys,” so we temper generous compensation packages with high expectations, clear targets and regular tracking to ensure we’re setting up new hires to achieve the success criteria outlined at their onboarding.

### The Interview Process

Our interview process is multi-layered. We look for cultural fit as well as specialized expertise through a staged mix of individual and panel interviews. Our team currently includes people across the U.S., so whenever

**66** With rockstar resources in place and empowered, the next steps are all about communication. This starts with fostering a culture of open communication, where feedback isn’t only welcome but actively sought.

possible, we try to make in-person conversations happen. If speaking with a potential new executive team member, meeting the spouse is also important.

We also use personality-assessment tests (such as DiSC or Predictive Index) and map the potential new hire’s results within the broader context of the current team profiles. This sparks awareness and discussion within the hiring team of how the assessment aligns the individual with the role and expected outcomes as well as how they might benefit the makeup of the broader team.

Again, we leverage experts. This is where executive coaches and hiring personnel come into play to help lead discussion, interpret and advise on reports and integration of the individual into the team and the role.

Empowering team members to achieve success and fulfillment starts with clear definitions. Challenge your concept of the traditional job description with the consideration of a “job scorecard,” which outlines specific and measurable outcomes of the role, rather than activities. Clarity on success outcomes sets up the next step to encourage autonomy and decision-making, allowing the individual to take ownership of their work.

### Open Communication

With rockstar resources in place and empowered, the next steps are all about communication. This starts with fostering a culture of open communication, where feedback isn’t only welcome but actively sought. We do this by regularly recognizing and celebrating individual and team achievements. Shout-outs pop up on team Slack channels, in weekly huddles, at monthly team meetings or quarterly reviews. This fosters a sense of accomplishment and motivates continued striving for greatness. Encourage a growth mindset, where failures are seen as learning opportunities and innovation is encouraged.

By fostering a culture of trust, respect and empowerment, you’ll inspire your self-storage team to reach new heights. In our remote-work

and geographically diverse team, how can we knit our members together for cohesive connection? We have a mix of approaches:

- **Weekly virtual team huddle.** This is to discuss objectives, roadblocks and accountability.
- **Monthly team meeting that alternates between virtual and in-person.** Agenda topics come from team members who present successes and work outputs from the past 30, 60 or 90 days. This serves a dual purpose: Individual ownership of areas of expertise as well as spreading awareness across team verticals of the different impacts upon delivering the broader company mission.
- **Quarterly full-team meeting.** This is one to three days offsite for strategic goal progress, setting future targets and team-building activities.
- **Annual review and strategic goal-setting.** How did we measure up against the goals we set for ourselves? How do we take that into account as we set our targets for the year ahead?
- **Extra credit: A virtual monthly book club.** Topics alternate between financial concepts, personal productivity and team dynamics, and we’re open to requests. Team members volunteer to present a summary and their greatest takeaways. For extra incentive to participate, everyone who attends the entire meeting gets credit. You can set a dollar value that makes sense for your company. At ours, it’s paid in January for the year.

### Continuous Improvement

As leaders, our most crucial responsibility is continuous improvement. My business partner, Sergio, and I have executive business coaches, dedicated practices to our mental and physical health, and show up with intention in networking groups and masterminds that elevate and challenge how we approach our goals, thoughts and actions. We talk about our own experiences candidly with our team, offering our coaches to our executives, sharing the latest bio-hack we’re experimenting with ourselves (workout variations, cold exposure,

alternate day fasting), and encourage our team through our own example to have similar pursuits along the path of self-evolution.

We also talk about the visceral experience of attending Tony Robbins' "Unleash the Power Within," and about Sergio's takeaways from climbing his first "Fourteener" mountain climb in Colorado. We bring the whole person to our daily work, aware of our strengths and weaknesses, and leverage those accordingly.

For us, leadership isn't about commanding but to trust, inspire, motivate and empower others. We pursue the concept of servant leadership and focus on supporting team

growth, removing obstacles and cultivating a positive work environment.

Building an extraordinary team in the self-storage business involves finding the right people who align with your vision, attracting them by showcasing a compelling purpose, empowering them through autonomy and recognition, and continually improving your own leadership skills. It's the combined efforts of an exceptional team that propels a business toward success, fulfillment and a lasting impact in our communities.

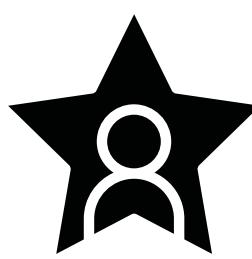
What has been the absolute game changer for us in building our self-storage team has

been to surrender ego and focus on the process of bringing in incredible talent who'll work together in harmony. The experience and deep knowledge of our team is world-class, and there's nothing more rewarding and humbling than to see them come together to work toward extraordinary results.

I'll leave you with one last thought, from entrepreneur and author Jim Rohn: "The big challenge is to become all you have the possibility of becoming." **ISS**

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## A FRESH APPROACH TO



## PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

**Ah, yes. It's that magical time again!** The air crackles with tension, everyone's slurping down coffee like it's about to be canceled, and sick days skyrocket. You guessed it: It's time for staff-performance reviews! If you're lucky, you've caught that stomach bug that's been going around and you might be able to dodge the bullet for a few days.

But let's be real for a second. While this whole performance-evaluation circus is great fodder for jokes, it's no laughing matter. This process is essential to your self-storage company's growth, employee development and productivity, and team retention. The problem is it's usually accompanied by enough stress to make a yoga retreat sound appealing, even to the least limber among us.

In this article, we're going to unravel the mysteries of the self-storage employee review, focusing on how you can walk the tightrope between objectivity and empathy,

and maybe even toss in some humor to keep things from feeling like a courtroom drama. I'll arm you with real strategies and insights that'll allow you to be the hero of team-evaluation season rather than the villain.

So, buckle up, grab that stress ball you won at the last team-building exercise, and let's transform this dreaded process into something less miserable. Who knows? You might even crack a smile or two along the way.

### The Traditional Approach to Performance Reviews: A Recipe for Disaster

Before we get into ways to improve the employee-review process for your self-storage team, let's acknowledge the conundrum in which we all find ourselves. The way staff reviews are currently conducted is, to put it mildly, a hot mess wrapped in human-resources lingo. Here's how it usually goes down:

- The supervisor frantically scrolls through emails trying to remember what the employee did six months ago.
- The employee spends several sleepless nights dreading the moment they have to sit in that awkward office chair.
- Both parties engage in an Olympic-level competition of forced smiles and polite nodding before launching into the real conversation.
- The supervisor drones on with corporate speak like "synergizing your proactive initiatives" while the employee mentally composes their resignation letter.
- Both walk away wondering, "What just happened?" and "Do we really have to do this again in six or 12 months?"

Sound familiar? If you're nodding so hard your neck might snap, congratulations, you've survived the standard performance-review process. But this approach doesn't exactly set up your self-storage employees for success. Let's break down the issues with this traditional approach:

- **Recency bias:** The supervisor only remembers the last few weeks of work, maybe a couple of months. Older accomplishments and problems seem to disappear into the ether, just like your car keys.
- **Lack of continuous feedback:** Why wait six months or even a year to tell someone they've been doing a great job or using too many exclamation marks in their emails? Feedback shouldn't come as an unpleasant surprise once or twice per year.
- **One-way monologue:** Reviews often turn into the supervisor's TED Talk on vague goals while the employee is just waiting for it to end.
- **Anxiety-inducing:** The stress of a performance review can rival that induced by a horror-movie marathon.
- **Disconnected from reality:** Arbitrary goals often have little to do with what the employee actually does each day.
- **Lack of empathy:** Focusing purely on data can sometimes make supervisors forget that they're dealing with actual humans, not an office printer. People have *feelings*.
- **Zero fun:** Performance reviews are about as enjoyable as a trip to the dentist, without the free toothbrush.

I know what you're thinking, but don't panic! In the sections ahead, I'll share exactly how you can ditch these old-school practices for something that won't make your self-storage employees want to hide in one of your units in the hopes that no one will find them.

## Performance Reviews and the Empathy Factor

If you want your self-storage staff evaluations to be less frightening and more productive, we need to talk about empathy. At the end of the day, you're reviewing people, not robots. Imagine you're the one being assessed—sweaty palms, racing heartbeat, and you suddenly can't remember your own job title. Wouldn't it be nice if your supervisor actually understood how nerve-wracking this whole debacle is? By injecting compassion into the review process, you can:

- Reduce anxiety and help your self-storage team open up.
- Understand the real-life challenges your employees face. Maybe someone's trying to juggle work with a new baby at home.
- Build trust and encourage people to be honest.
- Make staff more receptive to feedback and less defensive.

You don't need to become a full-time therapist to show empathy (though that might make for some interesting company picnics). Here's how to keep things real:

- **Practice active listening.** That means no texting or checking Slack while your employee is pouring their heart out. Eye contact, people!
- **Ask real questions.** Don't assume you know everything. Instead of the classic, "Tell me about your performance," try, "What challenges have you faced recently?"
- **Recognize emotions.** A simple "I know this can be nerve-wracking, but I'm here to support you" can take the tension down several notches.
- **Remember, personal circumstances matter.** If your employee's been juggling family drama or health issues, factor that into your evaluation.
- **Put work in context.** Help employees see how their efforts are contributing to the big picture. It isn't just about ticking boxes. There's a whole ecosystem here!
- **Offer support.** Don't just drop problems in your self-storage employee's lap. Work together to come up with solutions.
- **Reflect on yourself.** Make sure you're in a good headspace before evaluating someone else. If you've had a rough day, it might not be the best time for performance talks.

With a little empathy, you can turn the evaluation process into something that feels more like a conversation and less like a dental exam.

## A Fresh Performance-Review Process

Now it's time to dig deeper. Here are 10 practical strategies that can help turn your self-storage employee-performance reviews from something dreaded into a more productive and even enjoyable experience.

- 1. **Make it a continuous, ongoing process.** Don't save everything for the periodic review. Regular check-ins throughout the year can ease the pressure and ensure feedback is timely. These can be brief, informal conversations about progress, challenges and wins, so when the formal evaluation comes around, there are no bombshells. Monthly or quarterly chat sessions let employees know how they're doing in real time, so the formal assessment becomes more of a recap.

2. **Set clear expectations, and do it early.** Work with your self-storage employee to set clear, actionable goals at the beginning of the evaluation period. This gives them a roadmap to success and removes any ambiguity about what they need to achieve. It also gives supervisors a solid basis for evaluation, reducing those last-minute scrambles to remember who did what. Ultimately, you want to set goals that are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and

time-bound). This framework makes the review process feel more objective and less arbitrary.

### 3. Make sure it's a two-way conversation.

Instead of a one-sided lecture, each review should be a genuine dialogue. Ask open-ended questions like, "How do you feel about your progress this past period?" or "What challenges have you faced of which I might not be aware?" This creates space for employees to share their thoughts and for supervisors to listen and respond.

Also, encourage your self-storage team to assess their own performance before the review. This promotes reflection and can provide valuable insight into their self-perception, which might align (or contrast) with your evaluation.

### 4. Make it specific and actionable.

Whether offering praise or constructive criticism, ground your feedback in specific examples. Instead of "You need to communicate better," try "In the XYZ project, clearer communication would've helped avoid confusion." If there are areas of improvement, focus on actionable next steps. For example, if an employee struggles with time management, suggest they implement a new project-tracking tool or break larger tasks into smaller milestones.

### 5. Recognize achievements and strengths.

Make time to celebrate successes. Team members need to know their hard work is noticed. Recognition can be a powerful motivator and sets a positive tone for the review. Frame some of the feedback around how an employee's strengths can be further leveraged. For example, "You've done an amazing job with X. Let's explore how you can take that to the next level."

### 6. Incorporate humor and humanity.

It's OK to lighten the mood. Start the review with some light conversation to ease tension. A small joke or casual chat can make the process feel less formal and more comfortable.

You also want to keep it real. Show some vulnerability as a supervisor. If things got tough over the past period, acknowledge that it wasn't easy for anyone. Let your employee know they aren't alone in feeling challenged, which can help humanize the experience.

### 7. Use empathy as the foundation.

Performance reviews aren't just about job performance, they're about people. Check in on their well-being, personal challenges or external factors that might have impacted their work. Demonstrating empathy can build trust and make the process feel like a supportive conversation rather than a judgement.

I know this one will feel hard: Turn the tables for a moment and ask employees how you can better support *them*. This shows that

you value their opinion and are committed to mutual improvement.

**8. Create a culture in which you focus on development.** Position the review as a tool for personal and professional growth. Instead of purely grading past performance, shift the conversation toward developing skills and setting new challenges. Create individual plans that highlight areas for growth, specific training opportunities and actionable steps to help the employee continue to thrive. This keeps the conversation future-focused and optimistic.

**9. Reduce the formality.** Sometimes changing the review environment can make

a big difference. If possible, meet over a coffee, in a relaxed setting outside of the office or in a less formal meeting space. This can take the edge off and foster a more open discussion. Allow flexibility in how the review is conducted. Some employees may prefer a structured approach, while others might respond better to a more conversational style.

**10. End on a positive note.** Even if there's been some tough feedback, end the review with positive reinforcement. Highlight the potential you see in the employee and express confidence in their ability to succeed

moving forward. Close the conversation by looking ahead. What exciting projects or opportunities are on the horizon? This gives them something to look forward to, beyond just the immediate feedback.

While performance reviews will likely never be a cause for celebration, they don't have to be a total downer. Treat them as an opportunity to connect with your self-storage employees, celebrate their successes and identify where improvements can be made. **ISS**

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# Dealing With In-Team Disputes



**Let's face it: When a group of people** work together constantly, there will eventually be some type of quarrel. Whether it's a disagreement between peers or a clash between an employee and their supervisor, effective conflict resolution is an essential skill we all can use.

I know what you're thinking ... That sounds great in theory, but have you met my boss? They're impossible! Trust me, I've wanted to buy my fair share of voodoo dolls over the years, but this is a proficiency that needs to be mastered.

Conflict resolution is a critical aspect of effective team management. When issues between staff members are left unaddressed, they can easily escalate. I remember several times in work situations when I failed to communicate my feelings, and then, suddenly, I found myself lashing out over a small and simple thing.

Not addressing complaints early can lead to a toxic work environment, decreased productivity and high turnover. The key is to acknowledge any potential tension promptly and constructively while leaving

your ego and hurt feelings at the door. In this article, I outline actionable steps you can take to prevent, address and settle disputes in the self-storage workplace.

## Conflict With Peers

A very common source of conflict between self-storage facility employees is miscommunication. This happens to me quite frequently. I think I've explained something perfectly, but to the other person, that is the furthest thing from the truth. Communication and leadership are a lot like love languages. We always love others the way *we* want to be loved, not the way *they* want to be loved. It takes a conscious effort to think about how the other person wants to be treated.

To avoid workplace tension, you need to make sure there are no misunderstandings or lack of clarity about individual responsibilities. Any instructions must be communicated in a way that is best for others to receive them, not necessarily how you want to deliver them.

Unequal workload distribution can also create resentment among your self-storage team members. If you fail to carry your own responsibilities and unfairly burden others, it can result in negative feelings. Your coworkers may feel imposed upon or undervalued, and this is a cliff from which it is very hard to come back.

Varied work styles among self-storage employees can also spark conflicts. For example, you might prefer a highly

organized and structured approach, while another team member may thrive in a more flexible and spontaneous environment. Neither point of view is wrong, but if you aren't willing or able to deal with someone else's style, the relationship can become strained.

I remember early in my self-storage career when a coworker mandated that each tenant's name should be written on the lease in black Sharpie marker. Well, I'm the type that if I think a rule is ridiculous, I tend to kick against it. So, I used blue ink instead. The results were what you think they might be.

### Conflict With a Supervisor

Now, let's look at a few types of conflicts you might face with your direct supervisor or even the self-storage facility owner. To begin, disputes may arise when you have different opinions on how to implement company policies. Whether it involves tenants, maintenance or lease agreements, disagreements on policy interpretation and enforcement can really strain the employee-supervisor relationship.

The complaint I hear about most often? Micromanagement! Supervisors who are too hands-on can create frustration, undermining employee trust and autonomy and leading to reduced job satisfaction. Nobody likes excessive scrutiny or supervision.

If you feel like you're being micromanaged, look at the issues on which your supervisor is focusing. Are you sure you aren't underperforming or misunderstanding direction somewhere? There are times when I need an employee to really understand something, or maybe they aren't doing their job as expected. Do I watch closely in those cases to make sure we're getting the proper results? Absolutely. My intentions are good, but they may be misinterpreted.

Finally, there's seagull leadership. This is when the person above you comes for a store visit and does what seagulls do best—make a lot of noise, defecate everywhere and then leave. No one feels good about that.

### Prevention

Creating a conflict-free self-storage workplace requires diligence and preemptive action. Consider these crucial steps to keep tensions from rising.

**Promote an open work culture.** Have hard conversations. When everyone on the team is being honest, there's little room for assumption or ambiguity. Employees will feel valued and supported, and conflicts



**66** Conflict within the self-storage workplace is inevitable, but the way in which it's managed determines the success of the team and organization.

are less likely to arise. Be the first person to admit when you're wrong. Raise your hand and say, "That's on me." By doing this, you'll foster a culture where it's acceptable for people to express themselves, even during difficult discussions.

**Encourage team-building.** These types of activities can strengthen relationships among coworkers and between supervisors and staff. A supportive environment is fostered when everyone understands each other's strengths, weaknesses and work styles. Team-building events also provide an opportunity for open communication and conflict resolution. My greatest advice is to take a team personality test. Not only is it fun, it helps you understand your coworkers' perspectives.

**Take a proactive approach to problem-solving.** When challenges arise, team members should be empowered to address them promptly and collaboratively. We have a rule: We want a fix, not a band-aid. A positive mindset prevents minor issues from escalating into major conflicts.

### Resolution Techniques

Even when applying the above prevention strategies, workplace conflicts will arise at your self-storage business. Navigating them requires a delicate balance of diplomacy and assertiveness. Here are some essential steps to follow as a guide.

**Communicate.** The foundation of conflict resolution is open and honest communication. Encourage both parties to express their concerns, perspectives and emotions. Actively listen to understand

the root of the issue, and avoid making assumptions. If you take away just one piece of advice from this article, it's that you must avoid making assumptions and filling in your own dialog.

**Learn.** There are a multitude of books, online programs and courses that can teach you how to effectively resolve a conflict. You can use them to enhance your emotional intelligence, communication skills and ability to navigate challenging conversations.

#### Establish clear and transparent policies.

Clearly define roles, responsibilities and expectations to minimize misunderstandings. When everyone is on the same page, everyone knows what to do, and the likelihood of conflicts decreases.

**Provide feedback.** Regular performance sessions can help supervisors and employees alike address issues before they escalate. Provide constructive feedback on strengths and areas for improvement, and encourage ongoing dialogue. Timely feedback promotes a culture of continuous improvement and reduces the likelihood of recurring issues.

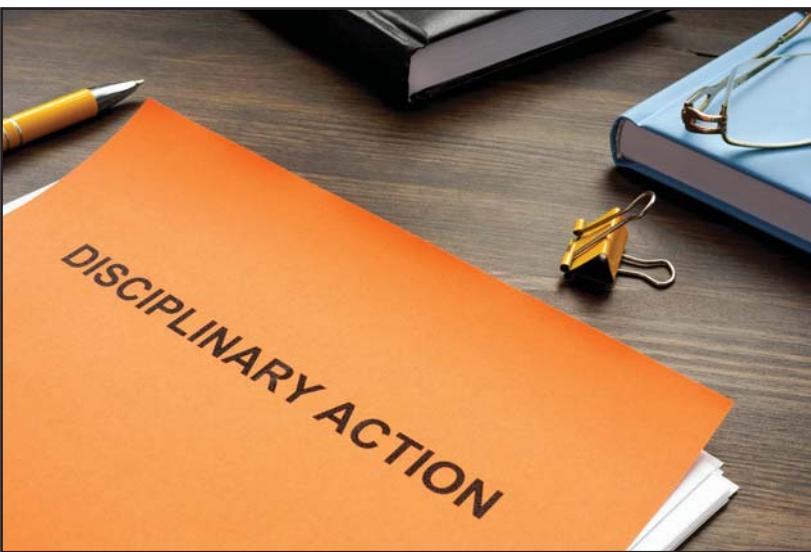
### Final Advice

I'd like to leave you with three key pieces of advice that will help you avoid and better handle conflict in your self-storage workplace:

- Do not assume. Don't think you know the intent of the other person. Chances are you'll be wrong.
- Check your ego at the door. If you don't, you'll be wrong. You'll be the person who made the situation worse. Sometimes you need to raise your hand, accept responsibility and apologize.
- Use clear and straightforward communication. Consider expressing yourself with statements like, "When you do X, I feel X."

Conflict within the self-storage workplace is inevitable, but the way in which it's managed determines the success of the team and organization. Facility staff play a pivotal role in creating a good work culture and preventing issues from escalating. While it's much easier to read and type this, it's infinitely more difficult to put these strategies into practice. Start small and be patient. Over time, you'll gain the skills you need to become an effective leader. **ISS**

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# ESTABLISHING A DISCIPLINARY POLICY

**As self-storage operators**, we all like to think that we have the best team members running our facilities. We believe they have the best interests of the business at heart and will generally do what's right. But this isn't always the reality.

Disciplinary action is sometimes required to ensure the operation continues to run smoothly and efficiently. Most of the time, all it takes is simple coaching to correct poor behavior. However, it can be necessary to be more stringent. It You might even have to terminate an employee. Following is a plan to help you course correct and fix difficult staff situations at your self-storage facility.

## Why You Need a Disciplinary Policy

Do you have a plan to deal with staff issues such as complacency, policy violations or insubordination? It's important to have guidelines in place before you need them. They should adhere to state laws, of course, and be published in your new-hire packet and self-storage employee manual. Here's why a clear, well-structured, well-written disciplinary policy is so critical:

- It ensures that all actions are based on established guidelines rather than personal judgments. There should be no arbitrary, inconsistent or emotional decision-making.
- It ensures that all team members are subject to the same rules. This helps maintain fairness and can prevent legal issues.
- It offers supervisors and human-resources (HR) personnel a guide for handling discipline and termination consistently and legally.
- It can protect your business from legal challenges, for example, wrongful-termination lawsuits, by demonstrating that you follow a fair and consistent process.

- It improves morale. Employees are more likely to understand and respect the disciplinary process if it's transparent and fair. This can contribute to a more positive work environment.

Every time you hire new self-storage employees, ask them to read and sign your disciplinary policy. This makes company expectations clear to your new team member, who'll hopefully go on to do great things for your facility.

## Common Employee Problems

There are many reasons why it might become necessary to take corrective action with a self-storage team member. Here are a few of the common offenses, some of which are behavioral, others of which relate to performance:

- Tardiness
- Excessive absenteeism
- Dress-code violations
- Bad attitude
- Poor phone etiquette
- Consistently failing to close sales
- Negative online reviews
- Failed secret shops

Many of these problems are already ingrained in the self-storage employee at the time of hire but don't come to light until later—sometimes much later. Some can be remedied through coaching.

One thing that commonly contributes to the need for disciplinary action is a lack of self-storage training. Continued coaching, positive reinforcement and frequent site visits from upper management will lessen the need to step in and act.

At my company, we have quarterly meetings with all our self-storage property managers to make sure team members meet performance expectations and understand organizational standards. This has provided great results and lessened the need to take corrective action.

## When It's Time to Act

If it's time to dole out discipline to one of your self-storage employees, follow the guidelines in your established plan. It's of upmost importance that your policies are followed and all actions are documented, with copies of all paperwork added to the employee's file. Thorough documentation is the best way to protect your self-storage business from legal action if the offending party feels the discipline was unwarranted or illegal and chooses to pursue a lawsuit.

While most states are at-will employment states, which means the employer or employee can end the relationship with no notice or cause, there are still protections for workers, which is why it's so important to document everything. Here are the two steps you should take:

**Issue a verbal warning.** Most behavioral or performance issues can be solved this way. Often, the self-storage employee isn't even aware of the problem.

It's important to address issues as they happen and not let too much time pass between the occurrence and the counseling, or it'll be less effective. Be succinct and to the point, letting the person know what went wrong and why it required you to step in. Keep the conversation positive and present it as a training opportunity. Afterward, email the employee a short recap to reinforce what was discussed. Share it with HR and add a copy to the team member's file.

**Issue a written warning.** If the verbal warning fails to correct the action, you'll need to be firmer in letting your team member know that their continued behavior is detrimental to the business and immediate improvement is expected. They should understand that any continued occurrence can lead to further disciplinary action, including termination.

It's best to partner with HR to determine the best way to word the written warning, but it should be clear and succinct to

avoid misinterpretation. Let the team member know exactly what improvement is expected. Personally, I like to also offer some positive feedback to the employee when presenting this, for balance. You and the employee will sign the document, acknowledging delivery/receipt and what improvement is expected.

Some self-storage companies will take things a step further. After all, disciplinary action should come with real consequences or it becomes meaningless. At my company, we pay a quarterly, goal-based bonus to our onsite self-storage staff; however, one of the stipulations for achieving it is that a team member can't be facing any corrective-action procedures. Withholding a bonus is a great motivator, but it's important to follow through. If you don't enact the consequence, there's no motivation for the employee to improve.

Again, always check with your HR department or representative to ensure you're following your state's employment laws. This will help protect your business during the disciplinary process.

### Terminate When Necessary

If you've exhausted all efforts to correct bad behavior to no positive effect, you're left with no choice but to terminate the employment of your self-storage team member. This is never easy. As an extra measure of protection and to

ensure it's fair and legal, partner with a fellow supervisor on the process.

Before meeting with the employee, be prepared with their final paycheck, termination document and any applicable paperwork required by your state. Keep the discussion short and to the point, letting them know what led to this outcome and that it's in the best interest of all parties to separate employment.

When the termination is complete, immediately remove the employee's access from all facility property, software and other systems. Depending on the circumstances, you might need to rekey locks to the office or any company-used self-storage units.

When terminating a resident manager, follow the housing agreement you and the employee signed. Most leases allow for a shortened timeframe to evict the manager from the premises in a termination situation. The sooner you can get them out the better. In this instance, I would opt to rekey the office, as the manager may continue to live on site for a time.

Bear in mind, there are egregious offenses that require immediate termination and removal of the employee. These include any behavior that negatively affects the safety of your self-storage team, facility, tenants and revenue. In any of the following situations, partner with HR to determine your timeline:

- Theft of company property, customer belongings, cash deposits or possessions of other team members
- Substance abuse, including on-the-job use or reporting to work intoxicated or under the influence
- Harassment or violence toward other employees, supervisors or customers
- Insubordination, essentially refusal to complete tasks or basic functions of the job

### Final Advice

Throughout this disciplinary process, it's vital to treat all of your self-storage team members equally and not give the impression of having favorites. I've seen people in upper management with soft hearts give way too many chances to employees who are detrimental to the operation. If it's time to let someone go, know that you're acting in the best interests of the business.

Also, I caution you not to hire a replacement too quickly, or you'll find yourself going through the same process all over again. Take the time to find the right fit, then be in a constant state of training and positive reinforcement. Before you know it, your self-storage operation will be running at full steam with the best employees possible. **ISS**

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# Why You Shouldn't Be Afraid to Fire



### Most people are familiar

with who the U.S. Navy SEALs are. This organization's activities are never publicly disclosed, but between TV shows, movies and the media, we've all heard at least something about their orientation-training program, which is known for being physically and mentally rigorous. With a completion rate of only 10% to 20%, the course is failed by most students who take it. In fact, many of the most successful military outfits in the world have a huge rate of attrition.

So, why are we self-storage operators so resistant to let go of underachieving facility employees? Why do we regularly accept poor performance? Often, the termination process

# 66 When it's time to terminate a self-storage employee, it's best to not talk too much. Everything you want to say is really more for your benefit, not theirs.

is delayed or put off entirely. There are a few reasons for this. Let's explore what they are, and I'll share my personal experience.

## Fear of the Unknown

Let's say you have a C-grade self-storage employee. They show up, but they don't make much of an effort. They never create any real value, but they're consistent in their work and handle some tasks reliably. You may be wondering, if you let them go, will you be able to find someone better? You may also be thinking about the fact that if you fire them, you'll have to hire and train someone new, and you don't have the time or energy. So, you keep them on the team because they aren't the most pressing problem. There's always some other issue that takes priority.

But that employee affects everyone, and as the facility owner or supervisor, you find the problem is always in your mind. This person's coworkers ask themselves why they should be high achievers because, clearly, it isn't necessary to stay employed with your organization. The average work the poor employee produces represents the capabilities your company. They set your culture as much as the top performer does.

You can't have an excellent self-storage business if you have average employees. To be great, you need great people. If you resist making changes or taking the chance to improve your operation, you're doomed to being mediocre.

## The Impact of Human Resources

This one really gets me. HR is always full of reasons why we can't do things that need to be done. They're always saying things like, "Maybe additional training..." or "Did their supervisor document..." or my favorite, "Perhaps we should look at extending their probationary period because..." Too often, the company is blamed for failing the employee when it's the employee who isn't the right fit.

The first overall pick in the 2023 National Football League (NFL) draft was Bryce Young. He had a fair year for a novice quarterback. The second pick was CJ Stroud, who went on to become the Rookie of the Year. Were the

training manuals for Stroud better than the ones Young had? Did Stroud have a more supporting environment in which to learn? I doubt either of those things had anything to do with it.

At some point, performance is about the employee, not the company. If we're to preach accountability, then everyone must be held responsible. Some people learn faster or slower than others. That isn't your problem. Your problem is performance.

When HR is in charge, progress is slowed. Change is halted out of fear of unemployment insurance or paperwork. Don't allow this to be a bottleneck in your self-storage business. Make good decisions that benefit your entire firm and let HR clean up the mess (if there is one).

## Hiring Hassles

Hiring has been a challenge in all industries over the past few years. It's a tedious process. You have to create a job posting, place it on the right platforms and then sort through dozens or hundreds of horrible applications. You must then schedule interviews that applicants don't bother to show up for and evaluate the few who actually put forth the effort. Finally, you spend time trying to figure out which candidate might actually be capable of doing the job and will show up on the first day.

So, you offer the position to the best choice and get rejected. You offer it to your second candidate and they accept, but then they don't show up for work on the first day. Rinse and repeat. It's exhausting and easy to make excuses to avoid the process. But that's the choice that sends your self-storage operation down the path to mediocrity.

My new philosophy is to hire fast and fire fast. Traditionally, people say you should take a hire slow, fire fast approach, but I've come to disagree. How much can we really find out about a person ahead of time? Candidates provide references they know will say good things about them. Personality testing is risky. What defined metrics do we really have?

During the NFL draft, teams spend thousands of hours and millions of dollars on the evaluation process, which begins as soon as the previous year's draft is over. Some

have scouting departments and physical measurements to evaluate talent. In 2021, there were three top picks, all quarterbacks: Trevor Lawrence, Trey Lance and Zach Wilson. Two ended up being failures—when they could even get on the field. The third has been average at best.

If NFL teams spending millions of dollars can miss the mark that badly, can you really expect to do better for your self-storage business? What's the solution? Do interviews. Conduct your due diligence. Have applicants complete personality profiles, but don't drag out the process. If you have two applicants who appear to be close, hire them both rather than having endless meetings to discuss them.

## The Final Move

When it's time to terminate a self-storage employee, it's best to not talk too much. Everything you want to say is really more for your benefit, not theirs. Simply say, "We're going in a different direction. We're going to let you go." Finito. The employee is terminated. Do you really think they care if you say, "It was a really tough decision" or "I'm sure you'll be able to find another opportunity, as you're such a great person"?

I don't enjoy letting go of an employee. Sometimes they're a friend or they've been with us a long time. The impact is felt deeply. But as the company leader, I'm not ashamed to admit it feels good because I just did something that might make my business better. It's the same feeling I get when we land a new client or onboard helpful technology. Accomplishment. Progress. It's good.

Twenty-five years ago, I had a team member who wasn't a good fit. I inherited her from my predecessor, and she was resistant to any change. I tried to help her see the benefits of doing a few things my way. During an offsite management session, someone asked me if I thought about this employee outside of working hours. Yes, I did. He asked if I got frustrated when I thought of this person. Again, yes. He said, "You already know what needs to be done. You've just been talking yourself out of it."

I went back and let her go the next day. I felt so relieved. The amount of internal stress I was under because of her performance was incredible. I was then able to find someone who forced me to level up, as she was that much of an improvement. While it was hard to make that final move, my self-storage company and I experienced a huge boost in performance and health. Letting go of an employee will never be easy, but sometimes it's necessary. **ISS**

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# Goal-Setting for Facility Managers

**Every day you set goals** for yourself, professional and personal, perhaps without even realizing it. The first may simply be getting out of bed when your alarm goes off. That may be followed by taking a shower, getting dressed, drinking a cup of coffee, getting in your car and driving to work. Once you get to your office, you have a whole new set of objectives to complete. You often go through this process subconsciously, but you're accomplishing a multitude of goals every day.

This article is for people who work in self-storage facility management. You might be a part-time relief manager, a full-time property manager or a regional manager who oversees several facilities. Whatever your role, you have career aspirations. Perhaps you'd like to advance within your current company or explore opportunities elsewhere. Either way, the first step in planning for your future is to set goals! They're fundamental, as they pave the way to success.

## What Do You Want to Accomplish?

The answer to this question will depend on your current role within the self-storage industry. Before we get into tips for setting goals, let's explore a couple of scenarios that might describe your current circumstances.

**Part-time or relief manager.** For someone who's never worked in self-storage before, this is a common place to start. Many people come into the industry via this type of entry-level position. It's a great opportunity, and it's smart to make the most of it!

If this is your position, be on time for work. Pay attention and be hungry to learn. Ask your facility manager about their various responsibilities, for example, marketing and auction procedures. Focus on customer service and phone skills. Offer to fill in for colleagues who are going on vacation. Finally, let your supervisor know that you're interested in full-time work.

**Full-time facility manager.** If you're a full-time self-storage manager with the desire to move up within your operation, ask your division or area manager what you can do to support them and help the company grow. Find out what skills can help your pursuit of career advancement. Should you attend night classes at the local college, or take online classes in business administration, accounting, management or marketing? How can you improve your customer-service skills? Finally, offer to assist at other locations during training or site visits.

If you want to advance within your current company but there are no opportunities available, perhaps it's time to look elsewhere. You'll need to build a resume and detail your professional experience, skills and accomplishments. It helps to have solid references. You'll also need to improve your interview acumen. You can find tons of information about critical job-seeking strategies in books and online. I've even written several relevant articles on these topics. Look for them at [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com).

## It's Time to Set Your Goals!

The first step toward setting your professional goals is to know where you want to end up. What do you want to achieve? Are you looking to take on more responsibility at your self-storage facility? Do you want to help train new staff? Do you want to create a new maintenance program? Are you good at marketing and have skills from previous positions that can help increase facility occupancy and income? What can you bring to the table to help your current company or a new employer?

Once you understand your overarching objective, you can begin identifying the individual steps that will comprise your journey. Figure out the resources you'll need such as time, skills, money for classes, etc. Implement your plan of action and reward

yourself for achieving milestones along the way.

When writing goals, I recommend using the SMART method. In this approach, you ensure that every goal is:

- **Specific:** Your goal should be detailed, stating precisely what you hope to accomplish.
- **Measurable:** There must be a way to track your progress. What gets measured gets done!
- **Achievable:** Set reasonable goals based on your experience and expectations. For example, don't apply for a district-manager position when you're only qualified to be a relief manager. You must crawl before you can run. Set attainable goals, or you're setting yourself up for failure.
- **Relevant:** The goal should pertain to your desired destination. Don't include efforts in your plan that won't contribute to success. For example, if your goal is to learn more about facility marketing, you wouldn't take a class on accounting rather than social media strategies.
- **Time-based:** Set deadlines for completing your goals, so there's accountability.

All of this requires determination, organization and, most of all, commitment. How will you respond when faced with an obstacle or the need to increase your effort? You must remain motivated and have the flexibility to adjust your strategy if needed.

It may not be easy to get what you want. In fact, it may take longer than expected. Those who lack dedication are more likely to give up. The trick is to stay positive. Don't give in to a negative mindset, which can greatly demotivate you. Stay focused and charge ahead to obtain what you truly want out of your self-storage career and life. Good luck! **ISS**

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# 3 Ways to Advance Your Career

**The self-storage industry has** experienced remarkable growth over the past few years, creating exciting opportunities for career advancement. As a facility-level manager aspiring to rise through the ranks and take on more challenging roles, you're poised to capitalize on this growth; however, success in this dynamic field requires a combination of skills, knowledge and motivation.

I entered the self-storage business 10 years ago as a customer-service representative at a 1,400-unit facility. I progressed through my organization, embracing opportunities in site management, eventually overseeing nine facilities. Next, I became director of operations of our entire 18-property portfolio, the position I hold today. In this article, I'll guide you through the career-advancement process, drawing from my personal experience as well as scientific research and my undergraduate education in human development, psychology and physiology.

## Build Your Skills

One of the first challenges you'll encounter as you aspire toward more demanding self-storage management positions is the skills gap—places where the competencies required for a new role surpass those you possess. Begin by assessing your current skillset and identifying the specific expertise required for success. This might include abilities in financial management, market analysis, customer service and team leadership, among other areas.

It's important to invest in your professional development. Enroll in courses or certifications that focus on the knowledge relevant to your desired position. There are many industry organizations that offer training resources and programs tailored to self-storage professionals.

Skills-gap research emphasizes the importance of adopting a growth mindset. Psychologist and author Carol Dweck suggests

that individuals who believe in their ability to learn and grow are more likely to succeed in challenging situations. So, welcome new challenges as opportunities rather than as insurmountable obstacles.

## Set High Expectations

As you work to bridge your skills gap and advance in the self-storage industry, put the bar high. Why? Because the higher you set expectations for yourself, the better you'll perform. It's a psychological phenomenon known as the Rosenthal or Pygmalion effect. Believe in your ability to excel in new roles and visualize your success, and it'll serve as a powerful motivator.

You also need to let your superiors and mentors know about your aspirations. Open communication about your goals can lead to their support. When others expect you to do well, they're more likely to provide opportunities and guidance that facilitate your growth. This creates a network of individuals who are invested in your success.

In addition, try to engage with colleagues and mentors who have a proven track record in upper-level self-storage management roles. The Rosenthal effect suggests that spending time with high achievers can positively influence your own mindset and performance. Fostering relationships with peers is vital in this industry, and building a professional network can provide guidance, support and opportunities for collaboration. This is why participating in industry events is so critical in our development process.

All of this boils down to incentive, and research abounds on theories regarding the link between motivation and career advancement. The Self-Determination Theory says we're driven by three psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (connection). *Intrinsic* motivation is a need for knowledge or independence. It

leads us to engage in certain activities because we find them inherently enjoyable, interesting or fulfilling.

In the self-storage industry, career advancement requires initiative. So, take control of your path, make decisions aligned with your goals, and choose projects that resonate with your aptitudes and interests. Commit to lifelong learning, and focus on mastering new skills and gaining in-depth knowledge of the business. Finally, embrace challenges as opportunities to improve.

## Prepare Yourself

Now that we've explored the research and theories behind professional advancement and success, let's dive into specific strategies that'll help you meet your self-storage career goals.

**Network.** Connect with experienced self-storage professionals who can serve as mentors. This can provide valuable guidance and insights as you progress in your career. Attend industry events and engage in opportunities to expand your professional circle.

**Knowledge.** To excel in an upper-level management role, it's essential to have a comprehensive understanding of market trends, competitive analysis, customer behavior, etc. You might also need knowledge of budgeting and revenue optimization, especially if you're going to be managing multiple sites. Consider enrolling in financial-management courses or seek guidance from industry experts. Attend industry conferences, webinars and workshops to stay informed.

“ You also need to let your superiors and mentors know about your aspirations. Open communication about your goals can lead to their support.

**Leadership.** This is a cornerstone of upper management. You're aiming to become a leader of leaders. Invest in developing skills such as team-building, conflict resolution and decision-making. Consider joining or creating a leadership-development program, either within your organization or the larger industry.

**Customer experience.** In self-storage, exceptional service is a key differentiator. Focus on improving your skills and instilling a customer-centric culture at the facilities you oversee. Seek feedback from tenants and your teams, then implement improvements.

**Showcase.** As you gain new skills and experience, don't forget to brag a little. Update your résumé, create a professional LinkedIn profile, and communicate your

progress to superiors and potential employers. Highlight your commitment to growth and continuous improvement.

**Opportunity.** Keep an eye out for upper-level management positions available within your company and the industry at large. Even if an opportunity is only temporary, it gives you experience and exposure. Don't be afraid to take calculated risks and apply for roles that align with your career goals.

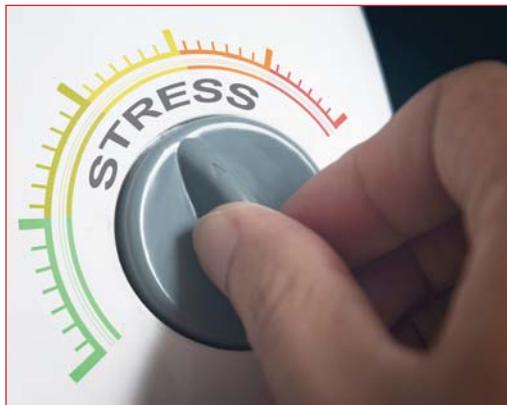
### Reach New Heights

Advancing in your self-storage career from an entry-level facility manager to a multi-site leader is achievable. By recognizing and addressing your skills gap, leveraging high expectations and

cultivating your motivation, you can chart a successful path forward.

Your unique journey will require dedication, continuous learning and a willingness to adapt. As you acquire new skills, embrace leadership opportunities and build strong business relationships. Stay motivated and focused, and pursue your aspirations with determination and confidence. The self-storage industry is growing and evolving, and your potential for success is only limited by you. Follow the above strategies, and you'll be well-equipped to reach new heights. **ISS**

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# A GUIDE to Stress Management

**At any given time,** a self-storage manager might encounter a stressful situation at work. It could be an angry tenant, a pending deadline, a problem with a contractor or a dozen other things. The fact is, overseeing a storage property can be *a lot*. This makes it imperative for you to know how to keep your stress in check, so you don't burn out or take it out on customers, coworkers or supervisors. Let's explore how you can take care of your mental health while still being an A-plus employee.

### The Causes

Self-storage managers are tasked with wearing several hats, which can be a source of stress in and of itself. Beyond that, each individual task can come with unique challenges that induce tension. Consider, for example, tenant issues, security concerns, sales targets and administrative responsibilities, says Garrett Byrd, vice president for Storage Authority, which operates self-storage facilities in two states and offers franchise opportunities.

One of the most stress-inducing—and critical—job functions is customer service.

The unique circumstances facing each renter, which might include moving, downsizing or another life-changing event, can amplify a challenging interaction. "Moving is stressful," Byrd says. "Often, customers project that stress onto managers, who have to deal with an irate customer while de-escalating the situation."

Another trial self-storage managers contend with on a regular basis is the rising cost of rent. "Rate increases for customers is always very difficult for store managers," says Christina Rita, chief operating officer for StoragePro Management Inc., which operates 126 facilities nationwide. An employee might be confronted by a tenant who's upset about the new price. They have to try to appease the customer, but they still have to collect the rent and provide the best possible service.

But that isn't all. There are other aspects of the job that can cause anxiety. "The administrative and operational tasks generally have tight monthly deadlines to stay in line with state lien laws, so if the workload 'bottlenecks,' i.e., deadlines are on a busy Saturday with lots of customer activity, then that can definitely cause high

stress," says Stacie Maxwell, vice president of marketing and training for Universal Storage Group, a third-party management company that operates more than 75 facilities nationwide. "Also, managers can become stressed by not meeting monthly sales and occupancy goals, or they have a hard time getting their occupancy percentages up where they need to be due to new competition in the market."

Sometimes, this tension can even stem from lack of recognition or incentive. Without raises or a show of appreciation, self-storage managers can "feel like they are owed something, which then causes them to be unhappy and looking for ways to feel better about their job," says Sue Haviland, owner of Haviland Storage Services, a third-party management company that operates nine facilities.

### Negative Effects

Stress can cause just about any ailment, from fatigue to cardiovascular disease to cancer, according to Dr. Daniel L. Kirsch, president of the American Institute of Stress

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(AIS), which conducts research and provides information, training and techniques to prevent stress-related illness. AIS data shows it can affect the body through headaches, heartburn, rapid breathing, weakened immune system, increased depression, stomachache, high blood pressure and tense muscles.

"Job-related stress is no different in how it affects the body and mind, except there are the complications of absenteeism, presenteeism and additional associated stressors, such as worrying about losing your job, that may cause financial stress," Kirsch says.

For Byrd, it can bring increased anxiety, difficulty concentrating and disrupted sleep patterns. If it goes unresolved, he says he'll feel physically exhausted, which affects his overall health and mood.

Similarly, Maxwell, who has 23 years of experience in self-storage, including time spent working as a facility manager, has also experienced the harmful effects of high stress. She cites physical issues such as muscle tension, digestive troubles and sleep disturbances as well as mental effects like mood swings, burnout and reduced motivation.

"Stress can impact a self-storage manager's job performance negatively or positively," Maxwell notes. "Some managers respond well to challenges and use the ordeal as a catalyst to improvise and overcome for the betterment of the facility. However, we most often see that stress has a negative impact in many ways."

Too much stress can influence how a manager interacts with tenants, coworkers, supervisors and vendor partners by inhibiting service and communication skills. A highly strained employee may struggle to convey information clearly, increasing the chance for misunderstandings, Maxwell says. In addition, high levels can lead to irritability, impatience and difficulty addressing customer complaints.

"When somebody feels stressed, it's very difficult to be efficient," Rita says. That's because it can adversely impact decision making, problem solving and time management, adds Maxwell. If prolonged, it can impair a manager's ability to make sound decisions and even encourage impulsivity. It also makes it more difficult for employees to prioritize tasks, meet deadlines and allocate resources.

Further, stress can impair a person's reliability. In Haviland's experience, stressed-out managers are prone to call in sick, particularly around holidays, when ownership is scheduled to do a site visit, or after a discussion with a supervisor.

When left unresolved for extended periods of time, this tension can lead to burnout, which

can cause physical and mental exhaustion. Signs include extreme fatigue, cynicism, irritability, lack of motivation, and feelings of negativity toward your job, among others. If you notice these signs creeping in, it's imperative to proactively manage what you're feeling and the stressors affecting you to prevent harmful health effects and growing dissatisfaction at work.

### Coping Mechanisms

Key to managing job-related stress is understanding what's at the root. "Since stress is a nonspecific reaction, different for each individual, and workers have lives outside of work, it is important to know what your stressors are," Kirsch says. "They are often not what the person thinks they are."

Tools like online self-assessment questionnaires can help you identify your own stressors. Kirsch also advises creating a "stress-less" schedule, which incorporates "gap time" throughout the day. Each gap is a two-minute self-assessment designed to help you focus on how your body feels, identify tension, and then relax and breathe to alleviate it.

"Simply scheduling a very short 'gap' into the stream of information flowing into your consciousness will allow you to plug into your 'self' and interrupt any stress reactions that are building and adjust, which will gradually build your resiliency to stress," Kirsch says.

It's also important to fully "unplug" from the stressors of the day by turning phones and gadgets off after 6 p.m. or 8 p.m., he adds. Taking time off from work can help overtaxed workers relax and build resilience.

Setting boundaries can also help. "Keeping work and personal life separate is key to being able to set aside the worries of the day and genuinely relax and recover at home overnight, to best be able to bounce back, ready to face the challenges of the next day," Maxwell says.

Exercise is another way to manage the pressure, adds Rita. "I personally go to the gym every day, and it's probably the one time of the day when the only thing I think about is what I'm doing at the gym," she says. "But your mind is clear [and] you're helping your body."

Two incredibly important skills that help employees cope with stressful circumstances are organization and prioritization. "Get yourself a calendar or an app and stay on top of all deadlines," Maxwell says. "Also, it helps to break down large projects into bite-size chunks and tackle them over time prior to the deadline."

Time management will allow you to accomplish the most important tasks as quickly as possible, helping you naturally avoid the anxiety that comes with procrastination

and buckling under a looming deadline. Another important tool is learning how to say "no" to avoid overcommitment. In addition, setting realistic goals and celebrating achievements can help managers keep it in check, Maxwell says.

### Seeking Help

When should an overstressed self-storage manager ask for help? Immediately, Rita says. "As soon as something is bothering you or you're uncomfortable, immediately raise your hand, whether that be with your peers, your supervisor or your human resources department," she adds.

Maxwell advises asking for help if your workload is too great for the amount of time you have to complete it, when expectations are unclear, you're struggling to resolve a conflict, or dealing with technical problems. This might include issues with security systems or the auction process, for example.

If a conversation is warranted, finding an appropriate time and place for the discussion is important and may require scheduling a meeting with a supervisor, Maxwell advises. Taking notes can be helpful to avoid leaving out important details.

"Also, be sure to explain how the situation you are asking for assistance with is affecting your job performance and the facility overall," Maxwell says. "This will help others understand the importance and urgency of your request."

To remedy feelings of low confidence or incompetence, which can cause stress to build, Byrd advises requesting additional training or assistance when needed. In some cases, however, it might be in your best interest to move on from a company or facility, especially if you're being subjected to a virulent work culture.

"Some places just push down a toxic environment and it may not be the right fit for you and time to move on," Haviland says. Importantly, she advises that the first step before leaving this kind of job is communication that attempts to address the stress source.

In some instances, an employee might not immediately recognize what's happening. If the signs of stress are evident to others, a supervisor or coworker may address the issue before the manager even reaches out for help. In this situation, it's important to be receptive.

"It shows they care and are reaching out to find the root of the issue," says Melissa Cronin, senior area manager for San Diego Self Storage, which operates 18 locations in California. "It will be your opportunity to share your situation and advocate for yourself." **ISS**

**Contributor:** *Rachel French, Freelance Author*

# Improving Your Communication Skills



## Communication is a critical skill

in nearly every business. For self-storage facility operators, it's paramount. As a property manager myself, I'd like to offer you the following advice from my decades of working in customer service, support and sales in various industries. I hope you find it useful.

### Be the Expert

Possibly the most important part of being a great communicator is confidence. As a self-storage manager, you toe the company line, and the customer knows it. This means you'll have to earn their trust, but it isn't as hard as it may seem.

The best way to demonstrate assurance in your verbal and written interactions is to be an expert in your field. Know everything you need to know about your facility's products and services. But there's one caveat: You must *believe* in what you're saying. Whether you're selling a storage unit, boxes or a truck rental, make sure you'd be willing to buy it yourself. If you don't have faith in it, neither will your customer.

Bottom line: If you aren't the expert you need to be, you have homework to do.

### Have a Groove (But Not a Rut)

Great salespeople don't stick to a single pitch. You need to be agile and smooth. Now, I'm not saying to freestyle every interaction. It doesn't matter how long you've been in the self-storage industry, speaking off the cuff can come across as sloppy and half-hearted. It also leads to inconsistency.

So, outline the points you need to cover and hit them like a checklist in your mind while speaking with customers or writing an email. If you take the time to follow your flow, you won't omit or overtalk any details. Then, when it's time to close the deal, it'll feel organic, like you and the customer arrived at the destination together.

## Focus on Physical Gestures

Communication isn't only about what people say. In fact, non-verbal cues can sometimes be more important than words.

When a self-storage customer enters your office, stand up. If you're already standing, meet them halfway. Maybe even open the door when you see them coming. Kind gestures add up on the customer's score card.

Also, be sure to smile. This may sound corny, but effective, positive communication begins simply with good eye contact, an open ear and a smile. Even if you aren't meeting your customer face to face, convey your smile—on the phone or writing an email. Heck, I'm smiling right now!

On the other side of this coin is being able to read your customers and pick up on their body language. If you haven't had enough life experience to develop this skill, consider joining an improvisational acting or performance class, or offer to speak at local events or within groups to which you belong. Maybe even take a public-speaking workshop or read a book about body language. All experience is good experience if you take something from it.

If you're worried about your own non-verbal gestures when speaking with self-storage customers, carry a clipboard to keep your hands occupied. Maintain as much eye contact as you can and only point to things you're talking about.

## Practice Verbal Presentations

To improve your verbal communication skills, you must use them. Watch movies and plays to see how others act in a professional setting. Role-play uncomfortable scenarios with someone who's helpful and willing. It can't devolve into foolery, though, so keep it professional and focus on learning. Acting out difficult situations will help you minimize the element of chaos when something challenging comes up; but focus on the everyday stuff, too, as this'll fine-tune your approach.

To overcome your communication weaknesses and build strength, practice speeches and conversations in a mirror, or even just in your head. Write down various approaches and see which is easiest and clearest. Be critical of your performance and ask others for input.

Just don't get upset if you receive critical feedback. This includes online customer reviews and performance reports from superiors. Approach the input with an open mind and willingness to learn. Don't let your ego get in the way. Take notes from the experience and try again. If you combine all this effort with the pursuit of written communication, you'll achieve synergy that elevates all of your communication.

## Clean Up Your Writing

A great way to improve your written communication is to observe professional sources for examples and emulate them.

**“** To overcome your communication weaknesses and build strength, practice speeches and conversations in a mirror, or even just in your head.

## The Body Says...

There are many nonverbal signals we give through our face and body, often without even realizing it. When communicating with others, it helps to pay attention to the below.

POSITIVE		NEGATIVE	
Signal	Demonstrates	Signal	Demonstrates
Eye contact	Confidence, trust, paying attention	Arms crossed	Defensiveness, disagreement
Good posture	Confidence, respect	Slouching	Laziness, disrespect, disinterest
Head tilt	Interest, listening, processing	Nail biting	Stress, insecurity, nervousness
Chin stroke	Interest, deep thought	Tapping fingers or feet	Impatience, disrespect
Leaning in	Trust, interest	Touching the nose	Disagreement (listener), possible lying (speaker)
Nodding	Listening, agreeing	Playing with jewelry	Nervousness, insecurity, boredom
Smiling	Kindness, respect		

**Source:** Indeed, "How to Improve Your Workplace Communication Skills"

As a start, focus on proper spelling and grammar. Misspellings and sloppy documents are inexcusable. With all of the tools available today, there's no reason for them. That said, don't solely rely on spelling and grammar check. Make an honest attempt to compose the content accurately



the first time, and then use these programs as a backup.

In addition, your writing should be clear and concise. Avoid jargon and abbreviations, and add a clear call to action. If possible, have someone proofread and give you notes. Just because you understand your copy doesn't mean readers will interpret it the way you intended. The more input you get, the better your output can be.

Formatting and consistency are equally important, so use templates or research online to see how to organize a document. Consider creating a stylebook for your company to help create and maintain uniformity and professionalism in all brand communications.

Finally, as strange as it sounds, it's good to smile while you're writing, as it'll help you maintain a positive tone.

### Stay Positive

Even the best communicators have trouble closing the deal sometimes, and that's OK. If you've done your best, wholeheartedly presented your self-storage product, and the customer still says no, that's their loss. Continue to be positive and professional until the very end. Thank them for their time and let them know you're happy to discuss your business with them if something changes. Then take a deep breath and move on. But

always leave the interaction on a positive note because they may be back.

Today, a single communication can spread the globe in an instant and remain on permanent display. Coupled with that is the need to be consistent and on brand across communication types and channels. Great verbal and written skills will differentiate you from your self-storage competition, create peace of mind and transparency, and establish a path forward. It can prevent future trouble and create amazing experiences that leave customers feeling certain, comfortable and happy.

Fortunately, communication isn't hard to improve, but you must pursue it. Even if you already communicate well, the world is ever-changing, and interactions with customers are evolving. What worked five years ago might not work at all tomorrow, and we need to be adaptable to remain competitive.

If nothing else, remember this: Don't be afraid to seek examples of great communication to emulate. Never rest on your laurels (always be improving). And *smile*, even when you aren't interacting with your self-storage customers face-to-face. It really shines through, as you can probably tell by reading this article! **ISS**

**Contributor:** Adam Gray, *Guardian Storage*, [www.guardianstorage.com](http://www.guardianstorage.com)

# 4 STEPS to Job-Search SUCCESS

**Deciding to find a new job** in self-storage can be thrilling and scary. It might be that you're new to the industry, relocating, looking to advance your career or simply ready for a change from your current role. Well, I have good news for you: Companies in this business are always looking for great employees! The following four-step plan will help you find and acquire your next position.

## Step 1: Define What You Want

Before you get into the job search itself, it's crucial to define your "target," aka the ideal self-storage position. What's your vision? There are a range of options:

- Property manager
- Regional or area manager
- Part-time assistant
- Call-center representative
- Maintenance expert
- Corporate-level support

Once you know the type of position you desire, it's important to ask yourself the following questions:

- What kind of self-storage company interests you? Do you prefer to work with a large operator that has dozens or hundreds of sites or a smaller independent?
- How far are you willing to travel for work?
- What kind of work culture attracts you? It's important to find one that fits your own style.
- What are your salary expectations?
- What kinds of benefits do you expect?

Finally, where do you want to be in five or 10 years? Consider your long-term career goals. Make a list, establish a few non-negotiables, and include additional preferences to help you determine the perfect position.

## Step 2: Craft an Effective Résumé

Now that you have a better idea of what you're looking for in a self-storage job, it's time to promote your professional experience. The first step is a well-written résumé. It should include

the work history, skills and accomplishments that are relevant to your desired position.

List each company you've worked for, your title and dates of tenure. Then add the duties and responsibilities you've held with each, highlighting significant achievements. Include your educational background, industry certifications and skills.

While it's important to note your hard skills, such as any computer programs or technology platforms you know, you should also highlight your soft skills. I'm talking about things such as strong work ethic, initiative, accountability, willingness, the ability to learn, etc. Have you displayed these characteristics in past jobs? Do you have examples that would demonstrate them? Add them!

There are also several things to avoid when writing a résumé, like dishonesty. If you went to college but didn't earn a degree, clearly state "coursework," don't insinuate that you graduated. Keep it factual and avoid introduction summaries and objectives. When a hiring manager is sorting through dozens of files, they won't read these types of comments anyway. Rather, save them for a more personalized email or cover letter.

## Step 3: Uncover Your Options

There are two primary ways to approach your job search. The first is to respond to ads. Keep in mind that when a company posts one, they typically get hundreds of résumés from qualified and often unqualified candidates. Pay attention to the stated requirements, and make sure your résumé shows that you meet them. For example, if marketing experience is necessary, clearly list your skills in this area.

When responding to an ad, wait a few days after applying, and then send a personalized email to the hiring manager. Thank them in advance for reviewing your information, express your interest in the role, and let them know that you're available for a conversation or to answer any questions they may have. Very few people take the time to send a follow-up email, which will help you stand out from the rest.

The other way to find a job is to be proactive and investigate potential openings. Is there a particular self-storage company or facility you'd like to join? Do some research and find out who the supervisor would be. For example, if you're interested in a property-manager position, find out who the district manager is. Call the company and ask for that person's email address, and then send a note introducing yourself and expressing an interest in working for them. Attach a copy of your résumé, and submit your information to human resources.

In addition, bookmark the company or facility website and follow them on LinkedIn so you can watch for new job postings. The goal is to get your foot in the door. This approach may take some time, but if it's your ideal position or employer, you're better off waiting.

## Step 4: Ace the Interview

Hopefully, you've done a good job of presenting your self-storage background and skills. You've



applied and actively sought out opportunities. Now, you begin to receive invitations for interviews. First impressions really are lasting, and you're likely to compete with other applicants; so, you want to present yourself well.

When preparing for interviews, thorough research is key. Learn about the company and the role for which you've applied as well as the individuals you'll be meeting. This information is often available on the business' website or LinkedIn page.

Whether your interview is online or in person, have a copy of your résumé in front of you and a list of relevant questions about the position and company. Dress professionally and maintain good eye contact. If it's a video interview, look at the camera when speaking.

During the session, it's important to listen. Ask questions about the job requirements, and

share your skills and accomplishments that align with them. Don't bring up compensation unless asked.

When the interview concludes, express your genuine interest—if it's still there—and ask what the next step will be or when you can expect to hear back. Lastly, send an email or text thanking the interviewer for their time and confirming your desire to work for their company.

As you conduct your self-storage job search, be consistent and patient. Refer to the list you created when you began your journey and your long-term career plans. It may take time to find the perfect fit. However, if you can wait, you'll avoid short tenures and bad choices. **ISS**

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## Prove Your Value

When it comes to interviewing for any self-storage position, it's up to you to demonstrate the value you can bring to the organization. Your interviewer should ask lots of probing questions. Before responding, think about how you've helped your current employer achieve goals and solve problems, and what you might be able to do in this new position.

**Source:** *insideselfstorage.com, "Advice for Outpacing Your Rivals During Your Next Self-Storage Job Interview," by Matthew Eoff*

# Mastering the Online Interview

**Many self-storage companies**, especially the larger facility operators, have incorporated video interviewing into their hiring process. Often, candidates must navigate a series of online meetings before being asked to meet in person. Those high-demand invites are typically reserved for the top one or two applicants.

From an employer's perspective, video interviews save time and are especially advantageous when conducting a confidential search. You can also assemble multiple decision-makers at once, regardless of their location, avoiding travel time and expense.

If you're seeking employment in the self-storage industry and a company likes the look of your resume, you'll likely be asked to participate in a video interview. While it can be stressful to appear on camera, being prepared can help ease your anxiety. Consider the following advice to ensure you do well and advance to the next phase in the hiring process.

### Prepping for the Big Day

There are a lot of people out there looking for jobs, so whatever position you're pursuing

within the self-storage industry, there will likely be multiple candidates. With so much at stake, how can you stand out from your peers?

The key to any interview, whether it's online or in person, is to be prepared. It's true that you only get one chance to make a great first impression. Also, whether you meet with a company once or several times, treat every interview as though it's your first. Here are some other tips that'll give you an edge over the competition:

- **Research the company.** Visit their website and even a nearby self-storage property, if possible. Familiarize yourself with their locations, target markets, and any recent news or developments.
- **Be familiar with your interviewer.** Confirm that you have accurate names and titles for anyone with whom you'll be speaking. Look up their backgrounds on the company website or LinkedIn and familiarize yourself with their role.
- **Review the opening.** Thoroughly review the job description, paying close attention to the required skills and qualifications, so you can articulate how yours will align.

- **Update your social profiles.** Always present yourself professionally on all social media platforms. Before the interview, check them all to ensure there's nothing there that might harm your chances.

- **Prepare a list of questions.** Not only does this act as a reminder of important discussion topics, it demonstrates that you've put effort and thought into the opportunity.

- **Have your resume handy.** Have a copy in front of you so you can easily navigate through your work history.

- **Write notes.** Don't be afraid to help yourself! A benefit of having a webcam interview is you can use a cheat sheet, and you don't have to memorize everything you want to mention. Just use it sparingly and stay focused on the conversation.

- **Check your equipment.** Test your computer, camera and microphone in advance to ensure they're working properly. Make sure you have a stable internet connection and your laptop is fully charged or plugged in. Before your interview, close all other windows

- on your computer, especially if they make noise. Mute your phone as well.
- Watch your background.** Pay close attention to your video backdrop. Make sure it's professional and clutter-free.
- Avoid interruptions.** If you're interviewing from home, let everyone in your house know ahead of time that you'll be in an interview. Don't let pets interrupt the conversation, either.
- Dress for the part.** Treat your video interview as though it were in person and dress professionally. If you'll be in casual attire for any reason, let the interviewer know in advance.

### Nail the On-Camera Interaction

Now that you're fully prepared for your self-storage job interview, keep these pointers in mind for the on-camera conversation.

- Slow down.** It can be easy to talk over people in a video meeting. Always wait for the interviewer to stop speaking before you answer. This also gives you a few seconds to think about what you want to say.

- Look at the camera when speaking, not the screen.** It's very tempting to watch yourself or your interviewer during a video call. Instead, look directly at the camera when speaking. It's the only way to maintain direct eye contact with your interviewer.
- Relay your accomplishments.** Be prepared to discuss achievements that have made or saved your employers money. Also, think of past successes that are in line with the requirements of this self-storage position.
- Show your enthusiasm.** If you like what you've heard in the interview, let the interviewer know you're interested! Also, ask them what the next step will be and their timing.

After all is said and done, follow up with a thank-you email reiterating your interest and abilities. Remember to spell-check and proofread carefully.

### Avoid These Mistakes

While the above guidance explains what you *should* do during an on-camera self-storage job interview, there are a few things you should definitely avoid doing, too:

- Don't join the interview from a tablet or phone. If that's your only option, set up in a quiet space, and prop up your device at eye level, just as you would a laptop.
- Don't join the meeting from any office with noise or distractions. Also, avoid conducting the conversation from your car, and never do it while driving!
- Don't eat or drink during a video interview. That said, it's OK to have some water set aside in case your throat gets dry.

Video interviews are an effective way for self-storage employers to get to know their candidates and for job seekers to explore new career opportunities. They can be a tremendous time- and money-saver and can even expedite the entire hiring process. However, the ease of coordination doesn't lessen the importance of preparation or basic interview etiquette. With proper planning, video interviewing is a win-win for self-storage job candidates and the businesses that seek to hire them. **ISS**

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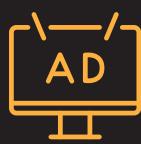
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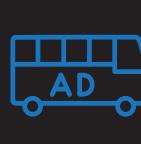
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# MASS-MEDIA ADVERTISING

## Spending on TV advertising

in the United States is on track to drop steadily over the next several years, from an estimated \$60 billion in 2024 to \$54 million in 2027, according to marketing company Statista. Money spent on radio ads is also falling. Meanwhile, advertising in the battered newspaper industry is projected to plummet over the remainder of this decade.

All these declines are happening as digital advertising continues to soar. In the U.S., digital media attracted about 75% of all media spending in 2023, according to marketing firm MarTech.

Amid the dramatic shift in the advertising landscape, self-storage operators may question whether buying ads from traditional mass-media outlets still makes sense. Industry experts maintain that this method remains viable—as long as operators allocate their dollars carefully.

“Mass-media advertising can still benefit self-storage companies by building brand awareness and reaching a broad audience, especially in areas with lower digital media consumption. However, we face challenges like high costs and changing consumer habits toward digital platforms,” says Christian Espinal, marketing director for SecureSpace Self Storage, which operates facilities in 14 states.

If mass-media advertising is an avenue you’d like to explore for your self-storage business, here’s what you need to know.

## The Price Tag

When it comes to plotting your mass-advertising strategy, cost certainly should be at or near the top of your

information-gathering checklist. Consider the following:

A 30-second ad on a local TV station can range from \$5 to \$100 per 1,000 viewers, reports “Fit Small Business,” a provider of online content for small-business owners. On top of that, it typically costs \$1,000 to \$50,000 or more to professionally produce a local TV ad, according to an article from marketing agency Motivated Marketing. Keep in mind that this differs from pricing for local cable networks.

A 30-second radio spot might cost \$100 to \$500 in a small market, \$500 to \$1,500 in a mid-size one and \$2,000 to \$5,000 or more in a large market, according to technology startup VoiceTalks. Again, that doesn’t include the expense of producing the ad.

Prices for newspaper ads vary widely. For instance, a full-page ad in a daily paper in

Albany, Georgia, might cost around \$7,000. But in a bigger market like Albany, New York, the same ad could cost \$31,000, according to an article on “Fit Small Business.”

As these figures show, you could easily spend tens of thousands of dollars on a campaign. So, how do you figure out which mass-media types to consider? Of course, your budget will be a significant factor in your decision.

You must assess the cost-effectiveness of mass-media ads compared with vehicles like digital advertising and community outreach, notes Kristi Adams, vice president of marketing for OpenTech Alliance, a provider of technology and other services for the self-storage industry. She recommends ensuring you’ve got a handle on your target audience. Look at data that’ll

## Information Gathering

To help you make smart spending decisions, collect the following details for any mass media outlet you consider for advertising:

- Target market(s) served
- Circulation (number of individuals reached, or impressions)
- Key circulation classifications, if applicable (break out by percentage)
- Ad placement and schedule (where it’ll appear and when)
- Rate-card rate vs. negotiated rate
- Total negotiated savings per advertisement and month/year
- Any bonus placements included with the buy
- Any value-add incentives included such as a free company profile, directory listing, report, etc.
- Total cost
- The overall reasoning for placing the buy (include comparisons to other media outlets)

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com, “Buying Mass-Media Advertising for Your Self-Storage Business: Platforms, Pricing and More,” by Christina Alvino](https://www.insideselfstorage.com/article/buying-mass-media-advertising-for-your-self-storage-business-platforms-pricing-and-more)

## Buying Basics

As a media buyer, it's your job to ensure your advertising and promotional campaigns reach the highest number of people in your target audience at the lowest possible cost. When placing a buy, follow these five steps:

- **Identify your market.** Who are you trying to reach? Create a profile that reflects the customers you wish to target.
- **Research your audience.** You need to know where their eyeballs are. Savvy research will reveal which marketing channels will work best.
- **Set objectives.** To measure a campaign's effectiveness, establish a specific goal for each media buy. For example, are you looking to create awareness? Drive sales? Something else?
- **Create strategy.** This is where rubber meets the road. Based on your target, objectives and budget, determine where you can buy media to achieve the best results.
- **Execute your plan.** Once you know where to buy, get to work. Place your campaigns and measure the results!

**Source:** *insideselfstorage.com, "Buying Mass-Media Advertising for Your Self-Storage Business: Platforms, Pricing and More," by Christina Alvino*

help pinpoint who your best customers are, such as age, gender, location and income. This may steer you toward one alternative over another. For instance, it might tell you that a campaign anchored by radio ads and billboards may be the most effective option based on your customer demographics.

"Each type of mass media has its own advantages and reach, so determining what will bring you the best [return on investment] is the goal," says Adams, who suggests hunting for leftover TV and radio advertising inventory, which typically can be purchased at a steep discount. In addition, pay attention to when election advertising is peaking, as mass-media ads can be particularly pricey during these periods.

Regardless of which vehicle you choose, mass-media advertising shouldn't be a one-and-done proposition, notes Adam Kutner, vice president of marketing for Andover Properties, which operates the Storage King USA brand. To be effective, it should be treated as a yearly or multi-year

investment, meaning you might not see substantial results right away but maybe six or 12 months down the road.

To carry out a long-term ad campaign, Kutner recommends setting aside funds in a special bank account and perhaps even paying for some ads up front. Otherwise, you might be tempted to trim or eliminate this method when cash flow is low. Such budget-cutting actions can make your initiative "completely ineffectual," he says, because you aren't consistently following and updating your advertising plan.

### Compelling Content

In addition to determining your mass media advertising budget, you need to ensure the message resonates with your target audience. This means creating TV, radio and newspaper ads consumers won't overlook.

For TV and radio, Adams recommends an opening line that's gripping and, in the case of TV, a great visual element. Repeat your call to action as often as possible during the limited run.

"The language in a TV or radio ad should be conversational and easy to understand, and that sound should be used to enhance your ad's message," Espinal adds.

If a TV ad offers no value, such as something informative or entertaining, it'll be forgotten, Kutner notes. "People put boring ads on TV, and that drives me insane. The ads need to be entertaining," he says. "We've all watched the Super Bowl, right? A lot of people don't even watch the Super Bowl for the football. They want to see the ads."

For newspaper advertising, Adams suggests focusing on a clear message, using an attention-grabbing headline and high-quality images, and zeroing in on your call to action. If you're publishing in more than one paper, test different copy and designs to see which deliver the best results.

"Be creative and be different. People are exposed to hundreds of advertisements daily," says Carlos Diaz, president of Value Store It Management Inc., a provider of management services for self-storage owners and investors. "If you're the same as everyone else, you'll be overlooked."

### Should You Outsource?

While mass media may appeal to many self-storage operators, you might not have enough in-house bandwidth to produce and buy ads. If that's the case, consider hiring an agency that specializes in these areas, Adams suggests.

"Outsourcing can bring professional quality and insights but adds to costs," Espinal adds.

"Weigh the benefits against the cost and your business capabilities."

There are advantages to both DIY and outsourcing. If you keep the work in-house, you retain full control of the creative elements, and you're likely more familiar with the mechanics and quality of internal projects, Diaz says. "Outsourcing could be good if you're in a time crunch and you're willing to dish out some additional spend on a reliable team of several people to pump out your content quickly with quality," he adds.

### Performance Tracking

Once you've settled on the mass-media formats you'll use and the details of creating and buying ads, determine how you'll measure their success. This is the most important step in rolling out a campaign, Adams notes.

Tracking involves paying attention to various metrics and key performance indicators. Adams suggests examining leads and conversions, website traffic and other data. Also, consider using a unique URL and phone number to better assess performance in a specific market. This monitoring might help you adjust your ad spending, she adds.

In one market, Adams and her team noticed a surge of calls during the airing of late-night TV spots, but these callers yielded few solid results. They largely turned out to be "bored people asking questions about self-storage at 11 p.m.," she says. "We saw this trend in a few other markets and then pulled [ads at] that specific time, as they were not generating actual rentals, just conversations."

Derek Walker, a principal at self-storage consulting firm Box Pro, offers a more traditional approach to gauging the success of your advertising efforts. "Whenever a tenant rents a unit, ask them how they heard about your facility. Make it a required question," he says. "It may add a few seconds to the rental process, but it will offer you invaluable insight as you allocate your marketing dollars."

While your self-storage marketing approach will likely always include a digital component moving forward, don't discount mass-media advertising. If it's an avenue you'd like to explore, investigate your options, create a practical budget, and have a well-planned strategy that includes a method to track your efforts. You might discover it's an effective way to promote your brand to a bigger market. **ISS**

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# Better Marketing Through AI

## One of Gabriel Luna's

**responsibilities** as the marketing coordinator for Trojan Storage is creating and executing marketing campaigns for the company's 44 self-storage facilities. So, when he was informed about two underperforming properties in Portland, Oregon, he was tasked with figuring out why, then devising a plan to fix it.

While this seems like a daunting mission that requires countless hours of swimming through a sea of data, Luna eagerly accepted the challenge. He knew he was armed with a relatively new weapon that would provide the answers he was looking for and quickly. Artificial intelligence (AI) would be key.

An admitted aficionado, Luna had already committed more than a year to researching AI's capabilities and stashing a collection of tools in his virtual toolbox that would help him improve as a marketer. Now, it was time to put them to work. (Read on to learn how it went.)

## Making Big Moves in Marketing

There's no denying that AI can be overwhelming. Its reach is vast and its impact massive. However, it's also a technological advance that's here to stay and will change the world forever.

The rollout of ChatGPT in November 2022 is frequently identified as the date AI went mainstream, but its use has silently permeated our society for quite some time. While the self-storage industry has been somewhat slow to adopt AI, the technology has already been used by many other types of businesses. In fact, one of the areas most impacted is marketing, where brands have used it for automating many tasks such as:

- Predictive trends and customer behavior
- Personalized recommendations
- Targeted advertising
- Content creation
- Dynamic pricing
- Data analysis
- Customer service



"There's so many places in marketing where AI is being used between what's coming and what's already here, and very few people are even aware of it," says Brennan Palmer, owner of CoreMarketing.io, which helps companies leverage the power of AI through conversational chatbots.

After some initial resistance, similar AI marketing practices are being implemented in self-storage, with facility operators adopting the blueprint laid out by other sectors to boost their own bottom line.

## Solving the Portland Puzzle

Luna's strategy to solve the Portland revenue puzzle began by inputting the each facility's customer list into ChatGPT, which then identified the neighborhoods where most of existing tenants lived. He then crafted four carefully worded and detailed instructions, known as prompts. The first three had their own purpose: to define the ideal tenant profile for Trojan Storage, to determine the key selling points for those residents, and to list the unique pain points. Within just a few minutes, ChatGPT presented all the output in the format requested.

From that data, Luna learned there was a crime surge in those neighborhoods and security was important to customers. There was also a strong sentiment toward supporting local businesses instead of big companies. The tenant profile also revealed that Trojan's primary customer lived in apartments 5 or more miles away.

With this insight, Luna crafted a fourth prompt to combine all of the output and used AI to create an email marketing strategy that enhanced the relatability of Trojan Storage to its target demographic. The message featured new language that emphasized a sense of community and emphasized the measures taken to ensure a renter's items are safe at their facilities.

"Initially we were just blanketing the area and marketing in a 3- to 5-mile radius, but we noticed those were suburban homes, which we learned weren't our customers," Luna says. "We created a flier with special promo codes and tracking numbers to measure the impact, and we saw a huge lift in occupancy rate at both Portland facilities."

## Applications

This is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of how self-storage operators can include AI as an integral part of their business-marketing strategy. Many are discovering an array of applications that automate tasks like creating content, crafting personalized customer experiences, refining targeted advertising strategies and generating marketing materials, to name a few.

One of the most common AI tools being used by self-storage operators is the chatbot, which automatically initiates a conversation with a website visitor via their chosen device. Chatbots have made a huge impact by responding to customer needs at a time when they would otherwise get overlooked, such as after hours or on holidays.

"A chatbot is essentially like having another employee who works 24/7 and never takes time off," says Palmer, who also owns two self-storage facilities.

AI is also commonly used for content marketing. You can ask it to write an article or blog, produce a podcast, create an original non-trademarked photo, compose and schedule social media posts, or produce and edit video.

The real trick lies in tasks in which multiple AI tools work in symphony. For example, Trojan Storage produces a music podcast that includes commercials for its brand. ChatGPT writes scripts based on the company's promotions. Synthesis.io then takes the script copy and converts it into audio.

AI can also serve as your own personal analyst. You can scrape competitor data from other self-storage websites to compare occupancy rates, unit prices, promotions and more. All of this can be accomplished in the time it took you to read this paragraph.

The tech can also help you analyze historical data for your facility and combine it with current market trends to predict future customer behavior and demand. This output will arm you with the information to optimize inventory and implement dynamic pricing strategies in real time.

You can also create eye-catching slide presentations and marketing materials, optimize your search engine optimization (SEO) or improve your email interactions by using AI as a writing assistant. This still only scratches the surface of the marketing tasks and operational efficiencies AI can unlock and automate.

## Skills

The information provided by an AI tool is only as good as what you put into it. The act of writing out your instructions is called prompt engineering. This is likely the most important skill required to be effective at using the technology for marketing. The art is in providing as accurate and detailed of a prompt as possible. Simply changing one adjective can completely alter the output from the AI tool.

Here's an example of the prompt Luna used to produce the AI-generated email campaign for his company's underperforming Portland locations:

*Given the information at hand, develop an email marketing strategy that enhances the relatability of Trojan Storage to our target tenant demographic. Address their unique requirements and aspirations, weaving our product offerings into the broader narrative of shared human experiences and values. Incorporate key discussion topics including our unique selling propositions and local challenges they might be facing. Ensure the inclusion of a compelling call to action that motivates engagement.*

A few other vital AI skills include adaptability to learn and use these unfamiliar tools, problem-solving if a prompt doesn't net the desired result, editing for quality control over the content generated, and staying knowledgeable about updates to policies and operating procedures, as the world of AI is constantly evolving.

## Benefits

AI ultimately benefits your self-storage business and positively impacts your revenue by making your marketing faster, more affordable and more profitable. You'll also enhance the customer experience by making the rental journey convenient and personalized.

"Generally, AI is about meeting customers where and how they want to be met and at the time they choose," says Melissa Cameron, chief marketing officer for National Storage Affiliates Trust, a Greenwood, Colorado-based real estate investment trust that owns and operates self-storage facilities nationwide. "It's also about gaining efficiency, not only in your marketing but improving marketing processes and utilizing intelligence to automate repetitive tasks."

Those efficiencies have a positive impact on your bottom line, both by increasing income and reducing expenses. Chatbots capture revenue your business would've lost by not immediately following up with a sales prospect. They also cater to the changing consumer habits for Millennials and Gen Z, who prefer texts to phone calls.

You can create more content while keeping your labor expenses the same, reduce or eliminate the need for graphic designers and photographers, and almost instantly produce real-time business data at any time with the click of a computer key. Every aspect of your marketing strategy and operations can be impacted and improved with AI.

"We used to joke about how AI would impact our bottom line, but it's 100% starting

to make us better at what we do and make us more efficient," says Robert Madsen, president of U-Lock Mini-Storage Group, which operates self-storage facilities in Western Canada. "AI has taken us far beyond what we could've done on our own."

## Drawbacks

Not all is sunshine and rainbows in the world of AI. As a technology that only recently went mainstream, there are still kinks to work out:

- **AI-generated photos can occasionally feature a person with extra or missing fingers.**
- **Truth, accuracy and bias issues can creep into content, as the sources used to create it can be flawed and produce errors called hallucinations.**
- **Marketing campaigns may not be in line with your goals or on brand.**
- **Math can occasionally be calculated incorrectly.**
- **Chatbots lack human emotional intelligence, which can lead to an unpleasant experience for a customer.**

Despite these imperfections, AI is rapidly becoming more intelligent as this technology matures. The more you use it, the quicker it'll learn about your business. Its output will improve and it will become more trustworthy.

## Concerns

AI also presents its own set of unique ethical and security concerns. Some surround content creation. With the speed at which these tools can create content, there could be a temptation to emphasize quantity over quality. However, search-engine companies have caught on to content farming and adjusted their algorithms to reward originality.

"Recently, Google began penalizing AI-generated content as spam unless their crawlers decide the AI content adds value you can't see elsewhere," says David Austin, SEO content manager/marketing for StoragePug, a Knoxville, Tennessee-based company that offers self-storage software, website development and marketing.

Deep faking (misrepresented content) and plagiarism are other content issues to watch, and they reinforce the importance of auditing your AI content output. Chatbots, especially conversational ones, have become so good that some customers think they're dealing with an actual human instead of automated responses, and that quality comes with risks.

"You shouldn't try to trick your customer," Austin says. "In a situation where someone thinks they're talking to a person, and then the chatbot can't answer their question or it starts hallucinating [giving false information], you could do damage to your brand."

## Try These Tools!

In the following list, we've compiled some of the most popular AI tools being used today for various marketing tasks ... and, yes, we used AI to build it! The chatbots ChatGPT4, Gemini and Microsoft Copilot are great starting points and can also perform many of these tasks. Take note that some of the below options are free, while others require a subscription.

- **Writing:** Byword, Copy.ai, Jasper, Grammarly
- **Photos:** Adobe Firefly, Canva, DALL-E 2, Midjourney
- **Audio:** LANDR, Descript, Murf, Synthesis.io
- **Video:** Sora, Synthesia, VASA-1, VEED
- **Social media:** Buffer, FeedHive, Flickr, Hootsuite
- **Graphic design:** Beautiful.ai, Canva, Designs.ai, Lunacy
- **Search engine optimization:** Ahrefs, Moz, Semrush, Seobility

There are also security concerns, as self-storage operators possess sensitive customer information that's valuable and may require compliance for data and market analysis. If your tenants can't trust you, you'll likely lose their business forever while damaging your brand's reputation.

Fortunately, these risks can be mitigated, if not eliminated. Sensitive information can be encrypted and stored on private, in-house servers. Chatbot transcriptions can be monitored with a human intervening in the conversation when needed. The widget can also include in fine print that the chatbot is powered by AI. You should also educate yourself on regulations that protect consumer information. Preserve tenant trust by asking for their consent to use their collected data for AI purposes.

Generative-AI tools are becoming more intelligent and creating accurate content, while auditing output adds another layer of oversight. Storage companies can also take steps in-house to address potential risk.

"We are putting together an AI committee to build best practices and make sure we're ahead of the curve for policies that may need to be put in place as well as testing the best

use of AI within our business," says Melissa Stiles, chief marketing officer for Storage Asset Management, a third-party management company that oversees more than 580 self-storage facilities.

### DIY vs. Outsourcing

Once your self-storage business chooses to adopt AI, the next decision is whether the tasks you've identified as candidates for support will be executed and managed by an in-house team or a third-party company. Some aspects of the technology are simple and easy, while others are quite technical.

The size and skills of your team, along with budget constraints, can influence your decision to retain AI work in-house. If your staff is already operating at full capacity or lacks the expertise to delve into AI and you have the financial means to outsource, then the potential return on investment may be significant.

"We're not only in content creation but in the storage business, so we must ensure that our time is utilized to the best of our abilities," Madsen says. "There are times when you must recognize that hiring professionals would be a

better fit for the task, aligning with their skills. We've tried to handle things ourselves, but we're not experts and ended up wasting time and money that we weren't aware of until afterward."

Most people have heard of AI and ChatGPT, but how many self-storage marketers are using it daily? Some are, but most aren't. Many people are still using AI for entertainment, so there's a lot of low-hanging fruit to make your job as a marketer more efficient.

The benefits can also bleed into the entire organization because AI is so efficient and pushes the envelope on the productivity limits of your team. Incorporating it into marketing strategies marks a pivotal step toward improving efficiency and customer satisfaction while positively impacting revenue. As AI evolves, its role in marketing promises to reshape the landscape, propelling self-storage businesses into a new era of innovation.

"AI isn't just a fad," Madsen says. "It's making a tangible impact on our revenue and efficiencies. We're just getting started, and I think the best is yet to come." **ISS**

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## A 5-Step Competitor Analysis

**Self-storage is a very competitive business**—much more now in the age of the internet than it was several decades or even several years ago. To stay relevant with customers, you need to monitor and understand how your facility ranks in the market area relative to other operators, both online and in person.

If you want to be the market leader, you must win the game of marketing, particularly online marketing. If you don't want to learn

about things like website performance, search engine optimization, Google ads, social media and analytics, then pay someone else to do it or get into another business. This is part of your world as a self-storage operator, and there's no ignoring it. Also, don't believe that just because there's a real estate investment trust (REIT) in your trade area that you've already lost. That isn't the case. I've beaten the REITs, and I've seen others trounce them, too.

One of the first steps in effective self-storage marketing is to conduct a competitor analysis. If you do, it'll help you understand your position in the marketplace and what you need to do to improve. Below are the five areas I examine when gauging a facility's position.

### Self-Storage Competitor Analysis: Location

The first step in your analysis is to identify the main self-storage competitors in your market.

In most cases, these are the properties within a one- to three-mile radius of your facility, though it can be up to five miles depending on your location and other geographic factors. In more rural areas, the competition can be as far as seven to 10 miles away.

Your feasibility report, if it's recent, will tell you where and who your competitors are. You can also simply search for them on Google Maps. Note their locations relative to your facility, so you can start gathering more information about them.

### Self-Storage Competitor Analysis: Online Presence

Next, I want to see how good my competition's online presence is. I visit their websites and see how user-friendly they are. I create a spreadsheet that allows me to track which self-storage operators allow online rentals and which don't, their move-in specials, and who's running Google Ads. Ultimately, I'm able to determine how sophisticated the trade area is and who appears to be on top of their marketing game. These are my main competitors.

First and foremost, you must sign up for a Google Business Profile. I also buy pay-per-click advertising, and my business shows up on the first page of search results.

You also need to know what you're spending on your online-marketing efforts, including the cost per move-in (conversion), and how effective they are compared to the competition. Google Analytics gives you most but not all of this data. Most of us aren't too knowledgeable about online marketing when we start. Google offers free training, and there are dozens of videos on YouTube. I've also hired coaches to help me learn. Of course, you can employ a third-party marketing company to do all this for you, but I recommend that you educate yourself, so you can manage marketing on your own.

### Self-Storage Competitor Analysis: Pricing

The next thing I look at is whether my self-storage competitors use dynamic pricing; in other words, do they alter their rental rates based on market demand? If you have REITs like CubeSmart, Extra Space Storage or Public Storage in your area, they generally do. Check to see if the independent operators in your area use static pricing or offer move-in specials.

I'm not going to tell you that you should use dynamic pricing to compete. I'm not currently using it myself. But at the very least, you should offer move-in specials and perhaps upgrades for more convenient units. Ultimately, I price my space based on occupancy in a specific size. Most self-storage management software will allow you to preset prices based on set parameters.

If my storage property is in lease-up, I keep rental rates closer to the lowest in my market to gain occupancy quickly. I'll work on raising them later. If my facility is stabilized or close to it, I don't try to compete with the lowest price. Rather, I keep my eye on revenue. I'd rather drop a few percentage points in occupancy and keep the integrity of my pricing intact.

As with most things in life, there are no absolutes when it comes to self-storage pricing—or marketing, for that matter. Play around to discover your preferences and find a balance for your business. Update your competitor spreadsheet quarterly so you know where you stand in the market.

### Self-Storage Competitor Analysis: Physical Appearance

Next, I drive by each of my main self-storage competitors. I want to compare the physical appearance of their locations to my facility. What do I need to do to improve my property in relation to theirs?

In the past, I've updated landscaping, painted buildings, repaired dented corners,

added bollards, etc., to spruce up a site. I don't go crazy, but I do design an improvement plan and create a timeline to execute it.

In a perfect world, I want to have the highest rent in the market, unless the location or condition of the property is such that discounts are necessary to draw customers. My mindset is focused on what I can do to make my facility look the best.

### Self-Storage Competitor Analysis: Strengths and Weaknesses

Every self-storage operation has its strengths and weaknesses. I often rent a small unit from my main rivals so I can see what theirs are. For example, I want to see what happens if I'm late paying the rent. How quickly can I get a gate code if I forget it? If a manager is present, I assess how good they are at their job. Some facility flaws can be as simple as narrow drive lanes, water puddling in front of unit doors or poor customer service.

I go through this exercise so I understand my self-storage facility's unique selling propositions (USPs). Then I can tell potential customers what they are and the benefit of each. For example, in Florida, we tell prospects to ask the competition when their facility last flooded. My sites never flood (feature), so when tenants store belongings there, they can expect them to be dry whenever they show up, no matter the weather (benefit). That's a USP. I create at least three USPs for each facility, and my managers and call-center representatives know them inside and out.

Today, being successful in self-storage means excelling at the game of marketing; and it all starts with a good competitor analysis. When you know and understand how your rivals operate, you have the insight you need to improve your business. **ISS**

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**In the competitive world** of self-storage, success isn't just about renting units to new customers, it's about fostering a community. What I've discovered is that one of the most overlooked yet crucial aspects of running a well-performing facility is building a great referral network among fellow operators in your area. This can be a game-changer for your business, ensuring that customers find the perfect storage solution, even when you can't provide it yourself.

### Enjoy the Benefits

In any industry, connections and relationships can significantly impact your

# Playing Nice With Competitors



success. For self-storage operators, a referral network is like a safety net that catches potential customers who might otherwise slip away. It's a vital tool for growth and sustainability. While you may refer some prospects away from your property when you can't fulfill their request, you'll also have them sent back to you when other sites can't meet their requirements.

Storage needs vary greatly from one tenant to another. Sometimes, they might require a unit size, location or additional amenities your facility can't provide in that moment. This is where referrals become invaluable. When you have a network of fellow industry professionals, you can confidently refer shoppers to sites that better suit their requirements. This demonstrates a commitment to customer satisfaction and enhances your reputation as a helpful and knowledgeable resource.

Referring potential customers to other self-storage facilities isn't just about redirecting business; it's about nurturing positive relationships. When you genuinely care about meeting the renter's needs, even if it means sending them elsewhere, it creates a lasting impression. They greatly appreciate your willingness to help them find what they want rather than trying to force them into your product. This leaves them with a positive impression of you, and they'll happily tell others of the great service you provided.

A well-established referral network can also boost your self-storage facility's reputation and credibility. When customers see that you have connections with other respected businesses in the industry, it builds trust. They're more likely to choose you over competitors (when possible) because they know you have the knowledge and connections to provide them with the best storage solution, even if it isn't at your location.

When self-storage operators collaborate and support one another rather than establish a negative rapport, it creates a positive atmosphere that benefits everyone. This camaraderie can lead to shared resources, joint marketing efforts, and even advocacy for the industry's interests at a local or regional level. This can be especially important when it comes to legislating changes for the industry in your state.

### Make the Connection

So, how do you create a referral network with a business that is essentially your competitor? Start by visiting them! Tell them who you are, where your facility is and why you're introducing yourself. Find one or two properties where you feel comfortable with the physical aspects and the staff or owners. You want to feel completely safe referring customers to them when necessary. Visit a few times during different times of the day or week if you need to and get a good feel for them, and them for you.

I've built a fantastic relationship with the owners of a facility about 3 miles from me that only has 10-by-10 and larger spaces available. In the last five years, I've had only small units (5-by-10 and smaller), and zero drive-up units. Those seeking this type of storage have been on a two-year waitlist! When I have customers who desire a larger space or drive-up unit, I have somewhere to send them.

Moreover, because I've spent time getting to know these owners and their properties well, I'm more than comfortable sending prospects to them. Plus, they regularly send referrals to me. They recently even sent me a Crumbl Cookie delivery as a thank you!

Many self-storage operators reward their customers with a gift card or cash any time they refer a new tenant. Similarly, consider offering the same perk to other managers or owners who send you leads. It isn't necessary, but it's appreciated and a small price to pay for a new renter. Always let them know how much you appreciate the reciprocal relationship.

The power of connections in the self-storage business can't be overstated. It isn't just who you know but how you can help each other succeed. Start building those connections today and watch your facility thrive in the company of supportive industry peers. **ISS**

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# How to Master Target Marketing

**It's a fact: Some products and services** are easier to sell than others. Sometimes it's because they're necessities and everyone needs them, like toilet paper or soap. Other times it's because they're trending and in high demand. Remember, for example, what happened when Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen released its

chicken sandwich in late 2019. People were literally beating each other to get one!

Self-storage doesn't enjoy that luxury. Your facility may be gorgeous and your customer service stellar; you may even have excellent marketing. Still, not everyone needs storage. In fact, according to the 2023 Demand Study published by the

Self Storage Association, only about 11% of U.S. households use it. There's also fierce competition for that customer base. As a result, it's very easy to spend your marketing budget and receive nothing meaningful in return.

If you want to maximize the impact of your hard-earned marketing dollars,

**66** If you successfully add local businesses to your self-storage referral program, they serve as a pipeline of new customers that are relevant to you based on proximity and need.

you must direct your campaigns toward *qualified* self-storage leads. This is called target marketing. Using it means understanding who needs storage in your area and who is most likely to rent from you, then forming a strategy to reach those consumers specifically.

### Focus on the Why

Traditionally, the self-storage industry has benefitted from the five Ds: death, divorce, downsizing, disaster and displacement. These are common reasons a person might suddenly need a lot more space. But the No. 1 reason people use the product today is they're simply running out of room for their stuff.

A primary factor driving this demand is the escalating cost of housing. People can afford to buy fun toys like RVs, kayaks and mountain bikes well before they can afford a larger garage in which to keep them. Renting a storage unit is much cheaper than renting or purchasing a bigger house.

Knowing why people need self-storage will help you execute target marketing. The trick is to be visible where they are when they need you. For example, how would you find and connect with folks who are moving? One approach is to create partnerships with local businesses such as realtors and moving companies. To reach consumers who may have large toys they need to store, talk to RV and boat dealers in your area as well as any retailers that sell bikes and kayaks. Establish a referral program in which you send potential customers to each other.

### Focus on the Where

Self-storage is a hyper-local business, and your customers are generally going to come from a short distance from your facility. The SSA Demand Study says most will travel from less than 20 minutes away. If you're in a competitive area, that drive time will be drastically less.

Your potential customers are looking for convenience and a good price. If someone is experiencing one of the five Ds mentioned above, they're likely feeling stress or grief and just want a place to stash their stuff. They aren't likely to drive out of their way to rent from a facility unless the closer facilities are subpar.

That said, "convenient" could mean a lot of things. You don't necessarily have to be near a customer's home. You might be near their work, on their commute route, near their kids' school, or close to one of their frequently visited spots like a gym or supermarket. So, while you don't have to limit your marketing efforts to *homes* within a certain radius of your facility, you do need to target customers who would see you as a convenient choice.

### Reaching Your (Seemingly Small) Target

So, we know that only 11% of U.S. households are using self-storage. We also know that the best potential customers both need the product and are close enough to your facility that they see you as being a convenient choice. That narrows your prospect pool quite a bit, which might seem scary. How are you going to maximize your revenue potential if you're fishing in such a small pond?

The good news is you don't need to catch many fish. Every self-storage renter provides a lot of reliable revenue, and they'll typically rent from you for many months. Some tenants stay for years! The question is, how will you reel them in?

People who regularly drive past your self-storage facility are good candidates to choose you based on convenience. To lure these customers, your priority should be curb appeal. Make sure your signage is clean, up-to-date and attractive. The landscaping and grounds should be tidy and well-kept. Your fencing, driveways and parking lot should be clear of debris. Your buildings should be fresh and free of damage.

Facebook ads can also work well as a way to reach people nearby. You can target specific demographics and neighborhoods, which is better than reaching out to the entire town. You can also home in on applicable interests such as boats and RVs, which is great if you offer vehicle storage, or certain job titles such as "contractor," which might help you fill your commercial units. You can even target prospects by income level for premium vs. affordable storage.

Finally, leverage local search engine optimization (SEO). People who search for "storage units near me" and are, in fact, close to your facility are your exact target. Google will send these folks to you for free—as long your website and SEO are up to par.

Google ads are fantastic because they let you target a buyer's location *and* intent. You can choose keywords and phrases to optimize where your ads show up. Start with "storage units" and "self-storage units," as well as anything else you offer. Don't overthink this one.

If you successfully add local businesses to your self-storage referral program, they serve as a pipeline of new customers that are relevant to you based on proximity *and* need. Start with those that overlap with your customer base (realtors, apartment managers, movers), but don't leave anyone out. This tactic is ideal because it helps you build relationships in the community, establish your brand and keep the renters coming.

### A Straight Shot

If these strategies are leaving you scratching your head because you don't know where to start, try talking to your current self-storage tenants. Where do they live? What are they storing? How did they find you? Why did they choose you? The answers will give you hints about where to find more customers, so you can better optimize your target marketing.

Some property-management software can show you a map of where your customers live, but if not, you can do the work yourself. If you find clusters of tenants in a certain area, that's a great spot to direct your marketing efforts.

When it comes to filling your self-storage units, think smart, not big. By using target marketing to focus on the people who need storage near you, you'll land the right customers without wasting time or money. **ISS**

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# TRACKING Your Way to Success



**In today's tightly competitive** self-storage landscape, understanding the impact and performance of your facility marketing is more than a strategic advantage, it's a necessity. Tracking allows you to see what campaigns and messages resonate with your audience, what drives traffic, and what converts leads into loyal customers. It enables you to tailor your approach to meet the needs of your target audience, ensuring that the dollars you spend yield the highest possible return. Ultimately, it provides vital insights that can guide you through industry fluctuations with data-driven confidence.

The process of tracking your self-storage marketing is comprehensive. It should cover everything from your website to your paid advertisements to your social media outreach. Let's look more closely at the reasons to track your efforts, the metrics to follow and what they reveal about your business.

## Tracking Is Essential

The cornerstone of effective marketing is an understanding of your target audience. You must know them like the back of your hand. Who are your self-storage customers? Are they people who are downsizing or moving? Businesses in need of extra space for equipment or inventory? Students who need a place for their stuff between semesters?

To track your marketing efforts is to unravel the mystery of who is engaging with your content and through which channels. This isn't just about numbers; it's about *insights*. Which messages are resonating? What prompts a click or a call? Understanding these dynamics will empower you to fine-tune your messaging while ensuring it speaks directly to the needs and wants of each customer type.

Tracking also tells you where your marketing investments are working the hardest and best. It's about discerning which campaigns are

merely creating noise and which are genuinely driving revenue. This clarity is crucial in the self-storage industry, where every dollar needs to count toward filling units and growing the business. With precise data, you're able to allocate resources to the channels and campaigns delivering the best bang for your buck, enhancing your overall efficiency.

Finally, tracking is the key to continuous improvement, providing a roadmap of past performance, spotlighting successes to replicate and missteps to avoid. By analyzing trends, responses and engagement over time, you gain valuable insight to steer your marketing strategy.

This ongoing cycle of measure, learn and adapt ensures your efforts evolve in lockstep with market dynamics and customer expectations, keeping your self-storage operation not just competitive but a step ahead. Tracking isn't just a tactic; it's a calculated imperative that enlightens, guides and propels your business forward.

## What to Track

Understanding the metrics that matter most can turn a marketing strategy from good to great. Following are key indicators every self-storage operator should keep on their radar.

Let's start with traffic. Knowing where your in-person and website visitors are coming from can reveal which marketing channels are producing the best results. Are potential customers finding you online through organic search, web ads or social media, or via offline advertising such as direct mail, newspaper ads, billboards or event sponsorships? Are they reaching out directly via phone, chat or personal visit? By tracking your traffic sources, you can identify which platforms are worth an increased investment and which need further consideration.

Engagement is another key area of focus. It's a critical barometer measuring the appeal and relevance of your self-storage marketing messages. This metric delves into how visitors interact with your content. Are they participating enthusiastically, exploring your offerings and finding value in what they see? A high rate signifies a strong connection with your audience and that your content is resonating well. Conversely, low engagement could indicate a disconnect, signaling the need for adjustments in your content strategy or website design.

There are three types of user engagement: online, offline and person-to-person. Each has its own metrics to follow. Let's break them down.

## Online Metrics

Google Analytics 4 (GA4) provides a detailed picture of how effectively your online content engages users. Focus on the following metrics:

**New users.** This is the number of first-time visitors to your self-storage website within a specific period, crucial for assessing the effectiveness of marketing strategies aimed at attracting new business. Observing this metric helps you understand the appeal of your products and services to potential customers and guides you in refining your efforts to target relevant audiences more effectively.

**Engaged sessions.** This metric highlights meaningful interactions users have with your website, such as exploring different unit sizes or spending significant time on your FAQs (frequently asked questions) page. It's vital for evaluating how effectively your content captures and maintains visitor interest, indicating the relevance and quality of your online presence.

**Engagement rate.** This ratio of engaged sessions to total sessions provides insight to the overall engagement your self-storage website generates. A high rate suggests that your content and user interface are effectively

holding users, encouraging them to explore your self-storage solutions more thoroughly.

#### Average engagement time per session.

Measuring the average duration of engaged sessions offers a clear view of how compelling your content is. Longer times can indicate that potential renters are carefully considering your offerings, reflecting the success of your site in providing valuable information.

**Conversions.** This refers to visitors who complete a desired action on your site, such as requesting a quote, reserving a self-storage unit or completing a move-in. To track this metric, go to the "Events" section of your GA4 property and designate specific user actions as conversions.

#### Offline Metrics

Tracking the performance of offline advertising such as billboards, print ads, direct mail or event sponsorships requires a bit of creativity since these methods don't inherently provide digital analytics. Here's how you can measure their impact:

- Use a unique phone number for each campaign. Call-tracking services allow you to assign different numbers to specific ads or locations, making it easy to see which ones are generating calls.
- Create a unique URL or dedicated landing page for each campaign. This way, you can track how many people visit your site specifically because of an offline ad. Make sure your URLs are easy to remember and type.
- Include QR codes in your offline materials to direct users to specific web pages. Smartphones can scan these easily. Tracking visits from these codes provides insight to ad effectiveness.
- Use specific promo codes or special offers that are exclusive to your offline campaigns.

By tracking these, you can measure the direct impact on sales or sign-ups.

- If you're using direct mail, count the number of inquiries, sign-ups or purchases made in response to the campaign. Compare this with the total number of mailers sent out to calculate a response rate.
- While the least accurate, a count of your onsite foot traffic during and after an offline advertising campaign can be a good indicator of its success.

#### Person-to-Person Metrics

To effectively monitor person-to-person engagement, adopt a comprehensive approach for each communication method.

- **Phone:** When potential customers call your self-storage facility, ask how they found out about you. Ensure the response is logged accurately in your CRM (customer-relationship management) software.
- **Online chat:** Incorporate a pre-chat survey or train chat representatives to ask users how they discovered your facility. Capture these insights directly within the platform or record them in your CRM system.
- **In-person visits:** When customers visit your facility, ask about their discovery method during the initial greeting or tour. These responses should be documented in your CRM or facility-management software for future analysis.

#### How to Set Yourself Up for Success

To successfully track your self-storage marketing, it's essential to start with the right setup, incorporating these key components:

**Goals.** Begin by defining what success looks like for your self-storage business. Is it

increasing occupancy rates, boosting website traffic or enhancing customer satisfaction?

Clear, measurable goals are the foundation of any effective marketing strategy. They should be SMART (specific, measurable attainable, relevant and time-bound). For instance, aiming to increase online bookings by 20% within six months gives your team a clear target and makes it easier to measure the effectiveness of your efforts.

**Tools.** Choose the right ones to track your progress. For example, we already know that GA4 is a powerful, free tool that offers insight to website traffic, user behavior and conversion rates. For social media campaigns, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X provide built-in analytics to gauge post engagement, audience growth and more.

Customer-mapping software such as Maptive can also be helpful. Once you've entered your customers' addresses, it renders a detailed map highlighted with pins. This visualization offers an immediate overview of your base's geographic distribution relative to your store's location.

Hotjar, a behavior-analytics platform, offers heat maps and recordings of customer website-viewing sessions, which allow you to observe and understand how people navigate and interact with your site. You'll see which aspects engage them and which may act as obstacles to conversion.

**Check-ins.** Incorporating regular performance reviews into your marketing routine ensures you're on track to meet your goals and allows for timely strategy adjustments. You might conduct a weekly analysis of social media engagement or a monthly deep dive into website analytics, for example. Consistent monitoring helps identify trends, pinpoint what's working and spotlight areas for improvement. It also fosters a culture of agility within your self-storage team, enabling quick pivots in strategy in response to market changes or new awareness.

#### Assess, Learn, Grow

In today's competitive self-storage market, effectively tracking your marketing efforts isn't just about gathering data; it's crucial for turning that information into action, ensuring your business stays ahead. It helps you understand your customers better, refine your strategy to get the best ROI and adapt to changing market trends. Simply put, regularly assessing and adapting your marketing based on what you learn is essential for growing your business and maintaining its success. Embrace these tactics to not only compete but to lead in the industry. **ISS**

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# 4 Areas to Optimize



## After two years of record-high rental rates

and soaring consumer demand, self-storage operations are feeling the pinch at the outset of 2024. The market is tightening. Cost per square foot has fallen year over year, and many operators have struggled recently to fill units.

Meanwhile, self-storage business income was down nearly 5% in 2023, according to Argus Self Storage Advisors, a national network of real estate brokers who specialize in the industry. Overall occupancy also dropped 2% to 3%, which means seasonality is back.

If you're running a facility on tight margins, these numbers might make you sweat; but there are steps you can take to ensure your operation thrives through the downturn. It's all about nailing the fundamentals, including your approach to marketing.

In an environment in which you and your competitors are scrambling for renters, you can't afford to fall short on the basics. If you give a self-storage prospect any reason to not choose your facility, they'll be snatched up instantly by the real estate investment trust down the street. So, let's revisit four essential areas of marketing to optimize this year.

## Curb Appeal

Facility appearance should be prioritized as an essential part of your self-storage marketing because it says a lot about your business and shapes public perception. This is true for most service-based businesses.

For example, imagine you're new to a town and looking for somewhere to eat. You don't know much about the area, but you're starving and drive past a restaurant enroute to your hotel. How do you decide whether to eat at that establishment? You might check online reviews or perhaps ask a coworker for their opinion. But before doing any of that, you'll likely be swayed by how the place looks. Is it clean? Does it look well-maintained?

Consumers who are considering a self-storage facility go through the same mental process. An initial drive-by creates the first impression for about 40% of our customers, according to the Self Storage

Association (SSA). In fact, driving by a site is the most common way renters find their chosen facility, according to the SSA's "2023 Self-Storage Demand Study."

The best thing you can do for your facility marketing this year is to simply spruce up your lot. This could mean updating the management office, repairing or replacing the fence, repaving the lot, painting the buildings, refreshing signage, or simply pulling weeds and trash out of the landscape. If you're short on budget, focus on your street frontage. This allows you to take good property photos, which are vital for your other marketing efforts. If you advertise using photos of a dingy, unkempt facility, you're throwing away money.

If curb appeal accounts for 40% of initial customer impressions, then what about the other 60%? Well, once your self-storage facility is looking its best and you have a bunch of great photos, it's time to tidy your online presence.

## Google Business Profile

More people find self-storage facilities through online channels than any other means. Though other search engines matter, Google should be your most important consideration since more than 90% of web searches occur on that platform. In fact, one of the most important elements of your online presence is your Google Business Profile (GBP).

Self-storage is a local business, and tenants generally come from the immediate area. When someone searches for a unit, Google always prioritizes local results. Thus, a well-maintained GBP makes you a candidate to appear in front of users. The Local Pack, which displays local GBPs, gets more clicks than any other set of results. If your profile isn't considered a good option by Google, it'll be difficult to generate any online demand.

To help optimize the performance of your GBP, make sure it contains:

- Accurate business name, address, phone number and website
- Primary and secondary categories

- Accurate office hours
- A good description of business offerings and why customers should choose you
- Lots of good photos
- Available products with prices and photos
- A link to your website
- As many reviews as possible

Think of your GBP as your storefront. It should make your business look good and demonstrate that someone cares about it. It should give the impression that the business owner and facility manager are doing a great job.

GBP is a huge marketing asset, and best of all, it's completely free. This makes it doubly valuable during a market downturn. Once your listing is in order, it'll bring clicks to your facility website, which is our next area of focus.

## Facility Website

If a potential tenant goes online to find a self-storage unit, they want to be able to rent them and there. Though web design is an incredibly complex topic, the bottom line is your website needs to follow the same rules as your curb appeal and GBP. Does it look good? Is the information conveyed accurate? Does it get the job done?

Imagine shopping on Amazon and coming across a product that says, "This item cannot be purchased online. Give us a call at..." Would you do it? I certainly wouldn't. Other website features can benefit your self-storage operation, but a functional site that allows customers to rent is absolutely necessary.

In 2024, the bare minimum for marketing includes a comprehensive and functional website. While your customer base is getting younger, technology continues to advance. A facility without a well-performing website looks like a unit without a door.

## Online Reviews

Once you've got the above three basics down, focus your energy on reviews. These drive renters to your GBP and website and

work collectively as one of the stronger local ranking factors Google considers. Google wants to give searchers a good solution to their problem, and positive reviews function effectively as votes that your self-storage facility meets that criterion.

Keep in mind that having more reviews won't necessarily make you outrank the competition. Google also values the frequency and quality of the feedback. Details can matter. For example, reviews with photos and complete experiences are much more useful to people conducting searches than a five-star review without any information. And,

because detailed, positive reviews are more useful to searchers, Google likes them better. In addition, recent reviews are better than old ones, at least to some extent.

Every self-storage operator should implement a program to ensure they regularly receive online reviews. You don't need dozens every month, but a steady stream is necessary to maintain a good position online.

### Prepare for the Year Ahead

This could be a difficult year for many self-storage operators. Anyone who bases their marketing on 2022 metrics will struggle, at least

for a while. When planning your 2024 strategy, go back to the basics. Make sure your facility looks good online and off. Take steps to ensure you're able to rent to people when the need for self-storage arises, and do what you can to convince Google that your business is a good one.

Once you've mastered the fundamentals, feel free to explore more complicated tactics! Just bear in mind that a \$100,000 of marketing won't fill your units if people see your business and don't believe it's operated with care. **ISS**

**Contributor:** David Austin, *StoragePug*, [www.storagepug.com](http://www.storagepug.com)



# Pre-Launch Marketing



### If you're building a new

self-storage facility, you've got a lot on your plate. There are critical steps and considerations at every phase of development, from planning and design to construction and operation. As the walls go up, the roof goes on and the roll-up doors are installed, your grand opening will shimmer on the horizon. With your Certificate of Occupancy in sight, how will you begin promoting your new business and attracting customers? Let's take a look at the new-launch process and timeline for online visibility, so you can begin filling units on opening day.

### Steps to Success

First and foremost, you can't succeed without acknowledging that Google is the digital gatekeeper. The search-engine behemoth accounts for 87% of all search traffic in the United States. Internationally, it has an even bigger slice of the pie. So, even though there are other pieces to the online-marketing puzzle, you're going to get the most bang for your buck if you position your new self-storage facility to be well-received by Google. Let's go through the steps.

Thirty to 60 days before opening your doors, you want to establish an online presence and make sure Google sees that your new facility exists and is coming soon. If you do this right, you'll start getting inquiries before opening, even without a website. In fact, once you've created a Google Business Profile (GBP), you'll begin getting reports that show how many searchers clicked for directions to your new facility.

To begin establishing your brand identity, you'll want to have a few marketing assets ready to go. They are:

- **Logo:** Your designer should provide this in multiple high-resolution formats, including a version on a transparent background for web and one your printer can use for signage.
- **Color palette:** Choose one or more colors that fit your storage facility's vibe. Perhaps your sites will be as recognizable as those of Public Storage with its signature orange or Extra Space with its pop of lime green!
- **Photos:** Once you've posted your signage and the facility is clean, hire some professional photos. It makes a huge difference. Bonus points for sending up a drone for aerial shots.
- **Copy:** Have blurbs ready for a variety of purposes, be it a five-word tagline or a full paragraph. Focus on your value proposition and competitive differentiator.

**Website.** Register your domain and launch your website at least 30 days prior to opening. If choosing a property-management platform, it'll most likely offer a website front end, or you can "roll your own" with a general-use platform like WordPress. Just consider the functionality required to allow online reservations and rentals.

**GBP.** Create your free profile at least 30 days before opening. Input what information you can, but you'll likely need to flesh this out later. Most important is to communicate your NAP (name, address and phone number). Under "edit profile," set your opening date. If this gets delayed, update GBP immediately.

**Local search engine optimization (SEO).** This is the process of improving business visibility in local online searches. Get this in place at the same time as your GBP, about 30 days in advance of opening. Your NAP can be distributed to dozens of websites and directories. Clean, consistent data across all your business listings (aka citations) helps give Google good context about who you are, what you do and when you're open for business. This would also be a good time to fire up a Facebook page for your new facility, too.

**Google Ads.** Allocate a reasonable budget that can help you hit the ground running with an acceptable lead-acquisition cost. Typically, smaller operators will budget \$30 to \$70 a day toward pay-per-click. Advertising for self-storage can start on opening day, while ads for boat and RV storage might begin one to two weeks before if you're set up to take reservations.

## Business Reviews

You've invested all this time in creating a great-looking self-storage facility, so be ready to ask for and receive reviews on day one. Your GBP will even include an "Ask for Reviews" link. If your site has a property manager, they should request feedback from each customer right after they rent a unit. It's when your new tenant feels like they're in great hands and before they spend hours sweating their buns off moving boxes into the space! For unattended facilities, consider posting a QR code on site, and following up the move-in with a phone call or email.

Marketing a new self-storage facility involves a strategic timeline that begins at least two months before opening. Focus on establishing a digital presence to ensure Google and potential customers are aware of your new business. Essential steps for building visibility and attracting potential renters include setting up a website, creating a GBP, engaging in local SEO, planning Google Ads and preparing for customer reviews. With the right online strategy and a commitment to excellence, your facility's lease-up success story isn't just possible, it's inevitable! **ISS**

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# REACHING MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z



**In today's fast-paced world,** the way we live, work and store our belongings is changing rapidly. Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, and Generation Z, born 1997 to 2012, are at the forefront of this transformation. Understanding their unique needs and behaviors is crucial for self-storage operators who want to craft effective marketing for these audiences, who are quickly becoming

the predominant customer base. Following is insight to help you successfully adjust your approach.

### What Are They Like?

Let's get to know these two generations a bit, so you can begin to understand their preferences and motivations.

**Lifestyle.** Millennials marry, have children and buy homes later than previous

generations; and this delay often means that they require self-storage during significant life transitions. They value experiences over possessions; but when they need to store their belongings, they prefer flexible solutions that accommodate their adaptable lifestyle.

Gen Z also values independence and flexibility, often engaging in freelance or gig-economy jobs from a young age. They



prefer storage solutions that support a mobile lifestyle, favoring smaller, more affordable units with high accessibility.

**Tech savvy.** Millennials are known for their adaptability, having witnessed the rapid evolution of technology from the pre-internet era to the digital age. Generation Z has grown up entirely in a digital world. They're tech-savvy, with smartphones and social media being integral to their lives. They have high standards for digital engagement and expect seamless interactions with online platforms.

**Media consumption.** Both generations are digital natives, but they have distinct habits when it comes to using technology. Millennials are versatile in their use of devices, from smartphones and tablets to laptops, and they consume a lot of content on platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Gen Z prefers mobile devices and gravitates towards platforms like Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram, favoring short-form content that suits their shorter attention span. This distinction is vital to consider when delivering your self-storage marketing messages.

**Purchasing behavior.** Millennials are loyal to brands that align with their values and provide a seamless omnichannel

experience. They rely heavily on online reviews and peer recommendations before making a purchase. Gen Z values brand authenticity and strongly emphasizes privacy, sustainability and ethical production. They're more likely to support brands that positively impact society and the environment. Their buying decisions are influenced by interactive and highly visual marketing efforts. Bear that in mind when building your self-storage marketing campaigns!

**Money mindset.** Millennials, who came of age during the recession, are budget-conscious and skeptical about significant investments. They prefer cost-effective storage options without long-term commitments. Gen Z is similarly prudent but more optimistic about the economy. They prioritize spending on technology and experiences over big-ticket items, suggesting a need for storage solutions that help manage their active and change-driven lifestyles.

## Marketing to Millennials and Gen Z

To effectively reach these demographics, self-storage operators should adopt a mobile-first marketing strategy. Here are some key tactics:

- **Optimize for mobile devices.** Ensure your website is mobile-friendly with fast load times, simple navigation and prioritized content.
- **Create a mobile app.** Develop one that offers features like secure login, push notifications, virtual tours and personalized dashboards.
- **Leverage SMS.** Use targeted, engaging text campaigns to promote offers, send reminders and provide updates.
- **Use social media.** Focus on platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat. Develop a content calendar with daily posts, interactive content, influencer collaborations and live sessions.

By understanding and catering to the unique preferences of Millennials and Gen Z, you can ensure that your marketing messages are relevant and impactful, effectively engaging these influential consumer segments. Incorporating the above strategies can help your self-storage business attract and retain younger generations as tenants, guaranteeing long-term success in a competitive market. **ISS**

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### When you're building a new

self-storage facility, you don't just plop down some prefab structures and open your doors the next day. You take your time. You ensure you have a good parcel, so you can start on solid ground. You collaborate with the best vendors. You shop for materials and components that'll look good and stand the test of time. You invest in the best technology to streamline operation and provide the best customer experience.

To succeed in the long term, you need to bring the same care, attention and sense of pride to every other part of your self-storage business, including the website. Like the property it's intended to support, your website needs to be well-designed, purposefully built and appealing. After all, it serves as a digital storefront, attracting potential customers, showcasing your units and amenities and, ultimately, driving rentals.

Helping your self-storage facility stand out online has become critical to attracting and retaining customers. In today's competitive landscape, you can't afford to neglect your online presence. Below, I'll walk you through the steps of ensuring you have the best possible website and ways to keep it performing well over time.

### Set a Strong Foundation

To get started, you need a domain name for your self-storage website, which is the URL users will type into a browser to get to it. It should be concise and easy to remember while including essential keywords. Try to avoid hyphens, numbers and repeating letters. If possible, go with a URL that ends in ".com" as opposed to ".net" or ".biz." That's the most familiar domain extension and what most customers will expect.

Once you've chosen a domain and registered it with a web-hosting provider, you can start thinking about design. As a self-storage operator, your goal is to craft a website that's user-friendly, visually appealing and optimized for search engines. It should include the following basic pages:

- **Homepage:** A clear and concise overview of your facility, highlighting unique selling points, unit types and promotions
- **Rates:** Detailed information on unit sizes, features and pricing with clear visuals, easy-to-spot callouts for specials and promos, and a smooth online-rental flow
- **Features:** Details regarding your security measures, climate control (if applicable), and any additional amenities like moving carts or packing supplies
- **FAQs:** Answers to common customer questions regarding move-in procedures, access hours, payment options and security concerns
- **Contact:** How potential renters can reach you, often including a submission form and a map with directions

First impressions matter, so make sure your website is **clean** and **professional**. Opt for clear navigation and a user-friendly layout. Invest in high-quality facility photos. Also, consistency with your company branding is crucial. If your website looks like it's stuck in 1997, what does that say about the rest of your self-storage business?

**Responsiveness** is also critical. According to marketing company Statista, more than half of all web traffic comes from mobile devices, so make sure your self-storage website displays

flawlessly on smartphones and tablets. It should be just as attractive, functional and easy to navigate on mobile as on a desktop.

Don't forget about **accessibility**. Building your website with this in mind helps your search engine optimization (SEO) while enabling visually impaired tenants to do business with you. It also separates you from your competitors and, most important, protects you from potential lawsuits. According to "Forbes" magazine, website-accessibility disputes grew in 2023 by more than 30% over the previous year.

### Convert Potential Customers

Once potential self-storage customers find your website, the goal is to convert them into paying tenants. Here's how to optimize your website for rentals:

- **Value proposition:** Clearly communicate what makes your facility stand out from others. Do you offer competitive rates, 24/7 access or climate-controlled units? Emphasize these benefits in your website copy.
- **Clear calls to action:** Make it easy for users to take the next step. Bold and contrasting buttons that read things like "Reserve Your Unit Today" or "Get a Quote" should be strategically placed throughout the website. Consider offering online rentals with secure payment gateways.
- **Social proof:** Showcase positive customer testimonials and reviews to build trust and credibility.
- **Live chat:** Consider adding a live-chat feature to answer customer questions in real-time and capture leads.
- **Limited offers:** Run targeted promotions or discounts on specific unit sizes to incentivize rentals.

### Get Found Online

So, now you've built a great foundation for your self-storage website. It includes all the essential pages customers need to make decisions, and it's very well-organized and easy to navigate. You've incorporated company branding and ensured that the site is both responsive and accessible. But a beautiful website that no one can find is worse than useless. You need to make sure it's easy for potential customers to discover. The answer is to optimize it for search engines. Here's how:

**Enhance page-load speed.** A slow website frustrates users and hurts SEO ranking. To make it faster, format images to be web-friendly, minimize HTTP requests, and keep the homepage simple and clean.

**Use relevant keywords.** Identify the ones people use to search for self-storage in your area. Tools like Google Keyword Planner can help. Include these keywords naturally throughout

## Take It to the Next Level

Once you have your self-storage website up and running, there are several ways to make it even more powerful:

**Incorporate analytics and tracking.** Evaluate performance using tools like Google Analytics. The data can be used to track customer behavior, optimize marketing efforts and identify areas for improvement.

**Improve the user experience.** Consider features such as online reservations, live chat support or a portal to improve interactions with tenants.

**Integrate with other services.** A website that integrates with your management software is essential, as it allows you to update inventory and adjust prices in real time, among other benefits. You can use APIs to automate routine tasks and provide a better customer experience.

**Source:** *insideselfstorage.com, "A Step-by-Step Guide to Launching a Superior Self-Storage Website," by Al Harris*

your website content including page titles, meta descriptions and image alt tags.

**Focus on local SEO.** Claim and optimize your Google My Business listing and ensure your NAP (name, address, phone number) information is consistent across all online directories. Encourage positive customer reviews on Google and other platforms.

**Invest in content marketing.** Your website content should address topics relevant to potential self-storage renters. In addition to your FAQ page, you might publish a blog or helpful how-to articles. Include local SEO keywords and link to other valuable resources. Consistency is key! Aim for a regular publishing schedule.

### Keep It Fresh

Just like your self-storage business, your website will always be a work in progress. Regularly update it to sustain user engagement and improve SEO. Consider these pointers:

- Regularly publish fresh content including new blog posts, FAQs or facility updates.
- Use performance-monitoring tools like Google Analytics to track website traffic, user behavior and conversion rates. Identify areas for improvement and optimize based on data.
- Ensure your content-management system and plug-ins are updated regularly to address security vulnerabilities.

Be prepared to update and upgrade your website as technology, tastes and best practices change. In most cases, it should serve you for about two years. Initiate audits and peruse other websites to see how things have changed. If you haven't refreshed your website in a few years, it's definitely time for an update and possibly a new build. Technology changes at a breakneck pace, and a website that's four, five or six years old is leaving optimizations, improvements and opportunities on the table.

### Tying It All Together

Treating your self-storage facility's digital presence the same as you would your physical site—with great care and attention—is going to pay great dividends. Serving your tenants in the way they want to be served and maintaining your online storefront will allow your business to be successful for many years to come.

By following these best practices and staying current with evolving trends, you can build and maintain a self-storage website that attracts new customers, drives rentals and secures a competitive edge in the digital age. Remember, this is an ongoing investment! Dedicate time and effort to get the best possible return. **ISS**

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# Learning Local SEO

**Search engine optimization (SEO)** is a multi-faceted process that increases the online visibility of your self-storage business, but it goes deeper than that. It can also improve your organic presence in a big way, which means you'll attract more potential tenants.

In particular, *local* SEO is important for a self-storage facility, as many customers seek options near to where they live and work. In

fact, searchers will often focus on the results displayed in the Google Map Pack, which is the three or more results that appear at the very top of the search page, next to the map.

Below, I'll further explain the significance of local SEO and outline specific strategies to improve it. I'll also illustrate how all these methods work together to help self-storage operators boost their rankings on search engine results pages (SERPs).

### Elevating Your Business Locally

Local SEO greatly impacts lead volume for a self-storage business. As the Map Pack is the first SERP feature that appears after paid sponsor ads, it also generates a high amount of organic traffic. When a user is searching for terms like "storage near me," companies that are nearby naturally appear.

That said, there are ways to increase your facility's visibility so it places higher in search

results than other competitors in your market. Google looks at several factors to determine the order in which companies should rank on the SERP. They include:

**Customer reviews.** These are one of the most important rankings factors for local SEO. When a customer is searching for "storage near me," operators that have a more recent and better reviews will rank higher in the Map Pack. Overall, the quality of reviews has a major impact on a user's decision to choose one company over another.

**Business information.** Your facility's name, address and phone number (NAP) must be accurate and consistent across all online business listings, including the all-important Google Business Profile (GBP). Search engines will penalize you if they aren't. If the NAP is incorrect, it leads to confusion and a loss of potential customers.

**Photos.** Any pictures you use on your self-storage website and online business listings should represent and be relevant to your business, not generic ones you download from an image service. They should also be visually appealing, so they highlight your property and its amenities.

Your GBP cover photo should feature your facility signage as well as the storefront, so search engines and potential customers know your business is legitimate. Images of the office

interior offer another visual representation. Additionally, add photos of interior and exterior units of varying sizes.

**Keywords.** Another strategy for ranking higher in local, organic search results is to use core keywords like "storage units in [market]" and "self-storage in [market]." These phrases resonate with users but can vary across regions. Using tools like Google Trends and Google Keyword Planner can help you determine which terms are better suited for your location.

For example, it may be that "storage units" is more heavily searched than "self-storage" in your area, in which case it's important to optimize your website and online profiles for the more popular term. Incorporating these keywords into title tags, meta descriptions and header tags is critical to help search engines grasp the purpose of your online content and will benefit your SERP rankings.

Additionally, it's vital to target keywords that mention self-storage features and amenities. Customers may search for "long-tail keywords" if they're looking for a specific type of storage, for example "climate-controlled storage," "RV storage" or "boat storage." These amenity-based keywords can improve your local rankings. Similarly, keywords for specific unit sizes can be beneficial, as people often search for dimensions like 5-by-5 or 5-by-10.

**Content.** On-page, localized content is another essential part of building an organic online presence that helps your self-storage business rank higher in SERPs. It caters to the preferences of local audiences while signaling to search engines the authenticity and quality of your website. Search engines tend to prioritize sites they perceive as being more relevant to the market being targeted. By providing information about your facility's surrounding area, perhaps nearby landmarks and neighborhoods, it builds significance and improves online visibility, differentiating your business from competitors that post thin and generalized material.

### The Local Advantage

Effective, local SEO can boost your self-storage facility's visibility on search results, no matter the size of your market. The strategies described above can elevate your online presence, attracting a broader range of customers and ultimately driving growth. By embracing customer reviews, accurate NAP information, optimized images, targeted keywords and localized content, you can navigate the digital landscape with confidence, ensuring a strong organic authority. **ISS**

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By applying Google's new standards to your digital-marketing efforts, you'll enhance your user experience and boost your company's online presence.

# The Changing Tides of SEO

**Each year, to capitalize** on potential sales leads, self-storage operators must set a course for their online marketing. But this means contending with Google and its important updates. How do you anticipate the changing tides to better navigate and succeed in the digital world?

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the quantity and quality of traffic to your website via free, organic search results. By staying abreast of the most recent and significant search-engine changes, you can formulate better plans and fine-tune your SEO effectiveness for 2024.

### What to Expect

SEO guidelines are continuously being revised. Whenever Google announces an update, the marketing world is left in a tizzy, debating what it means for businesses. As a self-storage operator, you must be ready to incorporate the latest SEO best practices and look ahead to future developments. As you set your digital-marketing strategy for 2024, I recommend paying attention to two things: artificial intelligence (AI) and user intent.

Conversations about the recent advancement in AI vary. Some people feel it's a handy tool, while others consider it to be the nemesis that will someday take over the world. In 2023, AI made its first foray into serious applications for everyday use via the rollout of ChatGPT. Since then, companies including Google and Microsoft have been vying to outpace each other with service offerings.

Thus, it's fair to wonder about Google's official take on AI-generated content. According to Google for Developers, it's OK to use it sparingly as long as your website provides high-quality, useful and reliable content that meets Google's Search Quality Rater Guidelines.

But there's another critical factor here: Google will be applying AI in its search results to determine *user intent*. The technology will help search engines become smarter. In fact, it'll increase Google's capabilities exponentially. Rather than simply interpret the search terms a person has entered, the aim is to identify the intention behind the query. In other words, what did the user mean to accomplish? This advancement is part of Google's overarching objective and what the digital giant has been attempting to achieve with previous updates: to create a more user-centric experience.

### Important Steps to Take

As the operator of a self-storage business, you should prepare for these digital trends and enhance the effectiveness of your SEO to meet the latest changes. It can feel daunting, especially if you aren't well-versed in digital marketing; however, the following important but effective steps can improve your strategy.

**Focus on local search.** In self-storage, every property has a physical address, and a facility's success often hinges on location. Google and other search engines use a tiered system of rank factors to prioritize local inquiries and direct the most relevant results to the user; and geographic proximity is often a major contributor. For this reason, it makes sense to pull sales leads from the immediate area. Take advantage of local marketing to optimize your company's online visibility.

One way to do this is to leverage location-specific content full of relevant keywords. For example, you might publish an article or blog on your website about resident attractions, schools or businesses. Google can then pull from this when indexing and ranking discussion topics for a user's search query. By executing local SEO strategies within the framework of your business, you can emerge as a top contender in search results.

#### Craft content for voice search.

Voice-activated devices have been in broad consumer use for some time. As people increasingly use the voice-search functionality of their mobile devices, smart TVs, virtual assistants and other connected products, there will be a compelling push for voice-search optimization in 2024. This means your web content should be written in a conversational style. Consider weaving multi-word keywords into your long-form content.

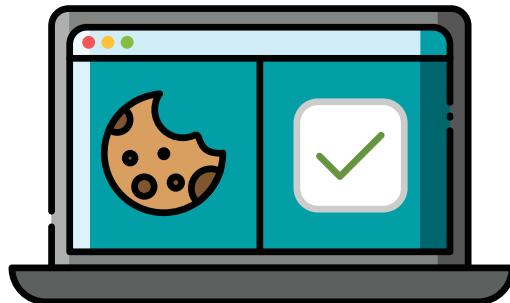
**Update your website.** The biggest and best anchor point for your digital marketing is your self-storage website. A better site will strengthen your digital presence. Focus on high-quality content that's relevant to users. It should be well-written, informative, and easily scannable and digestible. Images should be used as well but to enhance rather than replace written content. Just be careful about image sizes, as you don't want pictures to reduce your website load speed.

### Stay Current

The perpetual advancement of technology means you can't rely on the same online-marketing strategies for your self-storage business each year. To successfully navigate these uncharted waters, rely on industry best practices. Look for relevant resources, including experts, newsletters and online content, to help you keep up with SEO in 2024 and beyond.

Your ability to adapt to ever-changing search-engine rank factors will impact the overall success of your marketing efforts and business. By staying on top of SEO trends, you'll ensure that your self-storage facility not only stands out but stands the test of time. **ISS**

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# THIRD-PARTY COOKIES

**Digital marketing has transformed** the way self-storage operators discover and retain customers. The ability to target potential renters online by identifying their geolocation, affinity, behavior and device significantly increases your return on ad spend. That said, there are changes on the horizon that'll change the way you promote your business in the years ahead. Unfortunately, there's nothing you can do about them other than to adapt and move forward.

Next year, Google is phasing out the use of third-party cookies on its Chrome web browser. These are used to track someone's online activity across various websites to help advertisers target them with personalized ads. For self-storage operators, this means you'll be limited on the data you're allowed to collect about your website visitors and prospects without their knowledge or consent. Read on to understand what that means for your operation and its marketing efforts.

### Issues of Data Privacy

Though many consumers enjoy the products and services they find through targeted advertising offers, they dislike the intrusive methods marketers use to collect their personal data online. They've spoken out against what they feel is a violation of privacy, and legislatures across the globe are listening.

The European Union made the first move in 2018 with its General Data Protection Regulation. In 2020, California passed its Consumer Privacy Act, which gives people

more control over the information businesses collect about them. Colorado, Connecticut, Utah and Virginia enacted their own data-privacy acts, though each is unique. Similar legislation will soon be effective in Florida, Montana, Oregon, Texas and Washington. All of this creates headaches for self-storage operators with facilities in multiple states.

On the federal level, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce approved the American Data Privacy and Protection Act (ADPPA) in July 2022 to "provide consumers with foundational data-privacy rights, create strong oversight mechanisms and establish meaningful enforcement." However, until it passes the Senate and is signed into law, individual states will continue to implement their own versions, further complicating the situation.

### Third-Party Cookies and the Data They Collect

The use of third-party cookies yields a vast array of data points a marketer can harvest about your website visitors. Here's just a small sample of what is commonly collected to create a profile of a person's online activity:

- **Behavioral:** Email opens, social media engagement, website and app visits
- **Demographics:** Age, gender, income, location, marital status, profession
- **Digital:** Device ID, IP Address
- **Transactional:** Average spend per transaction, transaction frequency, spend across demographics and geographies

This data helps self-storage marketers customize their messaging and campaigns to maximize ad spend and conversions. It also helps them measure outcomes by identifying which channels or campaigns resonate with your target audience.

Without this data, self-storage operators who use Google Ads, Facebook ads, directory sites and other online ad placements couldn't optimize their efforts, which is problematic in a hyperlocal industry. For example, without access to a user's geolocation, your ad could reach someone in another city or a lead who clearly isn't your ideal tenant. Either way, it's wasted money.

Fortunately, Google is postponing third-party cookie deprecation for its Chrome browser until next year. And hopefully, Congress will soon enact the ADPPA to standardize the data marketers can collect, so we won't need to follow the unique legislation in every state. In the meantime, you can continue rolling out your digital-marketing campaigns as you've been doing, providing

you follow any data-privacy laws that may have been passed in your state. Just be prepared to go cookie-less next year, as the change is coming.

### A Return to Offline Advertising

Understanding that anything you do now to comply with the current data-protection landscape may not fulfill the requirements of future laws, what can you do to compete in the self-storage marketplace and avoid expending needless time, effort and money? A safe approach is to revisit your traditional, offline marketing channels, which many operators have reduced or abandoned since embracing digital options. Tools such as fliers, direct mail and billboards are still effective. Since many of your competitors aren't aggressively using them, those channels present an opportunity that can grow into a strong advantage.

I know what you're thinking: Offline marketing (also known as out-of-home advertising) isn't as sexy as digital marketing. Or is it? Consider billboards. A survey conducted by Statista in 2022 found that 30% of respondents like billboards. In fact, 9% like them a lot. Research from "OOH Today" indicates that offline ads show much higher brand recall for consumers than audio (including podcasts and radio), live and streaming television, online ads, and print ads.

A digital billboard is still considered an offline method, and yet it can yield fantastic results. According to HubSpot, consumers who see digital-billboard advertising will search for the business' website or search for the brand online. Additionally, 20% of them later recommended that product or brand.

Even traditional billboards can enhance your self-storage marketing plan, encouraging consumers to search for your business online or driving traffic to your social media profiles. In fact, cross-promoting your billboard with your website and social platforms is an approach that distinctively appeals to Millennials and Gen Z consumers, who classify digital billboards as an "experience"—and they are famously seeking new experiences.

Another offline yet effective marketing channel is direct mail. According to a recent report by marketing-solutions company Lob, it not only delivers the best return on investment, it has better response and conversion rates than any other channel. Of course, the performance of direct mail or billboards requires compelling messaging across all your offline channels.

Finally, don't forget about your facility signage, which is one of your most visible self-storage marketing tools. To be effective, it must be well-designed, well-placed, clean and fresh. It's often among the first things a

customer sees upon visiting your property. If it looks out of date, broken or worn, they may pass you over for a facility up the street.

Tools such as fliers, direct mail and billboards are still effective. Since many of your competitors aren't aggressively using them, those channels present an opportunity that can grow into a strong advantage.

customer sees upon visiting your property. If it looks out of date, broken or worn, they may pass you over for a facility up the street.

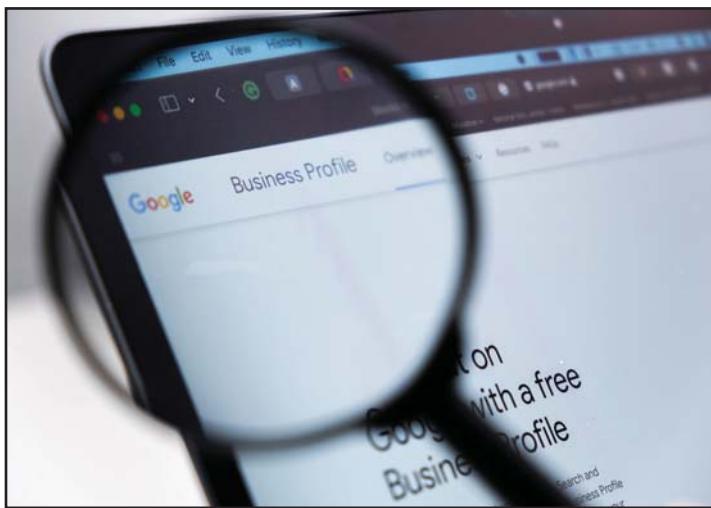
### The Solution? A Mixed Approach

To cope in the upcoming cookie-less world, I recommend implementing a well-rounded marketing plan that incorporates digital and offline methods to reach all potential self-storage renters. Gartner and LinkedIn both report that it takes an average of eight to 12 touchpoints with a company before a customer converts. The more touchpoints you offer, the sooner a prospective tenant will rent from you.

For example, consider distributing printed brochures, postcards or fliers throughout your community that include a QR code linking to a promotional page on your website. Once you've convinced a prospect to visit or tour your self-storage facility, offer them printed materials such as a brochure or flier they can take with them to keep your business top-of-mind. These collaterals should outline easy steps to rent and move into a unit, with targeted links to your website.

While digital marketing is, and will remain, critical to marketing self-storage marketing, the ability to target ideal customers in your area will change radically in the near future. Your new cookie-less strategy should integrate offline tactics like billboard advertising and direct mail with your online efforts. This won't only foster community relationships, it'll enhance brand recognition and customer loyalty. **ISS**

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[www.creativeblenddesign.com](http://www.creativeblenddesign.com)



# Google Business Profile

**An optimized Google Business Profile (GBP)** is one of the most powerful, cost-effective tools in a self-storage operator's digital arsenal, playing a pivotal role in facility success. When leveraged correctly, GBP can significantly boost your online visibility and attract more customers. In fact, more than 58% of companies find that their local website traffic predominantly comes from this profile.

Below is a list of steps that will positively impact your GBP, ultimately improving your online search rankings and self-storage rental numbers. It's designed to provide clear, practical advice for correctly completing and maintaining your profile, thereby allowing you to harness its full potential.

## Step 1: Add Accurate, Up-to-Date Information

Some of the details that should be included in your GBP are your self-storage facility's name, address, contacts and operating hours. A cornerstone of optimization is ensuring this information is always accurate and up to date. Nearly 70% of consumers lose trust in a company if they encounter incorrect information online. By regularly updating your profile, you can prevent customer loss and improve business credibility.

## Step 2: Take Advantage of All GBP Features

Google offers several features that can enhance your GBP effectiveness. Not only can you choose categories that are relevant to your business, you can include a keyword-rich description of your operation. This should be compelling and informative. You can also upload photos of your facility exterior, units, security components and other unique selling

points, such as cleanliness. Doing so will allow you to create a more engaging and trustworthy profile.

## Step 2: Update Regularly

Consistency is key in GBP optimization. Adding regular content updates and engaging with customers through your profile will ensure your self-storage business stays relevant and visible. For example, if you have any special offers or news related to your products or services, such as a new offering or property enhancement, post them to your page.

Set yourself a monthly reminder to review and update your GBP. Check all the details to ensure they're still correct. You can even create a content calendar to schedule regular posts.

As part of this effort, consider managing your business citations across all platforms for consistency. A citation is a mention of your self-storage facility name, address and phone number on any site other than your own.

## Step 4: Leverage Customer Reviews

Customer reviews are a vital component of your GBP. They not only provide valuable feedback, they significantly influence prospects' buying decisions. So, encourage your self-storage tenants to leave reviews, and make the process simple and straightforward. For example, you can send a follow-up email or text after each successful transaction, asking for a review.

It's also important to respond to reviews, positive and negative, as it shows that you value customer feedback and are committed to improving your service. Allocate time weekly for this activity, which improves customer engagement.

## Step 5: Understand Your Analytics

GBP provides valuable insights through performance analytics. They can help understand how self-storage tenants find your business online, how they interact with your profile and what drives them to your website.

Familiarize yourself with the analytics section of GBP to understand customer behaviors and traffic sources. Then use these insights to refine your marketing strategies and improve your online presence.

## Step 6: Communicate With Customers

Monitor your GBP dashboard regularly, including the Q&A section, to stay on top of any inquiries or messages from potential self-storage customers. This is another opportunity to provide helpful information and increase engagement, which significantly impact your online visibility and attractiveness to renters.

## Step 7: Reap the Benefits

Optimizing your GBP is an essential step in boosting your self-storage rentals. By maintaining accurate information, using the full range of features, regularly updating your profile, actively managing customer reviews, understanding your performance metrics and communicating with customers, you can significantly enhance your online presence. It not only aids in attracting new customers, it builds trust and credibility with existing ones. Both are key factors to success in the competitive self-storage environment. Set measurable goals for your GBP performance and review your progress quarterly to ensure ongoing improvement. **ISS**

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# Using Apple Business Connect and Maps



**Google dominates the world** of online search. As a self-storage operator, you're likely very familiar with Google Business Profile (GBP), Google Maps and Google Reviews, for example. If you want to reach the most people, you market your business on this massive search engine.

However, lots of people use iPhones and other Apple devices, so it makes sense to reach them through Apple Maps and Apple Business Connect (ABC), too. Let's explore what these tools are and how you can use them to bring in more self-storage customers.

## What Are They?

Apple Maps is the default map system on Apple devices. It has nowhere near the same market share as Google, but that doesn't mean you should ignore it. In fact, it's estimated to have 60 million to 90 million users. That's a ton of people! If you have a chance to get your business in front of those folks, why not take advantage of that exposure? Include Apple Maps as part of your self-storage marketing strategy.

Many iPhone users employ Apple Maps to find self-storage when they need it, and you want it to be easy for them to find your

facility specifically. One way to do that is to set up a profile on ABC, which is free and easy to do. This platform allows you to manage and enhance your presence on Apple Maps. It also has other benefits:

- **It allows you to ensure the app has accurate information about your business, which improves your facility's visibility and fosters better engagement with customers.**
- **Its algorithms can check your name, address, phone number and other identifying information to verify that you are who—and where—you say you are.**
- **Your listing acts as backlink pointing toward your self-storage website.**
- **The more places your company exists online, the more you'll show Google's algorithms that you're a serious business with authority in your market!**

## Apple Maps vs. Google Maps

Apple and Google Maps serve very similar functions, but there's a few key differences that might impact how you set up your Apple Maps profile and how your customers experience your business. First, ABC profiles don't appear in web searches the way a GBP profile might. Even the Apple web browser,

which is automatically installed on all Apple devices, uses Google as its default search engine. That means your GBP is still your No. 1 source of local search leads.

In addition, Apple Maps uses Yelp for reviews and photos instead of using its own proprietary platform the way Google does. This means you must keep your Yelp profile current, including high-quality photos.

Finally, to use Apple Maps, you'll need an Apple ID. If you own Apple products, you probably already have one. If not, you can create one for free.

## Setting Up Your ABC Profile

Getting your self-storage business set up on ABC is quick and easy. Just follow these steps if you aren't familiar with the process:

- Create a unique Apple ID for your business. If you're the sole owner, you can perhaps use your personal ID; but if you think you might share access with another owner or a manager, it's best to have a dedicated business account.
- Go to [businessconnect.apple.com](http://businessconnect.apple.com) and hit "Get Started."
- Choose the size of your business from the menu. For enterprise businesses

(more than 25 locations), you'll have to enter brand info, including your DUNS number, the unique nine-digit identifier assigned to each physical location of a business by credit bureau Dun & Bradstreet. If yours is a smaller business, add your first location. You can search for it by name and find it on the map. If you don't see it, simply create a new location.

- Fill out all relevant information including business hours, business categories, website, phone number, etc. Be as accurate and thorough as possible.
- Complete your business verification. Provide any additional details, including your company's legal name.
- Upload your proof-of-identity documentation. This might be a copy of your business registration, a utility bill or a lease agreement. Expect to wait several days for the verification to go through. If you have a multiple locations, it could take longer.

Warning! There's no fee to be listed on ABC. If someone is trying to charge you for setting up a profile, you're being scammed.

### Building Out Your Place Card

To lead potential customers to your self-storage business on Apple Maps, you must create a Place Card in ABC. Just as with your GBP, there's room there to include all the information that makes your facility unique and attractive to prospective tenants.

Your first job is to write a compelling description of your self-storage business and what it offers. Provide as much detail as you can, but be *honest*. Don't claim to offer amenities your facility doesn't have, as you'll only disappoint customers if you do.

Highlight the products, services and features your customers will most care about. Frame them in a way that explains the *benefits* of your offerings. In other words, what problems do you solve for your storage users? For example, your customers may not care about the specifics of your smart locks, but they'll appreciate the fact that they don't have to carry around a physical key.

In addition, include images, beginning with your self-storage logo and a good cover photo. Mention your accepted payment methods, whether or not you offer climate-controlled units, your general business model and any technology you use to help customers rent units, pay their rent, navigate the property and more.

ABC also offers a valuable promotional tool called Showcases, which is a unique way to create ads for your self-storage business profile. Here you can include a call-to-action button that encourages a visitor to visit your website, call you, share your profile or rate your facility. The button can be a prompt for whatever makes the most sense for your operation. If you're asking for reviews, don't be afraid to include Yelp in the request.

Your ABC profile and its connection to Apple Maps is mostly a set-it-and-forget-it type of self-storage marketing. Complete everything at once, and you won't have to think about it anymore—unless you make changes to your business.

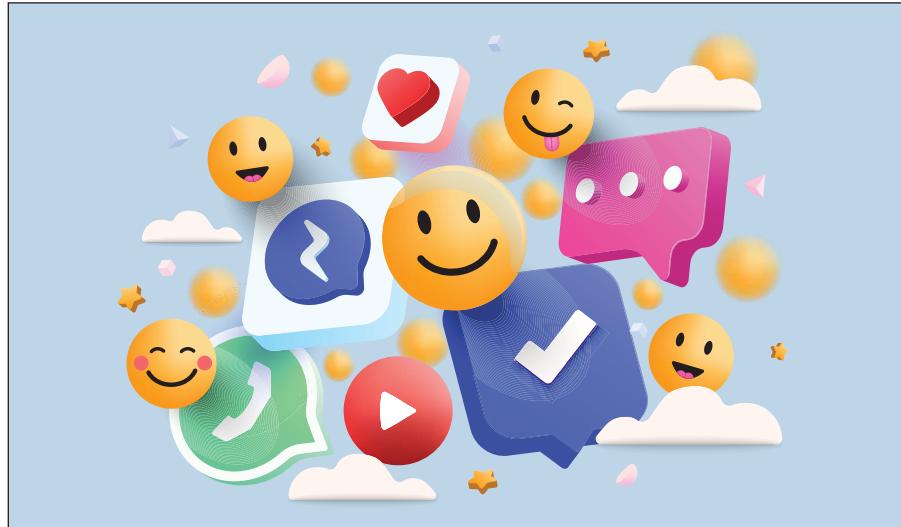
Many consumers use Apple products, so don't lose your opportunity to appeal to this audience. Customers who use these devices, which tend to be pretty expensive, may even be better equipped to afford premium storage. For this reason, it may be worthwhile to put more marketing dollars into Apple maps and capture this demographic! **ISS**

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# A Simple Social Strategy

**For more than two decades,** since the dawn of chat rooms and MySpace, people from all over the world have been spending loads of time on social media. There's little wonder. It isn't only an excellent vehicle of expression, it allows users to interact with each other, no matter where they are. Plus, there are so many platforms from which to choose.

Social media is also an excellent way to promote your self-storage business. It can help you expand your online reach, build brand awareness, connect with potential customers, sell products and services, communicate with existing tenants, and collaborate with other small businesses. Like email marketing and an optimized website, it can also generate leads and help you convert them into sales. That said, you



must have an effective strategy, a detailed plan that outlines your goals, target audience, content and tactics. In fact, it should be considered a vital part of your overall digital-marketing plan.

### The Platforms

Self-storage is unique in that its customer base is hyper local. While companies like Starbucks are attempting to reach people everywhere, most storage operators are

concerned with the audience within close driving range of their facilities. For that reason, you want to choose social media platforms that influence a local audience.

This type of reach is best accomplished through Facebook and Instagram, both of which offer business accounts and can help you plan and schedule posts. It can be easy to get busy and let things fall by the wayside, but a digital content calendar will keep you on track when deadlines



loom. You can even use a third-party scheduling tool like the one provided by HubSpot to organize content on multiple social media platforms.

### The Plan

When devising your self-storage operation's social media strategy, focus on these three elements:

**Who you want to reach.** Your target audience generally includes people in your area in need of self-storage such as families who are relocating or remodeling their homes, small businesses in need of space for inventory, or senior citizens who are retiring and downsizing. Whoever they are, they're probably local, so be sure your social media marketing reflects this.

**Obtainable goals.** These should be clear and specific, with realistic objectives broken down into manageable pieces. For example, you might set a goal to reach X number of followers on Facebook. Once you start thinking of a social media strategy as a "roadmap" and your goal as the "destination," working backward will help you plan effectively.

**Brand voice.** Every company has its own style, which should be recognizable. Your brand voice includes your business tone, font, colors and logo. For example, Starbucks is known for its signature green and white logo featuring its famous two-tailed siren. Across the web and in print, the public knows who that logo represents even when it isn't accompanied by the company name. This is because of vigorous and consistent marketing efforts. You want your self-storage business to be just as recognizable. Keeping a uniform style, whether printed on a brochure or posted on Facebook, will bolster your brand and reinforce customer loyalty.

### Google Business Profile (GBP)

As a self-storage operator, you should be aware of and have a GBP for your company.

It's a free way to promote your facility, make it searchable and increase its online presence.

You should also know that Google recently started integrating social media posts into user GBPs. When customers search for your brand online and find your profile, not only will they receive basic information such as contact information and hours of operation, they'll see what you've posted on social media. This means it's more important than ever to plan and execute effective social campaigns.

### The Metrics

When it comes to evaluating your self-storage business' social media strategy, Google Analytics (GA4) is a powerful tool that can provide a wealth of data. It allows you to track and analyze traffic from various platforms including Instagram and Twitter, for example. According to Orbit Media Studios, a Chicago-based company specializing in digital marketing as well as web design and development, GA4 can help you answer the following questions:

- [How much traffic is social media bringing to my self-storage website?](#)
- [How does social traffic compare to that from other sources?](#)
- [Which channels are sending the most traffic? The best?](#)
- [Which campaigns are attracting and converting visitors?](#)
- [How is my paid social traffic different from organic?](#)
- [How is social traffic different for mobile and desktop visitors?](#)

GA4 also has powerful segmentation and filtering capabilities, allowing you to isolate user groups and track their behavior over

time. This can be particularly useful if you want to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted marketing campaigns or track the behavior of specific demographics or geographic regions.

In addition, each social media platform has its own metrics such as likes, shares, comments and followers. Investigate each to see what might be useful. By tracking metrics such as website traffic, user behavior and conversions, you can gain a deeper understanding of how visitors are interacting with your self-storage brand and whether your social media strategy is effectively driving the desired outcomes.

### Time to Pivot?

There are times when you may need to pivot in your social media marketing strategy, either because you've set new goals or you're seeing poor performance. If you're struggling with how to proceed, use algorithms to analyze data and patterns. This can help you uncover insight and identify potential solutions. It's also helpful to gather input and perspectives from others and keep an open mind to new ideas. Being willing to make changes when necessary can facilitate success.

As a self-storage operator, you might find it overwhelming to navigate social media, especially if digital marketing is a concept you have yet to master. It can be time-consuming to devote the time to learn the best strategies, then plan and execute them. If it isn't something you'd like to do or have the time for, consider hiring a marketing company to help you and your facility grow on social platforms. **ISS**

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# Social Media Algorithms: A Primer



**“Mysterious” and “misunderstood”** are two good words to describe social media algorithms. If you aren’t familiar with what these are and how they work, it can make the quest to improve your business’ online presence more confusing and overwhelming. Unfortunately, you can’t afford to ignore them because they’re critical to the success of your self-storage brand.

To help strengthen your social media content creation, here’s a primer on algorithms and how to improve the visibility and engagement of your posts.

## Some Basics

A social media algorithm determines which content your self-storage customers see in their feeds. It uses thousands upon thousands of data points to sort, rank and ultimately determine what gets displayed to whom and when while also learning which types of content individual users prefer to consume.

Except for Twitter, most social media channels don’t reveal how their algorithm works; however, most will tell you where to focus your efforts. For example, when Reels became a thing on Instagram, the platform kept emphasizing its use in the app.

To find out what types of content each social media platform emphasizes and learn about updates, I recommend subscribing to their newsletters and blogs. It’s also a good idea to follow their executive teams. Finally, consider subscribing to other credible newsletters, such as the one for Social Media Today, to gain an outside perspective and keep up with pertinent news.

## Content Creation

When creating content for your self-storage operation’s social media platforms, it’s important to keep the algorithm for each in mind. Every channel favors different types of material, but they *all* distribute *quality* content, meaning that it’s intentional, original, unique, valuable, trendy or entertaining. Don’t expect an algorithm to boost your posts if you aren’t putting in the effort.

By the way, be wary of YouTube videos that claim they’ve hacked XYZ’s algorithm and uncovered how to game the system. If you play by the rules, you’ll win. If you cheat, you may see some short-term gains, but I promise you’ll experience long-term losses.

The potential benefits of tailoring content to a platform’s algorithm are organic growth of your social media account and, hopefully, new customers. A potential drawback comes from developing algorithm tunnel vision, in which you become so focused on creating one type of content you think will rank well that you lose sight of your brand identity.

## Things to Keep in Mind

Ranking signals play a role in the visibility of social media content, so it helps to keep them in mind. Though these vary greatly between platforms, generally, the more authentic likes, comments, shares and saves you receive in a given timeframe, the more positive signals an algorithm will see and consider.

The keyword here is *authentic*. Don’t fall into the trap of buying likes, comments or followers to boost your numbers. Algorithms never favor counterfeit engagements.

The biggest mistake self-storage operators tend to make when creating algorithm-based content is to post boring or “salesy” material.

The way to get exposure and build a following is to make your business seem interesting. You can’t only talk about how great your facility is or push the latest promotion. It’s OK to do that once in a while, but for the most part, you want to stay away from those types of posts.

## Long-Term Strategies

If you’re putting out quality self-storage content on your social media channels and not seeing immediate results, don’t give up. Keep trying new things until you find what works. Sometimes all you need is one good post to get noticed.

Once you find a successful direction, keep up the momentum with more relevant posts. Just know that what works today may not work tomorrow, which is why it’s important to stay up to date on any algorithm changes using the resources previously mentioned.

Social media algorithms favor quality content, so listen to your gut. If you create something you aren’t super excited about, don’t post it. In contrast, if you can’t wait for others to see a piece of content because you absolutely love it yourself, that’s a good indication that others will like it, too. Keep in mind, however, that if you’re drastically different from your core self-storage demographics, this approach may not always work.

Ultimately, if you take the time to understand what each social platform’s algorithm favors and work toward crafting self-storage content that meets those criteria, you should see positive growth in visibility along with better customer engagement and conversion. **ISS**

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# PINTEREST POWER

**In the fast-paced world** of digital marketing, social media has transcended its original purpose of connecting people and evolved into a pivotal tool for marketing and influencing consumer behavior. It's fascinating to see how platforms that were originally known for inspiring home décor or fitness routines are reshaping industries we typically consider utilitarian, such as self-storage.

Founded in 2010, Pinterest quickly carved out a niche for itself as a visual search engine where inspiration for nearly any project or interest can be found and catalogued. Unlike social platforms that are geared primarily toward communication, Pinterest focuses on personal curation of ideas, making it a go-to resource for millions of people who are looking to plan their next big project.

With more than 450 million active users, Pinterest serves not just as a passive browsing tool but as a vibrant community where inspiration leads to action. Despite the rise of numerous other social platforms, it remains highly relevant, offering unique opportunities for self-storage businesses to capitalize on its engaged and forward-thinking user base.

## Pinterest, Content and SEO

Pinterest's unique appeal as a pictorial planning tool makes it a great way to influence self-storage prospects, offering a platform on which to showcase facilities, highlight features and share organizational tips. Innovative operators can create visually engaging content that highlights practical and desirable uses of storage space, enhancing its service appeal.

Integrating the right content into blogs that are linked to Pinterest boosts

audience engagement and enhances search engine optimization (SEO), creating more opportunities to attract and convert potential self-storage customers. In fact, it can be a powerful tool for enhancing your company's digital presence. By pinning blog content that includes useful tips, facility updates or customer stories, you can drive traffic from Pinterest back to your website. This increases engagement and improves search-engine rankings by creating backlinks as users share and save the pins.

To maximize the SEO benefits, include keywords related to self-storage in your Pinterest posts and blog titles, and use high-quality images to encourage clicks and re-pins. These strategies can significantly expand your online visibility, attracting more potential customers to your website.

Creating a content strategy for Pinterest that aligns with your SEO goals involves targeting broad and niche keywords potential self-storage customers might use. For instance, if you operate in Indianapolis, a practical approach might be to target "storage in Indianapolis." To leverage this, you could write a blog post about the cost of living in the city, which is related but less competitive, attracting readers who moving to or considering a move to the area.

An effective pin could feature an infographic summarizing the blog post that's visually engaging and informative, which makes it more likely to be saved and shared. This pin should link directly to your self-storage blog, enhancing backlink quality and driving traffic to the site. Such strategies boost local SEO and increase the visibility of your services to potential customers who are actively researching their new locale. This targeted approach ensures that your content meets your operation's SEO needs and addresses potential customers' specific interests, making it a powerful tool for generating leads and conversions.

## More Ways to Boost Local SEO

**Highlight local events.** Create pins and blog posts about events in your area, like

"Things to Do in New York City Today." Link these events to the need for temporary storage solutions, making your content local, relevant and useful.

**Offer moving tips.** Provide practical advice on things like "Moving to San Diego: A Stress-Free Guide." This can include tips on choosing a self-storage unit, packing efficiently and settling into a specific, targeted neighborhood.

**Focus on seasonal solutions.** Develop content around temporary self-storage needs specific to your facility's greater metro area. For example, if you're in Aurora, Colorado, you could create a pin with the title "Winter Gear Storage Solutions in Denver," then use seasonal imagery specific to the city's demographic interests. Perhaps an image of a snowboarder would appropriately capture your target audience's attention! Then, add snowboarding keywords in your description along with direct links to your self-storage blog for detailed advice.

## There's Still a Place for Pinterest

As the digital world continues to evolve, embracing innovative marketing tactics will be key to staying competitive and visible in crowded self-storage markets. Through targeted content strategies that integrate Pinterest, facility operators can significantly enhance their local SEO and effectively reach potential customers. By focusing on local interests, events and needs such as moving and seasonal storage, you can create highly relevant and engaging content that resonates with the community.

This approach not only drives traffic to your self-storage website through strategic backlinks, it positions your facility as an integral part of the local landscape. Implementing these strategies could lead to measurable improvements in online visibility and customer engagement. **ISS**

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# Content-Driven MARKETING

## It's opening day for your

brand-new, three-story self-storage facility, and the chamber of commerce is on site with their giant scissors to cut the ribbon. It's also Girl Scout cookie season, and you've allocated space in the parking lot for the local troop to sell their wares. Christmas is right around the corner, and your Toys-for-Tots donation bin is filling up quickly. A new tenant is moving in, and you're telling them all about the security features that'll help keep their goods safe while they store with you.

These kinds of happenings go on in this industry all the time, but they aren't always documented through social media or on a blog. Every one of them is an opportunity to tell the story of your business in a way that highlights who you are rather than what you're selling. They showcase a service, a connection point or a better way to use your product. Simply put, these events are opportunities to use content marketing.

## What Is Content Marketing?

I asked my daughter this question and her simple answer was, "marketing with content." She may be a bit sarcastic, but she isn't wrong. Basically, it's using content rather than your product to promote whatever you're selling. The messaging takes the focus away from a sales pitch and strives to provide a helpful resource instead. That resource can be entertaining or informative, but it isn't simply highlighting a 10-by-10 unit for rent.

Content marketing tells a story and builds trust with your audience. It might detail a helpful tip for using self-storage, show a picture of your staff celebrating an event, or offer a how-to video on the correct way to use a Bluetooth lock.

We don't often associate storytelling with self-storage, but we should. Your facility has a tale to tell. You already communicate it to people through pictures of your business on social media, the design of your website and your property's curb appeal. Storytelling is what can form a connection between your customers and your facility.

What kind of story can a storage facility tell? It might be something like, "We're here to help you through a tough time by providing an affordable, secure and clean unit in which to store your goods while you sort through that divorce or move or recent death." Maybe it's something more like, "When you rent with us, you are supporting veterans or providing food for the hungry, as we donate a portion of all our proceeds to charity." These kinds of narratives connect with potential customers better than "We have climate-control and drive-up 5-by-10s available."

## Your Story

So, now you know that content marketing helps you tell your business story. The question is, what's *your* story? What makes your facility different from the one up the street? To answer these questions, you must identify the heart of your operation.

Some self-storage operators are proactive in this regard. They're passionate about customer service or veterans or the local homeless shelter and weave that into their marketing. Others are reactive, identifying what's important to their community. This could be as simple as adopting the local high school colors in your branding or offering a larger military discount due to the proximity of an army base. However you figure it out, finding the heart is the first step to telling your story effectively through content.

Once you know your story, it's time to share it. There are many ways to do this. But first, you must develop the content.

## Your Strategy

First, you need clear objectives. What are you hoping to accomplish with your self-storage content? Are you looking to raise awareness of your brand or products? Are you hoping to share useful information so people will see you as a resource? Are you looking for leads? Perhaps you want to accomplish all of the above.

Each of these goals requires a different type of content. In marketing terms, this is all about your sales funnel and which part of the customer journey you're targeting. That journey begins when a person develops a need and ends when they satisfy it. Your objective should target a particular point along that path, ideally helping them move to the next stage: renting a storage unit.

## Content Types and Audience

Make sure your content fits the message and your target self-storage audience. If you're celebrating a work anniversary or the fact that you just cleaned out a unit on a hot day, a well-planned picture is better than an article. But if you're sharing tips about long-term storage or RV parking, a single image might not be the best option. A blog post with a few images or a short video would tell that story better.

You must consider the physical and digital location of your audience. Once you determine where they're looking, you can produce the types of content that best fit those channels. If your audience isn't on TikTok or reading the local newspaper, don't focus your effort there. Signage at the local high school could be a fantastic spot for all those Friday night football attendees. You could also try sponsoring homecoming parades or other highly visible community events. Social media platforms are also a great option depending on your tenants.

As you're producing content, don't forget to add a personal touch. Artificial Intelligence is all the rage, but it can't replace the human element, especially when you're coming up with written material for a blog, email or social post. The tech giants are also getting very good at spotting the artificial posts and penalizing those that rely on them too much. Your content should come from you. Customers can spot the difference.

Quality is also essential to telling your story well. Beautiful pictures, high-definition video and well-produced content are becoming the norm. You can say all you want about

your clean facility or friendly staff, but if the attached picture or video is grainy or poorly produced, no one will believe you.

### Distribution Channels

Social media platforms are great places to disseminate your self-storage content, but they aren't the only channels. Your Google Business Profile is another great option. Both allow for images and copy as well as website links. You could also publish a blog or produce simple videos on YouTube. Maybe roll out an email campaign.

Depending on your customer base, you could even pursue billboard space, which can be used to talk about charitable giving, helpful tips or your staff. Some of the best billboards I've seen feature the energetic staff at a local orthodontist's office. They don't say anything about price or product. Everyone knows their big seller is braces! Instead they tell the story of a team that'll make you feel welcome and knows how to have fun. Most people know you sell storage units, but do they know you have a friendly manager or resources to make their moving experience less stressful?

### Controlling the Narrative

At the end of the day, content marketing is just one of many strategies to employ as you highlight your self-storage business, but it's an essential one. It showcases your facility in a way paid ads or street signage can't.



It has other benefits, too. As you add quality content to your website and other channels, it won't only educate your customers, it'll enhance your SEO and build a strong reputation with those all-important search engines. Eventually, you'll have a library where you can refer potential, new and long-term customers to get answers to their questions and learn about your business.

Your self-storage operation is already telling a story, whether you're in control of it or not.

Content marketing is the way you manage that narrative. When people discover they need your products and services, make sure the tale they've been told about your facility makes them want to choose it. Develop the story you want to be told, then share it in a way that makes your business shine. **ISS**

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### Everybody knows keywords

are an essential part of search engine optimization (SEO), but not everyone knows how to use them properly or to the best advantage. Keyword research is a digital strategy that'll help you identify the right keywords on which to focus your marketing, so you can drive more traffic to your self-storage website and rent more units. Once you understand how it works, it may feel a bit daunting. But trust me, it's well worth the effort!

Now, let's roll up our sleeves and dive into the nitty-gritty. Keyword research isn't as scary or complicated as it sounds. In fact, this tactic can be quite exciting once you start seeing your self-storage facility's search rankings climb!

### Identifying Your Keyword Targets

Improving your self-storage facility's SEO is crucial, as it's the biggest source of potential new renters. Think about it: When people need

# 66 Start with local-based keywords.

These include your city or state. Think “storage unit in [your city].” When people search for storage, they’re usually looking for something close by.

storage, what do they do? They take out their phone and do a search. If your website isn’t optimized for the right keywords, you’ll miss out on being discovered.

To ensure your self-storage business is found online, you need a sound keyword strategy. I’m not just talking about generic terms like “storage units” or “self-storage.” To connect with potential customers in your area, you must dig deeper. You need specific targets that’ll make you stand out from the competition.

Start with **local-based keywords**. These include your city or state. Think “storage unit in [your city].” When people search for storage, they’re usually looking for something close by. By including local keywords in your title tags, meta descriptions and throughout your website content, you’re telling Google and other search engines that you’re relevant. That can give you a big boost in the search results.

Next, there’s **feature-based keywords**. These highlight the things that make your self-storage facility unique. Maybe you offer climate-controlled units, 24/7 access or state-of-the-art security. Whatever your special features are, include them, for example, “climate-controlled storage units in [your city]” or “self-storage with 24/7 access.” By targeting specifics, you aren’t only attracting customers who are looking for particular amenities, you’re showing search engines that your facility has something distinctive to offer, which will help you rank higher in results.

Finally, don’t forget **question-based keywords**. These address common questions or concerns potential customers might have, such as “How much does self-storage cost?” or “What size storage unit do I need?” Content that answers these inquiries provides valuable information and shows search engines that your website is helpful. Plus, you can attract people who are in the early stages of their search. They might not be ready to rent a unit just yet, but by providing helpful guidance, you’re building trust and establishing your facility as a go-to resource.

The bottom line? When it comes to self-storage keyword research, it pays to be

specific. By targeting local-, feature- and question-based keywords, you can attract more rentals and show search engines that your site is valuable for storage seekers.

## The Right Research Tools

There are many tools to help you choose the best keywords for your self-storage digital marketing. The key is to use a combination of techniques to build a comprehensive list. Don’t just rely on one tool or one type of keyword. Mix it up and cover all of your bases. Here are some great options in your keyword-research “toolbox”:

**Google Keyword Planner.** This free tool is part of the Google Ads platform, however, you don’t need to run ads to use it. Just plug in terms and phrases related to self-storage, and it’ll provide you with a list of related keywords along with how often those words or phrases are searched per month. This tool is a great starting point for finding high-volume keywords to target on your website. Keep in mind that “high volume” often means “high competition,” so you’ll want to mix in some lower-volume keywords as well.

**Google Search Console.** This is another free tool that shows you the keywords for which your self-storage website is already ranking. It offers a goldmine of information for identifying low-hanging fruit and opportunities for improvement. You can also see which web pages receive the most impressions and clicks and which keywords drive that traffic.

**Google Trends.** This is handy for tracking the popularity of keywords over time. You can see what’s trending up or down and get ideas for related options to target. For example, you might see that searches for “climate-controlled storage” are trending up in your area. That could be a good keyword on which to focus your content and ads.

**ChatGPT.** This artificial-intelligence tool can help you brainstorm keyword ideas and validate their relevance to your self-storage business. For example, you could ask it, “What are some common questions people have about self-storage?” It’ll generate a list of

potential keywords to target. You can then run them through the other tools to check their search volume and difficulty.

## Content-Optimization Techniques

OK, you’ve done your keyword research and know what terms you want to target. Now what? It’s time to optimize your website content to ensure those keywords work hard for you.

To improve on-page SEO, focus on your title tags, meta descriptions, header tags and even your image alt text. By incorporating your target keywords into these elements, you’re telling search engines what your page is about, making it more likely that your self-storage business will show up in relevant search results.

For example, let’s say you have a page on your website about climate-controlled storage units in Miami. You’d want to make sure that your title tag and meta description include “climate-controlled storage units in Miami.” You’d also want to use header tags (like H1 and H2) to break up your content and signal to search engines what each section is about. However, don’t just stuff the same keyword into these tags. Use synonyms, and make sure you write these tags for people first, so they read well and don’t sound robotic.

You’ll also want to create helpful, informative blog posts that address common customer questions and concerns. You can naturally incorporate your target keywords into this content while providing value to your readers. For example, if one of your target phrases is “how to choose the right storage-unit size,” you could create a blog post that walks readers through the process of determining what size unit they need based on the amount and type of items they’re storing.

## Tracking Performance With Analytics

Congrats, you’ve optimized your self-storage website for search with the best possible keywords! But how do you know if all that hard work is paying off?

Google Analytics is a must-have for any website owner. It provides valuable insight and allows you to track website traffic and the source of new rentals (organic search, paid ads, social media, etc.). By monitoring these metrics, you can better understand how your self-storage marketing is performing. For example, if you see a big spike in organic traffic after optimizing a particular page, you know you’re on the right track.

Another valuable resource is Google Search Console, mentioned above, which provides detailed insight to the keywords for which

your website is ranking and the number of clicks each generates. Using this data, you can identify improvement opportunities and ensure your site is always doing its best.

For example, if you notice one of your target keywords is getting a lot of impressions but not many clicks, it could be a sign that your title tag or meta description needs to be more compelling. If a page on your site is getting a ton of organic traffic, that's a great opportunity to optimize the page even further and ensure it provides a great user

experience that encourages visitors to rent self-storage units.

By regularly monitoring your website's performance, you can stay on top of your SEO game and ensure your self-storage business is always visible and attractive to potential customers.

### King of the Mountain

Keyword research is the foundation of any great SEO strategy. It can help you boost your search rankings, drive more self-storage rentals

and grow your business. Just remember, it isn't about stuffing your website with keywords; it's about understanding your audience, creating valuable content and optimizing your site for search engines and users. Keep refining your approach, track your progress and don't be afraid to experiment. With a little persistence and a lot of testing, you'll dominate your market's search results! **ISS**

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# Video Marketing: Types and Tips



**If it seems like just about every** business has a video these days, it's because most have recognized the power behind this marketing strategy. Video can inform, entertain and grab attention. In a media-focused world, it's becoming more important in the effort to attract new customers and communicate with existing ones.

Creating quality videos for a self-storage business is important for driving rentals

and improving the customer experience (CX). If you're interested in adding it to your marketing, the following information will help you successfully create and launch a plan.

### Video Types

There are two main kinds of video content: informational and advertising. Each has advantages and can solicit

different responses from your audience. Both can improve CX.

**Informational.** These videos do exactly what the name implies: inform the viewer. Customers are interested in knowing more about what they can expect when renting self-storage. They want to feel more comfortable about the process. These types of videos are useful in convincing those who are considering

66 Whether you're creating a video yourself or hiring someone else, *engagement* is important. Viewers who feel "pulled in" by your content are more likely to remember and act on it.

the product but haven't decided where or what to rent.

For example, at Extra Space Storage, we created a series of unit-size guides to help shoppers. They're also effective at showcasing our brand and CX.

If you plan to create informational videos, put yourself in your viewer's shoes to determine what topics they may be concerned about or would like to understand better. Use real footage of your properties, not generic stock footage. Explain everything in a friendly and helpful tone, and include text to highlight important details.

**Advertising.** When you think of video advertising, it might conjure thoughts of a hilarious Super Bowl ads full of celebrities. This is obviously outside the budget for most self-storage operators, however. Instead, start small and research other more cost-friendly options.

For example, video ads on social media can often provide a better return on investment with improved tracking, all at a lower barrier to entry. Find out why your customers care about your product or prefer your brand, then turn that into a multitude of engaging short-form videos. Make your ads attention-grabbing and memorable to get the most value from them.

Start by asking yourself what makes your brand attractive. Take a look at your customer reviews and note the areas in which your business excels. Is it facility cleanliness? The personal care of your

property managers? The competitive pricing for your area?

Consider how you can make this concept visually appealing. Just don't fall into the trap of trying to do too much with one video. Keep it focused, and your customers will be more engaged.

### General Video Tips

Whether you're creating a video yourself or hiring someone else, *engagement* is important. Viewers who feel "pulled in" by your content are more likely to remember and act on it. Ideally, these are people who are ready to rent self-storage. (Sorry, but it may not be a good sign if only teenagers are enjoying it.)

A simple way to draw in viewers is to use emotion. Videos can be funny, thought-provoking, nostalgic and more. We all love to laugh, but sometimes a post that brings you sweetly to tears can be just as impactful. Of course, this approach applies more to advertising videos. It might not be as relevant for informational ones.

In addition to the emotional core, include a call to action, for example, "Rent now" or "Call for more information." Also, gather feedback about your video from others—preferably not close friends or family, as they may be understandably biased. Finally, find a way to track and measure video performance for future comparison and improvement.

### Where Should You Be Using Video?

Anywhere and everywhere! Embed them on your self-storage website to convince people to rent with you. Post them on social media to gain awareness. Share them in emails to improve the tenant experience. Use advertising to get your video out to more people in your local markets.

That said, be smart about the types of video you post on certain platforms. Not every video belongs in every place. Consider your marketing funnel, or *flywheel*. If you ran an informational video during an ad break on Hulu, it might reach millions, but are those people ready for that level of detail? It might not be enticing for the average person who isn't in immediate need of storage. Instead, they might be more likely to remember an intentional advertisement that's short and entertaining.

### Partnering With a Professional

If you're lucky enough to have the resources for a larger video production, search for marketing agencies that impress

you with their past work. Request a proposal from several vendors to compare pricing, and choose a partner in which you feel confident. Working with professionals will give you higher-quality videos; and quality production can be a quick indicator to customers of your company's professionalism and care.

But a production agency may be well beyond your budget. If you're looking for a compromise that still allows you to get video support, try contracting with a content creator. You can find a professional on your own or peruse the many available platforms.

The right hire can help you create video for your website and social media. You can also ask to be featured on the creator's own video channel if it seems worthwhile. Some may even be willing to trade services. Try offering free rent on a storage unit for a few months in exchange for some video work.

Of course, you want to use caution when beginning a partnership to protect your self-storage brand and marketing efforts. You want someone who can represent your brand well and make your posts appealing. To begin, ask for examples of their work. If they're posting on their own channel, assess their follower count and recent engagement (quantity of likes, comments) to avoid accounts with fake followers (bots). Finally, confirm that you'll be able to ask for revisions if what you receive isn't what you hoped for, but don't expect too much. You likely won't be getting any Spielberg-level cinematography.

Finally (and perhaps most importantly), allow your professional some creative freedom. Let them express themselves, and you'll often be glad you did. A good content creator will help you find a healthy balance that's respectful of your brand's professionalism but brings life and inspiration to your media.

### Time to Hit Record!

Your first self-storage video—or even the second—might not be great. The important thing is to keep trying. As cliché as it sounds, this kind of marketing gets better the more you practice.

Don't be afraid to ask for help, and hire professionals if your budget allows it. The return on investment is often worth it. Use video marketing to drive rentals, inform your self-storage customers, and, of course, have fun with your brand. **ISS**

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# Drone-Based Content



**They say a picture is worth** a thousand words, but what about one taken by a drone? I'd argue it has even greater value. When photographing a self-storage facility from the ground, it takes several shots to show the variety of unit sizes, driveways, lights, cameras, fencing, vehicle parking and curb appeal. But a drone picture can tell that whole story with a single take.

So, how do you get that perfect photo? Can you just buy a drone and play around with it? Not if you want the best results. For those you need an experienced pilot who knows the rules, the industry and how to deliver great footage. Below are 10 guidelines to follow when considering drone media for your marketing arsenal. From licensing to weather to editing, there's a lot to bear in mind. However, if you follow these steps, you should have exactly what you need to tell the story of your self-storage facility.

## 1. Hire a licensed drone pilot.

Believe it or not, flying a drone is regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). While these machines are readily available to be purchased by just about anyone, it isn't as simple as buying one, launching it into the air and taking a few photos. If a drone is used for anything other than a hobby, no matter its size, the individual flying it must have an FAA Part 107 license. The drone must also be registered with the FAA and equipped with a remote ID.

Now, if you go around this rule, will an FAA agent swoop down and fine you? Maybe, maybe not. If you drive your car without a license, will the police immediately pull you over? Maybe, maybe not. But this is about more than just having the right credentials and following the rules.

A licensed drone pilot has the training and expertise to ensure footage is gathered safely and legally. They know what type of airspace they're flying into and often can get clearance for

places prohibited to others. They've been trained in weather dynamics and can avoid conditions that could lead to a loss of drone control. They also know the proper safety measures to keep people on the ground out of harm. Plus, the footage gathered is usable for commercial purposes, like marketing your self-storage facility, so you never have to worry about violating those particular rules now or in the future.

## 2. Before you hire, see your pilot's portfolio and equipment.

A drone pilot should have the experience and tools to provide the services you need. Ask your candidate if they've recorded commercial properties, and ask to see examples of their work. Have they taken photos? Videos? Worked after dark? Your storage facility shouldn't be the first in this person's portfolio.

The right drone can also make a huge difference. Most professional machines will take fantastic shots, so make sure your pilot has the right tool for the job. If they're shooting with a drone that cost less than \$100 and was purchased at the local big-box store, it might not be up to the task. Professional drones will be able to handle a windy day and still take high-definition photos and videos. So, ask about the pilot's equipment and do a little research. Trust me, it'll be time well spent.

## 3. Be specific about your needs.

There are many uses for drone footage. You might desire a new art header for your self-storage website, a variety of shots to spruce up your Google profile, or detailed photos of your roof for an upcoming maintenance project. You know these things, but your pilot doesn't, especially if they haven't taken footage of a storage facility before (more on that below).

Make sure your pilot knows what you need. Do you want a slow-moving video to put at

the top of your website? Photos that capture your surveillance cameras? Close-ups of your pole lights? A shot list is a handy thing to give to your pilot, especially if you have specific requirements.

## 4. Be flexible around weather.

Weather is a huge consideration for a drone pilot. There are several modules during flight training that cover weather patterns and how to fly safely in every environment. There are also specific types of weather in which flying a drone is prohibited.

When you're setting up a time with your pilot, it's good to have a backup day in mind just in case the weather is bad. Even a cloudy day can ground the flight. Your pilot has no control over this, so be patient and plan to work with them to have the best conditions possible.

## 5. Make sure the footage is the right quality.

I'm amazed at the quality of images captured by tiny drone cameras. The higher the quality, the better the photo, right? Most of the time I'd agree; however, there can be drawbacks. Typical drone images can range from 6MB to 10MB and even higher depending on the camera settings. An image of just 1MB can slow your website load time. You don't want a pixelated image, but you also don't want something that'll bog down your platforms.

Video is a different story. There, I wouldn't skimp on quality. Most social platforms will lower video quality as the file is uploaded, so get the best you can. High definition and 4K footage allows for zooming in if necessary. Also, get several shorter-length videos that are more friendly for websites and social media rather than one or two longer ones.

Quality is also about the kind of footage you get. Do the photos have the right lighting? Is



your entire self-storage facility in the shot? Are key features missing? Is the video jerky or shaky as the drone flies around? An experienced pilot will be able to deliver smooth and clear footage of your entire property.

## 6. Choose a pilot with experience in self-storage.

Our unique industry is unique. Shooting a self-storage facility isn't like working in a home or retail environment. Our customers want to see how wide the driveways are for their rental truck, what security features are on site and the layout of the buildings. They want to know their goods will be safe on a property that's well-maintained.

The question is, does your drone pilot know this? Do they know the particular things about our business that need to be featured? You can give them a detailed shot list, but you aren't a pilot or movie director. The person you hire should already know what makes a self-storage facility enticing to viewers. Your property is loaded with showcase-worthy features. Experience will ensure they aren't missed.

## 7. Highlight all facility features.

Don't forget to capture everything! You have a unique perspective on what makes your self-storage facility great. Maybe it's the goose-neck lighting or the water fountain in front of your office, or outstanding architecture or curb appeal. But there are also many mundane extras your customers need to see. They want to know your facility is fenced, has cameras mounted on the buildings, and where the kiosk is located. They need to see that your roofs are in good condition, your gravel driveways don't have divots and the grass has been cut.

Your photos and videos should highlight everything about your property that'll invite someone to store with you, during the day and at night. If you have great lighting, see if your pilot can come back after dark to showcase it.

Your drone pilot will only be on site for a few hours at most, so make sure they capture it all. If there's something you're particularly proud of, be sure to mention it.

## 8. Acquire properly edited media.

Drones capture photos and video in amazing detail. The videos are especially mesmerizing. But that quality comes at the cost of extremely large files. A 4K or 8K video can be several hundred megabytes for less than 60 seconds of footage.

The size and quality of all your drone media really matters. Most of the time, some editing is required to convert the raw footage into useable files. Often there are a few seconds at the beginning or end that are unusable as the drone lines up its shot or your self-storage facility leaves the frame. At the end of the project, will you have pictures and video that are ready to use, or will you have to enlist someone else to create that short video, brighten up those pictures, or photoshop those annoying telephone lines that are in every shot?

Solid editing can make all the difference. Small changes in lighting or the addition of background music or a logo can turn an amateur video into a great reel for Instagram or YouTube. Remember, you never want to give an inaccurate picture of your self-storage property, so watch out for those obvious edits that'll make your customers lose trust. But things like adding a clear sky, removing that car in the parking lot, or closing an open door can enhance a photo so your customers focus on the right things.

## 9. Get your resources when you need them.

Shooting photos and videos takes time; so does editing. Your drone pilot may be working on several projects at once. Make sure there's clear communication on the front end regarding when they're coming and when you'll get the finished product. If you have a specific deadline

for a marketing campaign or the launch of a new website, make sure the pilot knows your timetable and can stick to it.

It's also important to establish how you'll get your media. Is the pilot able to deliver it effectively? Is there an easily accessible cloud-storage option? Make sure they have a way to quickly deliver your photos and videos that works for you. I recommend using a platform that's compatible with several types of hardware such as Google Drive or Dropbox.

## 10. Get a clear pricing structure and agreement.

You get what you pay for. Keep that in mind as you consider a budget for your self-storage marketing project. Some drone pilots may seem expensive, but what are you getting? Does it include edited footage? A ready-to-go commercial? Maybe you found a great deal, but does it include just a few photos and no video?

Whatever you need, make sure you and your pilot have a clear idea of what they'll be providing. If you need photos, video, edits and a commercial, make that's clear before the shoot so the pilot can get all the footage they need and quote you an accurate price. Have an agreement in place that states the time they'll be on your property, what will be delivered and when you can expect it.

Incorporating drone photography and videography into your self-storage marketing strategy can significantly elevate the visibility and appeal of your facility. Aerial photos can tell a story that ground photos simply can't. By following these 10 guidelines, you can ensure your media will be usable, legal and effective. Remember, the goal is to find a professional who can capture the essence of your operation, enhancing your marketing efforts and ultimately attracting more customers. **ISS**

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# The Power of Email



**You know from experience:** If you buy a thing online, attend a tradeshow or sign up for information pretty much anywhere, your inbox will soon be overflowing. Though the abundance of messages can be overwhelming and even irritating, email marketing is still one of the best ways to communicate with an audience in the digital age. Companies in all industries, including self-storage, are taking advantage of it. Are you?

Let's explore what email marketing can do for your self-storage business and how to ensure your efforts are effective and safe.

## Why Email?

Why should you use email marketing to support your self-storage operation? Put simply, it provides a direct line of communication to your potential and current customers that's cost-effective and efficient. It won't only drive sales and build brand awareness, it's ideal for sharing important information.

An email campaign allows you to skillfully release targeted messages to an audience. You can reach potential leads, announce news, strengthen relationships with tenants, offer promotions, publicize events and more. Plus, sending well-designed messages will present your facility as professional and well-run.

## Building Your Lists

If you're ready to engage in email marketing, the first step is to build a solid mailing list. Do you collect addresses from all your new self-storage renters? If not, start immediately! Include verbiage in your rental agreement that requests this information and states that by providing it, the customer is allowing your company to send them marketing messages.

If you're missing email addresses for any of your existing tenants, reach out via phone or snail mail to update their file and obtain permission to send messages. It's important to ensure that all contact information is current, so your marketing is sent to the right place.

When someone stops by your self-storage office or reaches out to you via social media, ask for an email so you can send them information. Also, add a pop-up or button to your website that invites prospects to sign up for your newsletter or other email communication. You'll get addresses for people who are interested in your facility and want to learn more about what you can offer. Customers who sign up voluntarily are high-intent and a great target audience for your marketing materials.

If you're collecting email addresses manually, put them in a spreadsheet for easy organization. This way, you'll be able to upload them as needed into a mailing program such as Constant Contact or Mailchimp. Bear in mind that there are automation tools on the market that can greatly improve efficiency, allowing you to schedule emails and manage other critical communication tasks.

It's wise to keep your list of prospects separate from current tenants so you can create tailored information for each group. Segmenting your audience allows you to send targeted messages, increasing the relevance and effectiveness of your campaigns. Failing to separate your lists can lead to opt-outs, which damages your marketing reach and will potentially flag your company as a sender of spam.

## Creating Good Content

Once you have your email lists and a way to grow them, the fun begins—creating content that's engaging and has value for self-storage

recipients. There are many resources that provide email templates. Use them to craft messages that support your company branding. The goal is to design a message that's visually appealing and grabs attention, encouraging people to open and read it rather than scroll past or delete it. Consider these guidelines:

### Match the message to the audience.

Think about your recipient, then craft your message to appeal to their unique needs. For current self-storage tenants, your content might focus on discounts, rewards for referrals, or tips for storing and protecting their goods. For prospective customers, it might address monthly specials or advice for choosing the right unit.

**Have a clear message.** Make sure your email has a specific purpose. Have you recently expanded your facility? Are you offering any specials? Is your business participating in a local event? The best way to inform customers of your facility news is to address them directly through a carefully crafted email. This continuous communication tells them that you're active, local and readily available for their self-storage needs.

**Create a strong opener.** Once the messaging for your email is clear, the subject line should accurately reflect it. This sets the recipient's first impression, so make sure it's well-crafted and attention-grabbing. People are more likely to open emails that look like they contain pertinent information, whether it's a change in business hours, a referral discount or something else that relates to them.

**Get visual.** Think beyond a simple text-based email. Adding photos engages readers and helps them understand your business. People love seeing pictures of

facilities, employees, property improvements and community involvement. Visuals also assist with brand recognition by teaching recipients to associate specific colors, logos and other graphics with your company.

**Think about timing.** This is extremely important. You don't need to send messages every day. In fact, you shouldn't. Instead, send emails when you have something important, exciting or valuable to share. Are you running a new special, hosting an event, or launching a new property feature or service? These are the perfect times to send a captivating message.

A quick word on holidays: Be careful about sending festive emails. Not all of your recipients celebrate the same occasions. You don't want to risk unintentionally giving offense.

**Be mobile-friendly.** With the increasing use of smartphones, email marketing allows you to reach customers wherever they are. Responsive email designs ensure your messages are easily readable and accessible on mobile devices.

### Following Legal Protocol

If you plan to email your existing and future self-storage customers, it's imperative that you understand the legal side of this marketing strategy. The CAN-SPAM (Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing) Act of 2003 sets rules and requirements for commercial email and gives recipients the right to opt out of receiving messages. It also spells out tough penalties for violations.

The Federal Trade Commission enforces this act and the accompanying CAN-SPAM Rule. Each separate email in violation is subject to penalties of up to \$51,744, so non-compliance can be costly. However, following the law isn't hard. Here are the main requirements:

**Don't use false or misleading header information.** Your email routing information,

including from, to, reply to, and originating domain name and email address must be accurate and identify the person or business initiating the message. The subject line must accurately reflect the content contained within.

**Identify the message as an ad.** The law gives you a lot of leeway in how to do this, but you must disclose clearly and conspicuously that your message is an advertisement.

**Share your location.** Your email must include your valid physical address. This can be your current street address, a post-office box you've registered with the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), or a private mailbox with a commercial mail-receiving agency established under USPS regulations.

**Tell recipients how to stop receiving future emails from you.** Your unsubscribe notice should be easy for an ordinary person to recognize, read and understand. Creative use of type size, color and location can improve clarity. Provide a return email address or other online way for people to communicate their choice to you. You might create a menu allowing them to opt out of certain types of messages, but you must include the option to stop all marketing from your self-storage business. Make sure your spam filter doesn't block these requests.

Remember, too, that even your newsletter subscribers can opt out. A person doesn't lose the right to unsubscribe simply because they opted in at some point. For a message to exclude an unsubscribe link, it must fit within one of five categories of "transactional or relationship" messaging outlined in the CAN-SPAM Act. If it doesn't, you need to include a way for recipients to withdraw from further sends.

**Honor opt-out requests promptly.** Any unsubscribe mechanism you offer must be able to process requests for at least 30 days after a message is sent. Then, you must honor a recipient's request within 10 business days.

### Monitor what others do on your behalf.

The law makes it clear that even if you hire another company to handle your email marketing, you can't contract away your legal responsibility to comply with the law. Both the company whose product is promoted in the message and the one that sends the message may be held legally responsible.

### Analyzing Your Efforts

Consistent communication keeps your self-storage company top-of-mind with an audience. Even if recipients don't make an immediate purchase, regular emails can reinforce your messaging and increase brand recall. But how do you know if your campaigns are working?

Programs like Constant Contact and Mailchimp provide analytics that show you the number of existing and new email subscribers you have, plus your message open rates. (An open rate of 20% or higher means your content is performing well.) You can also see metrics such as click-through and conversion rates. Collectively, this data provides valuable insight to the performance of your campaigns, allowing you to make informed decisions, see what messages are working best for any given audience, and optimize your strategies over time.

Effective email marketing might be just the tool you need to communicate with existing self-storage customers and convert prospects into paying tenants. A well-planned campaign can help your business reach its desired audience efficiently and professionally. Use it to increase sales, maintain a positive brand image and share information. It's one of the best ways to keep in touch with your renters and draw new business. **ISS**

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## A QR-Code Boost

### You've seen them everywhere

—small, square-shaped groups of pixel bits, sometimes containing branding or custom colors, but mostly just black and white. They're called QR (quick response) codes. If you're unfamiliar with them, now's the time to learn more!

A QR code is essentially a barcode readable by a mobile device. Think of it as a print-based

hyperlink, creating a bridge between offline (printed items or signage) and online (website or other internet-based content). But unlike traditional barcodes with a set of vertical lines carrying data in one direction, QR codes store information horizontally *and* vertically, containing up to 4,296 alphanumeric characters.

As a self-storage operator, you can benefit from using this technology in

many ways, particularly in your marketing, signage and communication with sales prospects and tenants. Let's explore the evolution of QR codes and best practices for using them to promote your brand.

## Advancement and Adoption

Adoption of QR codes in the U.S. has been slow compared to other countries. It wasn't until the pandemic that their popularity increased and they became more widely accepted. This is in part due to the fact that some people have been reluctant to download a code reader or app to their phone. However, in 2020, all iOS and Android smartphones were updated to scan a QR code using the native camera, which made it easy for everyone to adopt the technology.

At the same time, touchless initiatives emerging from the pandemic have forced people to scan QR codes for access to everything, from menus to directions to shopping. Business owners rushed to create and use QR codes to keep customer activity alive. Now, the trend continues. In fact, QR code use is projected to experience constant growth, reaching more than 100 million users in the U.S. by 2025.

So, how are people using these codes? The applications seem endless. Here are some popular ones:

- Inventory tracking
- Ticketing for entertainment and transportation
- Product/event/loyalty marketing
- In-store product labeling
- Sharing and storing personal/contact information
- Receiving and composing text messages and email
- Sharing URLs or wi-fi access
- Geo tracking

## Choose Your Version and Level

When creating a QR code for your self-storage business, it's important to understand that there are many versions, each determined by the amount of data stored. Version 1 is a 21-by-21 array of pixels, or about 14 alphanumeric characters. Generally, it's advisable to stick to version 4 or smaller (up to 62 alphanumeric characters) because most smartphones won't be able to read more data than that.

Also, check to see if the QR-code generator you're using will let you choose your error-correction level. In short, the higher this level, the more damage the code can sustain before it becomes unreadable. There are four levels from which to choose:

## The QR-Code Origin Story

QR (quick response) codes were created in 1994 by Japanese company Denso-Wave. They were originally used to track parts in vehicle manufacturing, as the barcode was becoming more popular due to accuracy and convenience. However, manufacturers needed to store even more information in a smaller area, and the two-dimensional QR code was born.

Denso-Wave owns the patent rights and methods used to encode and create QR codes, but the company has chosen not to exercise it to facilitate technology adoption. The codes were ISO Standardized in June 2000, ensuring ease of worldwide application and usage.

- L: The least dense array of pixels, allowing for up to 7% damage before unreadability
- M: Medium-low density, allowing up to 15% damage before unreadability
- Q: Medium-high density, allowing up to 25% damage before unreadability
- H: The densest array of pixels, allowing for up to 30% damage before unreadability

The higher the density, the more difficult it is to print the QR code with clarity, especially with promotional items that are screen-printed or laser-engraved. The less dense a code is, the bigger you can print it in signage and other materials. Levels L and M represent the best compromise between density and durability for general marketing purposes.

## Doing It Right

You can create QR codes for your self-storage business for free, or upgrade to a paid account for designer/branded codes, analytics and dynamic codes. My two favorite generators are QRStuff.com and QR-Code-Generator.com. Simply enter the destination URL, add your logo, customize the appearance, choose your error-correction level, choose your file type (png and jpg are popular choices), then download your code. It's a lot easier than you might think!

When preparing to put your new QR code to work, here are some important best practices:

**Keep it short.** Remember, the more characters you embed, the higher the QR code version, which can lead to printing and scanning issues. For this reason, it's smart to use a URL shortener before creating your code. (A good code generator will include its own.)

**Use dynamic codes.** This typically requires a subscription, but it gives you the ability to change the QR code destination over time. For example, you might create a code today that leads to your website homepage, but a month from now, you may want it to direct people to your rates page instead. This type of modification is possible with a dynamic code.

**Use designer codes.** Including your logo and company colors in your QR code reinforces your brand authority and is more aesthetically pleasing. Again, a subscription is typically required for this functionality.

**Use codes wisely!** Consider where you're placing your QR code in relation to where you're pointing viewers. For example, don't add a code that directs someone to your website on your website. Also, don't put a code in digital media (like email or social media) where a simple link will work just as well or better.

**Ensure the code is large enough.** Never print QR codes smaller than .75 inches or 2 centimeters square, as the code elements may muddle together, ruining scannability. Smartphones and other scanners may not be able to read the information when a code is too small.

**Create a buffer.** Every QR code should contain some white space around all four sides. This "quiet zone" is there to ensure the scanner can properly interpret the information without interference from other imagery or textures.

**Beware of glare.** Always consider the surface on which you're placing your QR code. Shiny, glossy and glassy surfaces tend to have a lot of glare, which will interfere with a scanner's ability to read.

**Watch colors.** Avoid light QR code colors. You want high contrast. Also, placing your code on a dark or bright background can make it unreadable. Dark codes on white backgrounds are always best.

**Choose a smart location.** Always put your QR codes where there's good cellphone or wi-fi coverage and be sure they can be easily seen and scanned. For example, a subway tunnel with poor signal will create a bad user experience. Similarly, don't put codes above eye level or anywhere else where they may be difficult to reach or scan. Avoid "noise" and distractions that'll interfere with your code being noticed. Finally, remember that lighting is key to good scans!

**Test, test, test.** Then test again! Get your coworkers to use your code. Try it on several types of devices. Test the destination and make sure all components work like they should. Then and only then can you go to print.

**Give a clear call to action.** Make sure you tell your self-storage customers what they can

expect to see or find when they scan your QR code. For example:

- Scan to visit our website.
- Scan for coupons.
- Scan for directions.
- Scan to watch a video.
- Scan to like us on Facebook.
- Scan to subscribe.
- Scan to leave a review.

### Get Creative

Now that we've covered how and where to create your QR codes and some best practices, let's look at some popular ways to use them in self-storage. One of the best is to get customers to your website. By putting a QR code on your

business cards, rack cards, brochures, postcards, fliers, display ads, posters and move-in truck, you can easily help people find you online.

QR codes can also help customers do business with you, even when your office is closed. Put one on your front door with a sign that reads, "Need to rent a unit or make a payment? Or just want more information? Scan here!" If you're driving people to an online-rental system, make sure you have a process in place to provide them with facility and unit access once the transaction is complete.

QR codes can also be used to:

- Invite customers to an event
- Donate to a charity your company supports

- Share helpful content, such as articles or videos on how to pack and store items
- Provide coupons
- Answer common questions
- Refer someone to your business
- Keep track of stored belongings

Now that you've read all about QR codes, I encourage you to get creative. This technology has been used for so many things and the list is ever-growing. If you aren't already using this tool as part of your self-storage operation, it's time to get on board because it's here to stay! **ISS**

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**In today's digital landscape,** self-storage operators are constantly seeking effective ways to boost their online presence and attract more customers. Two primary strategies have emerged as frontrunners in this endeavor: search engine optimization (SEO) and paid online advertising. While both have their merits, this article delves into distinct advantages of the latter. Learn how you can use paid online ads to gain a competitive edge.

### 1. Immediate Results

One undeniable benefit of paid online advertising is its ability to deliver immediate results. Campaigns such as pay-per-click enable you to place your self-storage content in front of a target audience instantaneously. In contrast, SEO can take weeks or even months to yield noticeable outcomes.

### 2. Precise Audience Targeting

Paid online advertising offers unparalleled precision when it comes to audience targeting. You can fine-tune your campaigns to reach specific demographics, geographic regions, interests and more. This level of control ensures that your self-storage marketing efforts are directed at the most relevant and likely-to-convert prospects.

### 3. Scalability

Paid online advertising allows you to scale your marketing efforts quickly. Whether you're looking to increase your budget, expand your campaign reach, or launch new products or services, it accommodates these changes with ease. SEO, on the other hand, requires continuous and often gradual optimization to see similar scalability.

### 4. Guaranteed Visibility

In a world where competition for online visibility is fierce, paid online advertising guarantees that your self-storage content is seen by your target audience. With SEO, your ranking on search engine results pages can fluctuate, leaving your visibility uncertain. Paid advertising provides a safety net, ensuring your message reaches potential customers.

### 5. Measurable Return on Investment (ROI)

Paid online advertising provides robust tools for measuring ROI. You can track key metrics like click-through and conversion rates, and cost per acquisition with precision. This data-driven approach allows you to adjust your campaigns in real-time for optimal performance. SEO, while

trackable, often offers less immediate and straightforward metrics.

## 6. Flexibility

Another advantage of paid online advertising is its flexibility. You can easily modify your self-storage marketing campaigns, ad creatives and targeting parameters to adapt to market changes, seasonality or emerging trends. SEO, while flexible to some extent, requires ongoing content creation, link-building and optimization to stay relevant. It's a time vs. money concept.

## 7. Enhanced Brand Awareness

Paid online advertising, particularly display ads, can be a powerful tool for building self-storage brand awareness. Consistent exposure to your facility's message through ads can leave a lasting impression on potential customers, even if they don't convert immediately. SEO alone may not provide the same level of brand exposure.

## 8. Geo-Targeting

For self-storage operators with a strong local presence or those looking to tap into specific geographic markets, paid online advertising allows precise geo-targeting. SEO can optimize for local search, but paid advertising provides more control over which local areas to target.

## 9. Ad Testing and Optimization

Paid online advertising platforms allow for continuous ad testing and optimization. You can experiment with different formats, messaging and visuals to find what resonates best with your self-storage audience. SEO optimization requires a different approach and may take longer to calibrate.

## 10. Protection Against Algorithm Changes

Search engine algorithms frequently change, affecting SEO rankings. Paid online advertising provides a level of protection against these fluctuations, as your ads aren't subject to the same algorithm updates that can disrupt organic search traffic.

## 11. Competing With Established Brands

For newer or smaller storage operations trying to compete with established brands, paid online advertising levels the playing field. Even if your SEO efforts aren't yet strong enough to rank your business highly on search results, you can still appear alongside bigger players through paid ads.

## 12. Promoting Offers

When your self-storage business needs to promote time-sensitive discounts, paid online

advertising excels. It allows you to create and launch campaigns quickly, ensuring that your promotional message reaches your audience in a timely manner. SEO may not offer the same immediacy.

## 13. Enhanced Mobile Visibility

Mobile use is on the rise and paid online advertising is particularly effective at reaching this audience. With mobile-specific ad formats and targeting options, you can tap into this growing segment more effectively than relying solely on SEO.

## A Solid Win

While SEO remains a valuable long-term strategy for web visibility and organic traffic, paid online advertising offers distinct advantages that are hard to ignore. Its ability to deliver immediate results, precise audience targeting, scalability and measurable ROI make it a compelling choice for self-storage operators seeking quick and efficient ways to reach their customers. Ultimately, the choice between paid online advertising and SEO should be based on your business goals and the specific needs of your marketing campaigns. **ISS**

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## Google Ads is an online platform

that allows businesses like yours to display advertising on Google's search-engine results pages and across its network of partner websites. Each ad presentation is based on a user's specific query. If a person is actively seeking self-storage, they'll see ads relevant to that search, which makes this an incredibly effective way to connect with potential renters.

As a facility operator, you benefit significantly from Google Ads' ability to target users based on their intent. When someone searches for terms like "self-storage near me" or "storage units in [city]," they're likely in need of the products and services you offer. By leveraging the power of this platform, you can position your business front and center, driving relevant traffic and potential leads directly to your website.

What's surprising is even though Google Ads can rapidly improve a self-storage facility's online lead activity, many operators pass



# 66 A common misconception among self-storage operators is that Google Ads is only viable for businesses with substantial advertising budgets.

it over as being too complex or expensive. The fact is, it can be an essential part of your marketing strategy, particularly if you're in lease-up. It's an ideal tool for reaching your target audience precisely when they need you.

Google Ads can be a real game-changer, regardless of the size of your advertising budget. Let's look more closely at how to leverage this platform to entice new self-storage customers.

## Setting Your Google Ads Strategy

An effective Google Ads strategy can be essential in your quest to maximize your self-storage advertising investment and generate quality leads. Here are the key steps:

**Target relevant keywords.** Conduct thorough research to identify search terms potential customers use when looking for self-storage. Google Ads has a free tool called Keyword Planner that provides insight to the exact variations that are relevant within your market.

If you're on a small budget, don't target too many keywords. Instead, choose the ones that are most likely to drive leads. For example, focus on a specific offering, such as climate-controlled storage, or location terms like "[city] storage unit."

**Craft compelling copy and offers.** Create ads that highlight your self-storage facility's unique selling propositions such as security, convenient access or special promotions. Incorporate an enticing offer like a discount on the first month's rent or free use of your moving truck. Keep your headlines short and to the point. Write in terms of what you know your customers are looking for to increase relevance and click-through rates.

**Leverage Google ad extensions.** Also called "assets," these are additional pieces of information that enhance ad visibility and create additional context for the searcher. They might include a phone number, address or site link. Extensions can even direct users to specific pages on your website such as unit sizes, pricing and testimonials.

**Optimize landing pages.** Your guiding principle should be making the self-storage rental as easy as possible. Design your

website pages with clear calls to action, relevant information about your services, and user-friendly contact forms. A successful Google Ads strategy revolves around targeting the right audience with compelling messaging and offers while optimizing the user experience on landing pages to drive conversions effectively.

You can also explore other advanced Google Ads features, such as ad scheduling and audience targeting, to enhance campaign performance. Take advantage of the Google Analytics integration to gain deeper insight to user behavior and marketing effectiveness.

## Managing Your Google Ads Budget

A common misconception among self-storage operators is that Google Ads is only viable for businesses with substantial advertising budgets; however, it can be tailored to accommodate operations of any size. With strategic planning and some flexibility, even a modest investment can yield meaningful results.

First, understand the costs. Google Ads operates on a pay-per-click model, so you only pay only when users click on your ads. The price of each click can vary based on factors like keyword competitiveness, geographic location and industry competition. Before setting your budget, do your keyword research and understand market conditions to home in on an average cost per click.

Your Google Ads budget should align with your self-storage business goals and resources. Consider starting modestly and gradually scale up based on campaign performance. Allocate money strategically across your marketing campaigns, focusing on high-performing keywords and target demographics. Here are some additional tips to help you maximize your return on investment (ROI):

- Regularly check your performance metrics, such as click-through and conversion rates as well as cost-per-acquisition.
- Use Google Ads' reporting tools to identify underperforming keywords or ad groups and reallocate your budget to top-performing areas.
- Adjust your keyword-bidding strategies based on competitiveness and conversion data.

- Implement cost-saving measures like negative keyword targeting to prevent irrelevant clicks and reduce ad-spend waste.
- Explore automated bidding or adjustments based on device, location or audience.

By proactively managing your budget and staying adaptable, you can optimize your Google Ads campaigns to achieve maximum results. The important thing is to pivot as needed. Remain flexible and responsive to market changes and seasonal trends. Adapt your promotions by testing new ad variations, adjusting targeting parameters or introducing limited-time promotions to capitalize on opportunities.

## Understanding the Value of Google Ads

As with any self-storage marketing spend, you'll want to understand the effectiveness of your Google Ads campaigns. To that end, use the platform's tracking tools to measure leads generated and units rented. Next, compare the revenue generated to the costs incurred.

Continuously optimize your Google Ads efforts by refining your keyword targeting, ad messaging and landing-page experiences. Implement A/B testing to compare different ad variations and identify the most effective strategies.

Finally, consider the long-term value of the self-storage customers you acquire from Google Ads, factoring in repeat business and referrals. Implement remarketing campaigns to re-engage website visitors and previous tenants, maximizing customer retention and lifetime value.

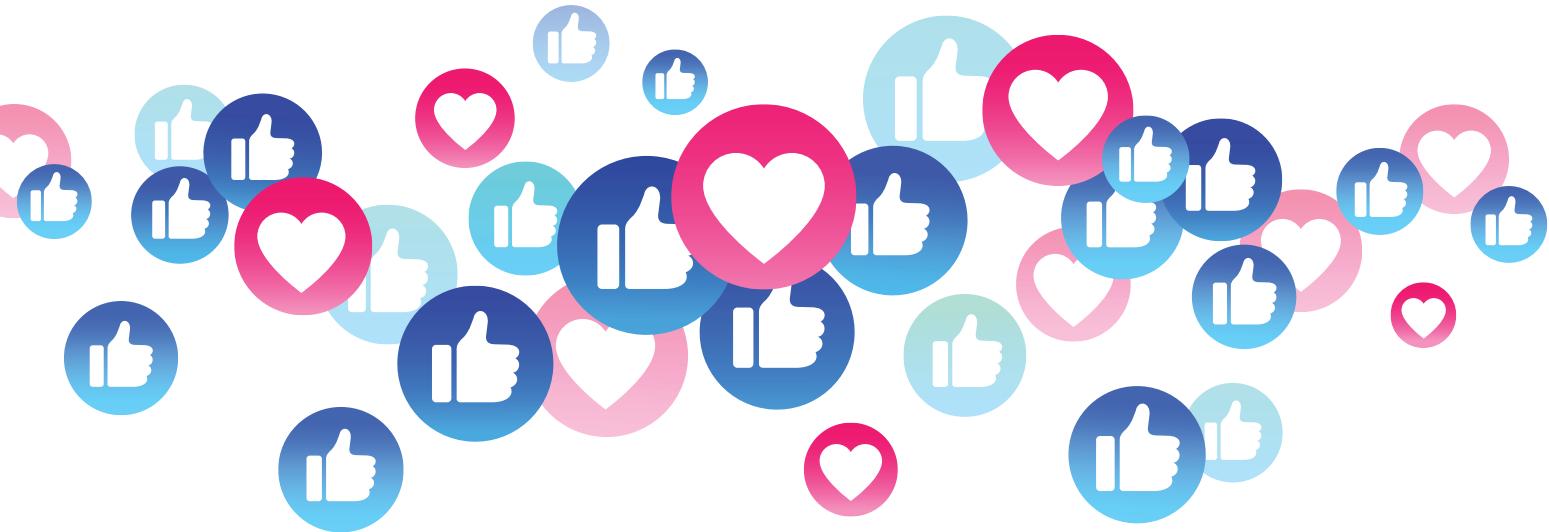
## Achieving Sustainable Growth

When using Google Ads to promote your self-storage business, the goal should always be to offer a seamless user experience, from ad click to conversion. Optimize your website landing pages for mobile-friendliness, speed and clarity. Use clear and compelling calls to action to encourage rentals or requests for more information.

If all this beyond your expertise or time, consider working with a digital-marketing professional or agency that specializes in Google Ads. There are also training and certification programs that can help you gain proficiency in ad management.

By incorporating these strategies into your Google Ads campaigns, you can optimize your self-storage advertising investment and achieve sustainable growth in customer acquisition and retention. **ISS**

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# Facebook Advertising

## In the self-storage industry,

the use of pay-per-click advertising to attract customers is well-known. However, the power of paid social media advertising is perhaps less familiar to facility operators. This approach can help you connect with potential customers, even those who may not be actively searching for your product.

Facebook is a giant in the social media world, with unparalleled reach and engagement, so let's look at how you can leverage paid ads on that platform to boost your self-storage business. I'll start with six reasons to consider this strategy and offer tips to help you succeed.

## Why Facebook Advertising?

The many features available on Facebook can significantly improve your self-storage marketing efforts. Here are six reasons to embrace this platform:

- Lower cost:** Compared to traditional methods, Facebook advertising can be more cost-effective. You have the flexibility to target specific audiences and set daily budgets.
- Improved customer engagement:** Facebook provides a unique opportunity to actively engage with your self-storage prospects. Responding to comments and messages there helps you build strong relationships and foster customer loyalty.
- Reputation management:** Facebook is a go-to platform for customers who wish to express their feelings about companies and products. Staying on top of this activity allows you to address concerns promptly,

preventing minor issues from escalating and showcasing your commitment to customer satisfaction.

- Advertising precision:** One of the strengths of Facebook is its ability to allow highly targeted advertising. You can reach your ideal audience with accuracy.
- Increased lead generation:** When used strategically, Facebook becomes a powerful lead-generation tool. By offering valuable content and promoting services effectively, you can attract potential customers and encourage them to act.
- Competitive advantage:** Actively engaging with customers on Facebook and running targeted ads gives you a competitive edge over self-storage operators who aren't using this platform. Building an active online presence helps establish your brand as an industry leader.

## How to Get Started

Before diving into paid marketing on Facebook, you must clearly define your advertising goals. Whether it's increasing brand awareness, attracting new customers or promoting specific services, having a clear vision is essential.

Next, allocate a realistic budget that aligns with these goals, and let your ads run for at least 30 days. This timeframe allows your campaigns to gain momentum and produce meaningful results.

Finally, craft a compelling theme for your Facebook advertising. These campaigns often rely on effective messaging, mirroring strategies used in terrestrial radio spots.

Consider focusing on special features. For example, does your facility offer boat/RV or wine storage, or any other niche-based services? Incorporate engaging videos to capture attention.

Special promotions can also be part of your theme, but they be creative. Move away from the generic "\$1 first month" ads that saturate the market. Instead, create promotions that resonate uniquely with your target audience.

## More Practical Tips

If you need help to navigate the complexities of Facebook marketing, consider hiring a consultant or agency with expertise in this area. These professionals bring in-depth knowledge of the ever-evolving social media landscape and can tailor strategies to meet your specific goals. However, if you prefer a do-it-yourself approach, try these practical tips:

- Ensure your content is engaging and relevant to your audience. High-quality images, informative videos, and compelling copy can capture attention and drive engagement.
- Leverage Facebook's robust targeting options. Define your audience based on demographics, interests and behaviors to ensure your ads reach the right people.
- Maintain consistent branding across your Facebook page and ads. A cohesive and recognizable brand identity helps build trust and recognition among your audience.
- Actively monitor comments and messages on your Facebook page. Respond promptly to inquiries and feedback, showcasing your commitment to customer service.

- Use Facebook Insights to analyze the performance of your ads. Monitor key metrics such as reach, engagement and conversions to understand what resonates with your audience and optimize future campaigns.

## Ways to Leverage Facebook Ads

To illustrate the effectiveness of Facebook advertising, let's explore some potential ways it can be used in self-storage:

**Niche campaign.** Let's say your facility offers RV storage. A Facebook campaign specifically highlighting this service can be highly effective. Develop engaging videos showcasing the secure and spacious RV-storage area, emphasizing features like 24/7 surveillance and convenient access. Target your ads toward users who've shown an interest in outdoor activities or RV ownership.

This approach ensures your message reaches individuals most likely to be interested in your offering.

**Acquisition rebrand.** Suppose your business recently bought a local self-storage facility. A Facebook campaign can announce and celebrate this acquisition, introducing your brand to the community. Create visually appealing posts and videos that highlight the positive changes you've made to the property. Use targeted ads to reach users in the area, ensuring they're aware of your presence and the enhancements you've introduced.

**Creative promotion.** If your business offers climate-controlled units, create a campaign based on the message, "Summer Special: Keep Your Belongings Cool!" Highlight the benefits of this product during the hotter months and offer a discount or incentive for customers

who sign up during the campaign period. Use eye-catching visuals and targeted messaging to amplify the promotion's reach.

Facebook marketing can help elevate your self-storage business to new heights. The platform offers a cost-effective, targeted and engaging way to connect with your audience, even if they aren't actively searching for your product. To succeed, define and set clear goals, allocate a realistic budget, and craft a compelling campaign theme. Whether you choose the DIY route or seek professional assistance, Facebook marketing has the potential to transform your business and position it as a leader in a dynamic industry. **ISS**

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# 10 Steps to a Better Business Reputation

**Monitoring and managing the reputation** of your self-storage business is critical for attracting and retaining customers, but how much time are you dedicating to this important work? It's even more important if you're a smaller operator competing with real estate investment trusts and their strong online presence.

Think of this article as your call to action to set aside a few hours per week to help keep your company in good public standing. For example, my "reputation-management day" is Thursday. That's when I focus on re-evaluating my company's social media, customer communications and curb appeal (physical and digital). Regularly monitoring these areas of our operation helps me gauge customer perception

of our brand, address small issues before they become big problems, and honestly rate our overall status compared to competitors.

This analysis requires being brutally honest and being able to put yourself in your customer's shoes. Below are 10 steps to help you immediately manage and improve your self-storage facility's reputation online and within your community. If you follow them,

your business will reap the rewards, including more long-term, satisfied tenants, higher occupancy and better net operating income.

## 1. Make It Easy to Do Business With You

For today's consumers, convenience is king; so make it easy for people to interact with your self-storage business. Invest in user-friendly management software with an integrated online rental system for your website and mobile app. Make sure all calls are answered by someone who can close a rental over the phone, and then can follow up via email or text for any additional documents that are needed. Keep the process simple. People have an extra-short attention span these days, and we need to cater to that as best as we can.

**Test your website.** Complete a rental as if you are a customer. Is it easy to navigate, find a unit and make a payment? Who's answering inquiries to your chatbot and emails? What could be better? Make those changes ASAP.

**Test your phones.** Who's answering your self-storage facility's calls and texts? Are those people smiling, outgoing and helpful? If you use a call center, mystery shop them once a week to ensure consistent results, and make sure they can complete rentals over the phone. If this is handled in-house, put your best team members on the phone to provide exceptional service.

**Test your staff.** Make sure that the employees you've entrusted to run your self-storage business are consistently providing win-win solutions and maintaining good relationships with customers. Mystery shop them occasionally to ensure they're responsive, outgoing, positive and professional. They should be motivated to focus on sales while providing A+ service.

Check on how well your self-storage competitors are handling these tasks and strive to do things better than they do.

## 2. Provide Extraordinary Service

Your onsite and online self-storage teams should provide top-notch service to all customers. Here are some quick tips:

- Respond promptly to messages and address customers' needs effectively.
- Train staff to provide exceptional service. Friendly, helpful interactions leave a lasting impression. Be humble, give people the benefit of the doubt. Smile, even if over the phone or in messages.
- Resolve issues and complaints swiftly and effectively. Show empathy and find solutions. Follow up if needed to ensure no customer is left behind.
- Use customer feedback and surveys to improve services and processes. Always strive to provide a win-win solution and exceed expectations.

## 66 Make sure all calls are answered by someone who can close a rental over the phone, and then can follow up via email or text for any additional documents that are needed.

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## 3. Instill Confidence and Trust in Your Brand

Building trust with your self-storage customers is a fundamental aspect of reputation management. Your tenants want to feel secure in their choice of facility and believe that their belongings will be safe. This confidence can be instilled by providing examples of satisfied renters who have put their faith in your business. Highlight positive experiences! In addition:

**Be easy to reach.** Provide clear signage and instructions on how to contact company representatives via omni-channel communication. Be available in some capacity 24/7/365. No one should have difficulty speaking with your team when help is needed. Be accessible by phone, email, text and chat.

**Do the right thing.** Keep up your end of the self-storage rental bargain by offering a clean property, safe environment and systems that function properly. If you want your customers' trust, you must first earn it and then maintain it by keeping the promise that you made to them when they became your tenant.

**Maintain a high star rating.** Shoppers put their faith in other people's experiences with a business. Often, they'll base their decision of where to rent on the impression they get of your self-storage facility from other customers. Make sure you have average review rating of at least four stars, but always strive for five!

## 4. Be Transparent About Pricing

Clearly communicate all information about self-storage unit pricing, including any extra charges such as admin fees or security deposits. Explain that promotions, introductory web rates and discounts will eventually expire, so it isn't a surprise to them when their rent goes up.

- Avoid deceptive practices and hidden fees.
- Explain your insurance options, late fees and other potential costs.
- Make sure new customers are aware that rental rates are subject to change on a 30-day notice with all monthly contracts.

## 5. Use Grassroots Marketing

Show your commitment to the local community by networking with other businesses, participating in local events, sponsoring activities and volunteering. For example, your self-storage company can:

- Join the local chamber of commerce.
- Sponsor a charity car wash.
- Hold a blood drive.
- Host a holiday event, after-hours mixer, open house or garage sale.

Visit local business owners and introduce yourself. Leave them with some of your marketing materials, maybe even some special offers, and follow up regularly. These people can become your biggest fans and cheerleaders. You can also establish a referral program through which you refer business to each other. Perhaps establish a local networking board in your self-storage management office.

## 6. Focus on Curb Appeal

Your self-storage property should be clean, well-lit and secure at all times. Again, put yourself in your customer's shoes and try to see things as they do. How fresh is your bathroom? How clean are your hallways? Is your gate easy to open? Is there trash in the drive aisles? Cobwebs? Peeling paint? Anything else out of order? Here are some key items to inspect for condition:

- Driveways
- Landscaping
- Gates and fencing
- Lighting
- Security cameras
- Front office
- Kiosks and other technology
- Roll-up doors
- Signs and flags

## 7. Claim and Optimize All Business Listings

Your self-storage facility will be listed online whether you put it there or not. Don't let others dictate what your business listings look like without your input!

First, find and claim all of your listings. Search for your business on popular platforms like Google, Yelp, Facebook and any industry-specific directories where it might



appear. Look for the option to claim ownership or verify your business. This usually involves clicking on a link that says something like "Claim this business."

Next, verify ownership. Each platform may have a different method. Some verify via phone, others via email or postcard. Follow the instructions to complete the process.

Once you've claimed and verified your self-storage business listings, make sure all the information is accurate and up to date. This includes your facility name, address, phone number, website, hours of operation and any other relevant details.

Finally, optimize your listings by taking advantage of all the features offered by each platform. To make your listings more appealing to potential customers, add photos and content, respond to reviews, and provide specifics about your products or services.

By claiming and managing your business listings, you can improve your online visibility, attract more customers, and establish more credibility online. If you don't feel up to this task, there are third-party companies that provide this valuable service.

## 8. Request, Monitor and Respond to Reviews

Make it easy for your self-storage customers to leave reviews for you online, then share any positive comments on all your social media channels. Post QR codes that customers can scan when they're on site. Ask for reviews while tenants are in the office. Post a sign in a high-traffic area inviting people to share their thoughts. There are even services out there that can help you generate more reviews than you could ever possibly achieve on your own.

You can also send out links via text and email to every new move-in and move-out. Use your property-management software to automatically send these requests, which should connect directly to your Google review page. The more reviews you get, the more you'll improve your online credibility and ranking.

Regularly check platforms like Google Business Profile, Yelp and other pertinent social channels for customer feedback and respond, whether the review is positive or negative. If it's good, thank the customer. If it's bad, don't let the issue fester.

Address the person's concern in a respectful, professional manner. Sometimes you might have to bite your tongue and be the bigger person in the conversation. Over time, this will show customers your empathy, gratitude and the ability to stay level-headed when dealing with an adverse situation. These interactions demonstrate your commitment to customer satisfaction and can help mitigate the impact of negative reviews.

## 9. Use More Text Messaging

Most of your self-storage customers are using text messaging in all aspects of their lives, so incorporate it into your business. It's how many people prefer to communicate and offers a simple way to document what information is shared with a prospect or tenant.

Your facility-management software probably offers some options for sending messages. You may even be able to automate this. Find out if your provider can send texts directly to clients individually and in bulk. If not, there are several third-party options.

Use texts to communicate courtesy rent-due reminders, new promotions, operational changes or safety measures. In fact, there's a wealth of opportunity within your existing customer database! Ask for new rentals, five-star reviews and referrals! Be creative in your messaging, and come up with attractive offers to encourage a response and generate more business. Include a payment link in your texts and you'll see a BIG improvement in your collection efforts. Just make sure you're offering a way to opt out of unwanted texts.

## 10. Act on Complaints and Requests

Wherever you find it, actively listen to all customer feedback, positive and negative. If there's a problem, offer to make it right and give concessions if necessary. Responding promptly is also extremely important, so customers feel their time and business are valued. Don't sweep things under the rug. Face problems directly and find solutions.

This effort can be a full-time job, so if you operate more than five self-storage facilities, I strongly recommend using a reputation-management service. This helps prevent the possibility of any customers being neglected, which will possibly lead to more negative feedback and lost business.

**Be transparent.** Openly share information about your self-storage facility such as unique features, pricing and policies. Train your staff to be helpful, humble, outgoing and fair. Your customers will appreciate your honesty. You have nothing to hide!

**Use clear communication.** Ensure clarity in all interactions, whether they take place online, on the phone or in person. Keep it simple, but convey all the basic information they'll need to have a pleasant experience with you.

**Be ready for emergencies.** You need a crisis-management plan for your self-storage operation. Be prepared by writing down all the steps you'll take to effectively engage with customers, staff, authorities and service providers in the event of a disaster, so you can quickly limit injuries or damage. This plan should include clear communication strategies, designated spokespersons and steps for remediation.

Now you have all the information you need to monitor and manage your self-storage facility's reputation. Establish a routine to assess and enhance your operation. In doing so, you'll foster a positive standing that attracts and retains satisfied customers, ultimately boosting your occupancy and profitability. **ISS**

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# Keeping Up With Industry Technology

**Self-storage operators are riding high** on a wave of technology, embracing a variety of tools and resources that are enabling them to better serve their customers and run a more efficient and profitable business. But innovation evolves quickly, and it's hard to keep track of the latest trends and developments. How will you avoid a wipeout?

In this article, we'll look at the most recent technology innovations in market as well as the perks and pain points involved in technology use. I've also solicited advice from industry experts on keeping up with trends and evaluating your business needs.

## The Latest Trends

New technology trends are constantly hitting the self-storage industry. Among the most recent are solutions driven by artificial intelligence (AI) and remote-management tools. AI testing is ongoing in the areas of reputation management, social media posting and customer-service. "AI is here to stay, and operators need to be smart on how they adapt AI into their technology roadmap," says Alyssa Parker, senior vice president of real estate for William Warren Group, which operates 314 facilities under the StorQuest Self Storage brand.

Many operators are eager to give AI a try. There are tools today that can predict demand for storage units in a particular area, create competitive pricing by collecting data from competing companies, and assist with marketing strategies, points out David Doget, revenue

manager at SKS Management LLC, which provides third-party management to 29 locations.

Remote facility management is another popular trend. "Operators have finally woken up to the fact that they don't need a manager on site eight hours a day, which leads to lower operating costs," says Robert Chiti, CEO of OpenTech Alliance Inc., a provider of kiosks, call-center services and other technology for the self-storage industry. Self-storage REIT Public Storage Inc. has seen a 40% reduction in labor annually per location using kiosk technology, he adds.

The flexibility afforded by technology is what allows the managers of North Carolina-based American Storage South to work remotely and oversee multiple facilities at once, according to Mason Shaw, director of operations. The company's platform maintains the human element of customer service by enabling managers to greet and assist people in real time using two-way video.

"The data points we can harvest from these interactions allow us to understand busy days/times/weeks of the month, provide real-time feedback to managers, and gauge our in-person conversion rate in a way that we were not doing before," Shaw says.

Just bear in mind that while remote-management technology can decrease labor costs and yield other benefits, it isn't without drawbacks. First, it can be off-putting to customers who prefer face-to-face interaction, particularly those who are older. Further, it requires a greater reliance on technology, and operators must invest more time in staff training to use it effectively, Doget says.

Parker warns against using touchless, tech-driven services to completely supplant onsite staff. "The industry saw many fully automated facilities pop up during the pandemic that are now at least partially staffed because technology cannot 100% replace the value a tenant receives from interacting with a team member in person," she explains. "Technology is best used to complement our human capital, but not to completely replace it in most cases."

Security is another major area of technology focus in the self-storage industry today. Popular products include electronic door locks, unit alarms and smart cameras. American Storage South is piloting near-field communication (NFC) locks that integrate directly into the facility's property-management software and allow for access-control without battery, Bluetooth or a network. The company plans to transition completely to this technology in 2024.

## The Perks

Technology has the potential to elevate a self-storage business in a variety of ways. Improved efficiency and a smoother customer experience (CX) are among the enticing perks.

"It simplifies administrative tasks and improves the overall management of facilities," says Jim Ross, owner of 3 Mile Storage Management, which helps clients understand their technology needs and implement new systems. He specifically cites enhanced security, increased efficiency and a better CX. Operators are especially receptive to tools that streamline operations, for example,

software that integrates billing, customer communication and facility maintenance.

Shaw adds that technology can improve a facility's data analytics, marketing strategies and digital record-keeping. When leveraged effectively, this information can be a powerful asset to any self-storage business.

For self-storage real estate investment trust Extra Space Storage Inc., which operates more than 3,600 properties including dozens of unattended sites, data is the driving force behind pricing strategies, marketing, acquisitions, feasibility and core operating metrics, according to James Hafen, senior vice president of product development. In fact, the company's growth has been powered by "connected stores, efficient operating platforms, aggressive use of the web for customer acquisition, and data, data, data," he says.

The information provided by technology platforms enables self-storage operators to better understand their customers and leverage that intel to market strategically and price their units dynamically, notes Parker. "This allows the ability to extend the tenant life cycle and creates referral opportunities based on a positive tenant experience."

But the advantages of self-storage technology aren't restricted to facility operators. They also benefit customers, whose expectations are rapidly changing.

"Tenants today are used to the everyday conveniences technology provides in other parts of their lives," Parker says. "To capture and keep guests renting today, operators have to lower the barriers for a guest to rent and stay." Basic expectations include online rentals, digital security and autopay.

Shaw's tenants have shown tremendous acceptance of new technology. They enjoy engaging with staff virtually through remote-management systems and serving themselves when it's convenient. Solutions that

minimize face-to-face interaction are a preference for most consumers, but "tomorrow it will go from their preference to their demand," Chiti says.

Tenants also appreciate enhanced security. Access-control systems and surveillance cameras can make a facility safer and better preserve the items that are being stored, "increasing customer trust and satisfaction," Ross explains.

### The Pain

Despite the many benefits of using technology in self-storage, there is a price to be paid, literally and figuratively. "The cost of technology is a considerable barrier to faster adoption," Hafen says. Some tools are easy propositions; however, those that replace things that have traditionally been cheap and very reliable, like door hasps and locks, "hold a lot of promise but are very expensive and have considerable support costs," he adds. Over time, he expects the costs to improve.

There's also a battle between seamless integration and the exclusivity of private products. Self-storage operators are often expected to manage multiple-point solutions including cameras, locks, internet of things (IoT) and alarms "with proprietary elements that hinder integration over existing or shared infrastructure," Hafen says. This can be unrealistic and hamper the broader implementation of store and customer-facing technologies.

Beyond integration and the initial investment costs, Shaw points to training requirements, maintenance and upkeep as potential pain points of implementation. While staff understand that adapting to new tool is a growing requirement, if it's too complex, it runs the risk of lowering the adoption rate by team members, says Doget.

### Evaluate Your Needs

Determining whether the latest technology releases are right for your self-storage business can be tricky. It takes due diligence. Here's some expert advice:

- Doget advises surveying tenants to solicit feedback on currently used items and gauge whether new tools would meet their needs. Similarly, ask your staff whether your tech is effective and how it's being received by tenants.
- It's important to be flexible in adapting technology to your unique business model, Ross says, especially if you aren't seeing the desired outcome. Take an inward look at your operation.
- Shaw advises conducting a needs analysis to identify areas where technology can streamline tasks, reduce manual efforts and improve overall efficiency. It should evaluate customer service, security, billing and other operational processes.
- Consider the future needs of your business. "Operators should also consider the scalability of technologies and how they align with long-term business goals," Ross says.
- Another strategy is to look at what's working at other facilities and what's happening in the industry at large. Regularly review trends and benchmarking against competitors, Ross suggests.
- Attend self-storage conferences, talk to other operators who use technology and visit vendors, Chiti says. He also recommends visiting a supplier's office to meet the people who'll be providing customer support. Also, talk to the company's clients.

Meeting the technology demands of today's customers is increasingly critical to a facility's success. But it can be a big investment for a self-storage operation, which is why it's often a good idea to start small. "Walk before you run," Chiti says. "Try the technology for a while at one facility before you install it across your portfolio." **ISS**

**Contributor:** Rachel French, Freelance Author



# Exploring Remote Management

**Remote management is a hot topic** in the self-storage industry as more and more operators move to this business model or at least consider running their facility without full-time, onsite staff. The idea behind it is that technology allows employee time to be used more efficiently. In some cases, a single manager oversees more than one property, perhaps with the help of a call center

that specializes in sales and customer service, and a website and kiosk to help fill in the gaps.

Why are so many self-storage owners drawn to remote management? The biggest catalysts are personnel costs and staff shortages. It's an employee's market right now. Job seekers have great negotiating leverage and opportunities for higher pay. There's simply more competition for labor and upward pressure on wages.

But on top of all that, there's much more technology available in the industry today. Ten years ago, there was only one kiosk option for remote management. Today, there are a host of slick tools, including modern kiosks, Bluetooth-enabled locks, smartphone access controls and off-site motion-monitored cameras. There are also third-party companies that offer turnkey facility-conversion services.

In addition, consumers are much more open to buying goods and services without human interaction since the coronavirus pandemic. Most are adept at using a kiosk at grocery and retail stores, for example, as well as the airport, and even their local McDonald's. Shoppers of all generations are growing more comfortable when buying goods and services online, too.

Now that you know the reasons why remote management is worth considering for your self-storage operation, let's look at the primary advantages and hurdles.

## The Benefits

**For owners.** The most obvious owner benefit of pursuing a remote-management model in self-storage is the ability to reduce staff count and payroll, thereby improving net operating income (NOI). In a traditional model, you'd need to four to five managers to oversee 250,000 square feet of storage space. In a remote model, you only need one or two, depending on the location of the facilities. Fewer employees make for fewer human-resources headaches as well.

In a remote operation, you can hire employees with a more concise area of specialty, too. The manager of a traditional site is a jack-of-all-trades, responsible for sales, customer service, collections, repairs and maintenance, property upkeep, pricing, and marketing. Alternatively, the manager of a remote facility focuses more on physical maintenance and repairs. They have minimal contact with customers, as a dedicated call center, kiosk and website handle much of the sales and customer service. In this way, roles are better aligned with employee skills.

Remote management also offers a competitive advantage when attempting to purchase or sell a self-storage facility. Higher NOI makes an asset more attractive, facilitating the hunt for investors or loans. It also draws stronger potential buyers.

**66** Today, there are a host of slick tools, including modern kiosks, Bluetooth-enabled locks, smartphone access controls and off-site motion-monitored cameras.

**For employees.** Staff of remotely managed self-storage facilities report that they're far happier performing the day-to-day operation of the site, free from interaction with upset customers and collections calls. The job also takes the employee out from behind a desk and allows them to be more hands-on with property maintenance. An additional benefit is weekends off, something not usually available under the onsite manager model.

**For customers.** In the end, your prospects and tenants receive a more consistent, predictable self-storage experience. The website and kiosk-reservation system are streamlined and automated to make the rental process as simple as possible. Users can choose their space, schedule a move-in or -out, make a payment, or speak with a person, all on their own schedule. Ultimately, customers have more agency to make decisions when it's convenient for them.

Meanwhile, experienced call-center agents, who have encountered nearly every customer-service scenario, provide a consistently pleasant interaction. Conversely, the experience encountered with an onsite manager can vary based on the person, their mood, their lunch and break schedule, the number of customers in the office, and many other factors.

## The Challenges

Benefits aside, there can be significant hurdles to converting a traditional self-storage operation to remote management. Let's look at what they are.

**Infrastructure needs.** For starters, you need a way to capture walk-in rentals, so a kiosk is mandatory. You need reliable electricity and internet to the machine itself, and you may want to modernize your management office (aka "leasing center"). If your office is behind the access gate, you may need to reconfigure it. You'll need an off-site customer-service team, generally in the form of a call center. Finally, communication between any remaining site staff, the call center and customers must be seamless, so your management software must be fully integrated with all platforms to allow information to flow in real time.

**Lack of personal touch.** The sales process is limited in a remotely managed operation. An onsite manager can show a self-storage prospect empty units to ensure they choose the correct size. They can also point out the property's features and benefits in person. The rental is much more hands-off when there's no one in the office. You must rely much more heavily on your website content and call-center support.

This lack of face-to-face interaction can also make it difficult to vet prospects. An onsite self-storage manager provides the first level of rental gatekeeping. If a customer seems difficult or likely to cause problems, it's easy to deflect trouble. This level of screening isn't possible with remote management. Further, there's no solution for those demanding, high-touch tenants.

**Task backlog.** In a remotely managed self-storage environment, a manager may only visit the site in person every few days, which can create a delay in physical tasks such as facility walk-throughs, overlocks and general site maintenance. Keeping up with vacant units can be more difficult, too. Some operators will put a hold on move-outs until the tenant submits a photo of their clean, empty unit. They'll charge a fee to those who don't meet facility requirements.

**Customer preferences.** Some self-storage tenants simply prefer to work with onsite staff. To help you get around this need, some third-party management companies offer virtual property managers accessible through two-way video technology.

**Payment limitations.** Cash is not king with remote self-storage management. In fact, depending on the tools you have available, cash handling may not even be possible. Customers will have to pay via credit card, debit card or ACH.

**Security.** A strong investment in self-storage security is a must. Some customers believe a remotely managed facility is more vulnerable to break-in, but the vast majority of these crimes occur after hours, when there wouldn't normally be staff on site anyway. Modern cameras powered by artificial intelligence can be used to remotely monitor

for movement after hours. provide audible communication to ward off anyone with illicit intentions, and alert the authorities.

### Get Started, but Cautiously

If you're thinking about converting your self-storage facility to remote management, try renting a unit at a competing property that already offers it. Make a reservation on their website, interact with the kiosk and call center, and see how the tools interact. Drive to the site to see what security it has. This'll give you a sense of the full tenant experience.

Also, talk with existing remote operators. Does the technology overcome off-site management challenges? Do vendors troubleshoot problems in a timely manner? Do their customers like the model? Do your due diligence.

There are many industry vendors that offer the tools necessary to remotely manage a self-storage facility, but you'll need time and energy to shop for products and services and vet all providers. From software, kiosks and call centers to access control, security monitoring and automated collections, do the homework, ask lots of questions and invest wisely.

If this sounds too complicated, you can always hire a third-party management company with expertise in remote facility operation. They offer various degrees of service.

Some self-storage operators believe the remote-management model only works in low-density, low-traffic markets; but the reality is that changing demographics, normalization of ecommerce and very real cost savings will slowly shift the industry in that direction. It's the future of the business! **ISS**

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# Making Remote Work for You

**Thanks to advancements in technology,** many self-storage owners have transitioned away from management offices staffed with employees to working remotely. Are you still meeting tenants in person and wondering if you can ever break away from the property? Would you like reduce or even eliminate office hours? Are you looking for the freedom to do what you want while running a successful business with great customer service? You can do it. I know because I do!

I've been the lone employee of my Montana-based self-storage business since 2007. I built it from a single facility with 165 units to three with nearly 1,100 spaces. I offer several unit sizes at two pricing levels: standard and premium. I don't offer retail sales, heated units, wine storage or outdoor vehicle storage. There are no dumpsters, bathrooms or other amenities. It's indoor, dry storage only, and I expect tenants to come and go quickly.

The key to success has been to streamline the operation so I only do the most important tasks: rent storage units and collect money.

I delegate or outsource anything that might stop me from answering the phone when it rings or immediately responding to an online rental. Streamlining includes every aspect of the business such as the website, facility maintenance and all communications. Here's how I do it.

### The Top 3 Steps

**1. Have the right set-up.** The first step is to invest in self-storage management software that integrates with your website, gate and payments. You want potential tenants to visit your website, quickly rent a unit and sign their rental agreement online. Automation can significantly reduce the number of employees needed and minimize the amount of time you spend on the phone. Get the best software you can afford, preferably with integrated texting.

**2. Outsource.** The next step is to outsource nearly everything to do with site maintenance. Hire a company for landscaping, lot sweeping and snow plowing, if needed. They have the equipment and the time; you should be

answering calls. The most you should do at the facility is pick up any small garbage when you drive around checking locks. Also, have a Google expert handle your search engine optimization and Google Ads marketing.

**3. Rent units!** When the phone rings or an email comes in for a new tenant, you need to be ready and focused; and you need to simplify the process so it's as easy and efficient as possible. Some small talk on the phone is good, but listening to the customer's needs is the priority. Steer the conversation politely as you listen and remember that you're the expert. With a cooperative customer, I can complete a phone rental in as little as six minutes but generally in about 10.

I've streamlined the self-storage rental process in several ways. I charge rent only, so no administration fees or deposits, and its credit or debit card only. I don't do meetups to show units or get payments. There's no hand-holding, and minimal time is spent on the phone. That's a lot of saying no, but what it means is that I'm fresh and happy for every call, ready to talk storage.

If tenants rent online, which is more than 50% of the time, I send a single text welcoming and thanking them, reiterating their unit number and gate code, and inviting them to contact me by phone or text if needed. You'd be surprised at how happy they are to receive a text from a real person.

### The Ongoing Relationship

Once the units are rented, the less contact the better. Put your self-storage customers on autopay and leave them alone. They don't need to be reminded that they have storage, and the longer they stay the better. If you do have to communicate, use automated texting. It's brief and to the point, trackable within the software, and far more likely to get a response than email.

When they move out, send a thank-you text and ask if they enjoyed their storage experience. If they did, forward them a link to your website-review page and ask them for a quick recommendation.

### Create Boundaries

Now that you don't go to an office and you have everything set up online, establish some boundaries. You can't answer every call from current or potential self-storage tenants, but you can send a quick text letting them know when you'll get back to them.

State your available hours on your website. For example, I take calls from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day, but not during meals with family or friends. I do, however, take them while skiing, biking or hiking, much to the annoyance of

those family and friends. If I'm not busy, I'll answer any call. I've rented many units by picking up the phone at 6:45 a.m. or 9 p.m. It's a trade-off. I'm almost never at work, but I visit each facility once every week or two, and I'm always on call.

I realize that remote management isn't for everyone. Perhaps you own a large self-storage facility with elevators and a retail store, or maybe you need staff for security purposes. But if you think you can go remote, I hope that something in my methods might free up some of your time and make owning and managing your facility easier and more fun. **ISS**

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## A Hands-Off Management Model



**Remote management is on nearly** every self-storage operator's mind right now, and for good reason: It can dramatically improve business efficiency and profitability as well as the customer experience. Many of you have already implemented some form of remote management by offering online rentals, employing a call center or adding a kiosk to your site. Some have even integrated live video-conferencing technology, allowing virtual customer-service representatives to oversee multiple locations at once.

These are all great steps, but if you want to truly realize the benefits of this model, the best approach is to go all in. Go *fully remote*. Here's why.

### It Enhances Efficiency and Profit

The implementation of remote management for a self-storage operation results in greater net operating income (NOI). How? First, it removes the need to have staff on site at all times, thereby reducing payroll expenses. It doesn't eliminate the need for property managers entirely. Rather, it allows

your team to be more focused. No longer do they have to be good at all facility tasks including sales, collections, maintenance, repairs and marketing.

Remote management also allows your self-storage customers to rent units and access their belongings during off-peak hours. Why have an employee sitting in the office when tenant needs are sporadic at best? This doesn't mean you offer zero customer service; it means you deploy resources only where and when they're needed, which in turn creates a more consistent customer experience.

Self-storage facilities that are on a fully remote management model are maximally efficient. They streamline operation through automation, monitoring vacancies and late fees and automatically notifying tenants of improper locks, overdue payments and more. Right now, many owners want to improve their infrastructure rather than acquire new sites, a result of high interest rates and falling rents. Remote management allows them to boost profit and improve occupancy, all without expanding their physical footprint.

You can grow your self-storage business without buying or building now! When the time for physical growth comes, self-service systems can easily scale and adapt to changing tenant preferences and technological advancements. But for now, any savings can be reinvested into your facility in the form of better lighting, advanced security and other amenities that make it more attractive to

consumers, boosting competitiveness in a time of declining occupancy.

Remote management reveals compelling fundamentals while delivering the experience customers increasingly demand. Let's see how.

### It Improves the Customer Experience

Remote management gives consumers the independence they desire. A survey by HRC Retail Advisory found that 95% of retail shoppers prefer to be left alone unless they need help. The same goes for self-storage renters. Most don't want to be walked around the property by a manager or told what unit to rent.

The history of online shopping provides helpful context. When e-commerce was first introduced in the 1990s, it was met with skepticism. One news story derisively called it an example of the "infohypeway." Another said the internet was "missing a most essential ingredient of capitalism: salespeople."

This suspicion was justified to some extent. In the early days, websites were difficult to navigate. Often, a web page would direct customers to call an 800 number and speak with a representative to place an order. Retail giants thought it would be helpful for remote salespeople to walk customers through the process and suggest what to buy.

But this wasn't what shoppers wanted. They wanted websites to be simple and safe to use without assistance. Retailers eventually created the online environment we recognize today, which allows buyers to independently shop 24/7, with customer service available if needed.

The same lesson applies to the self-storage industry. Customers want a simple, streamlined and consistent rental process that grants them self-sufficiency. They want help when something goes wrong, but not before. This is why some operators have opted to move customer service to a centralized call center, where

just a few employees can support multiple properties at all hours of the day, sometimes via two-way video. Properties that function on a fully remote management model have embraced—and are profiting from—this insight to customer preferences.

### It's a Win-Win

Remote management is better for self-storage operators and their customers. Operators get higher NOI and more flexibility. Tenants get the autonomous, simplified experience they want. When deciding how to plan for the future, remember the history of e-commerce. New technologies will usher in an era of business success for those who adapt and tailor their offerings to the wants and needs of today's consumers. **ISS**

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# AUTOMATION: Where and How to Use It

**As a self-storage operator,** are you leveraging automation to elevate the customer experience and increase team productivity? When it comes to getting more done in less time and delivering standardized business interactions that exceed user expectations, this technology is a must-have. However, researching and adopting specific solutions can certainly feel overwhelming.

The good news is you don't have to completely revamp your technology stack overnight. Instead, I encourage you to simply identify a handful of your internal operational processes that could be automated. Once you integrate a few, you'll quickly realize the immense benefits. Let's explore how

to identify areas of opportunity for your self-storage business and get started.

### Opportunities Abound

A successful self-storage operation has the ability to evolve with customer expectations. Automation facilitates this. When you automate routine and administrative tasks, you can significantly reduce human error, enhance efficiency and free up valuable time to focus on strategic business growth and tenant relationships.

Like CRM (customer-relationship management) and communications platforms powered by artificial intelligence (AI), automation enables your business to maintain continuous engagement with

prospects and tenants. From follow-ups on sales inquiries to reminders about late payments, it ensures you're able to maximize every interaction with customers, which can lead to improved conversion rates and retention.

Self-storage operations of all sizes are finding ways to leverage automation in their workflow. Here are just a few examples:

- Automated billing to streamline tenant payments, reduce paperwork and minimize errors
- Automated communication to keep customers well-informed about their units and accounts as well as facility updates

- Digital systems that enable customers to rent units and manage accounts, providing the convenience and the flexibility they've come to expect
- AI-enhanced security systems that offer advanced monitoring and real-time incident detection
- Access-control systems that allow tenants to enter a facility at any time and open their unit with their phone

When implemented effectively, tools like these can promote transparency and improve overall service quality and customer satisfaction.

### Steps to Take

Adopting any new technology can seem daunting, but with the right approach, most challenges can be solved. Once you've identified places where automation can improve your self-storage business, it's time to identify and implement specific tools. The following steps will help you get started.

**Identify gaps.** The first step is to conduct a detailed assessment of your self-storage operation to determine where automation can make the most significant and positive impact. Use a process-mapping tool to visualize current workflows and pinpoint inefficiencies. Identify tasks that are repetitive, time-consuming or prone to human error. These are prime targets for technology application.

**Choose the right products.** Next, tool selection is critical. Thoroughly evaluate potential products, considering your self-storage facility's specific needs, goals and budget. Consider how each of them might support the customer experience you're attempting to create. Here are some important factors:

- **Functionality:** This should align with your specific needs, addressing pain points and streamlining key processes.
- **Scalability:** Your chosen products should be able to adapt to the growth and evolving requirements of your operation.
- **Ease of use:** The user interface and overall experience should be intuitive and straightforward for staff and tenants.
- **Integration capabilities:** A product should integrate seamlessly with existing systems, such as property-management software and access control.
- **Vendor support:** Being essential for smooth implementation and ongoing maintenance, it's important that this be reliable.

**Train staff.** Providing comprehensive staff training and support is crucial for a smooth transition and effective utilization. A well-trained team won't only embrace your new automation tools and incorporate them into their daily tasks, they'll maximize the potential benefits.

To significantly reduce the learning curve, your technology-training program should provide a product overview, so users can familiarize themselves with the features and functionalities. User-friendly software interfaces, interactive tutorials and hands-on exercises will ensure staff can confidently navigate the platforms and apply them effectively. Finally, equip your team with the knowledge and resources to troubleshoot common issues and conduct routine maintenance.

**Evaluate and adjust as needed.** Post-implementation, continuous evaluation of your new technology is essential. This involves regularly assessing performance

of your self-storage automation tools, identifying areas for improvement and adjusting optimize effectiveness.

To begin, track key metrics such as system use, task-completion rates and feedback to gauge the impact of automation on your staff and customers. Gather insights from these groups to identify potential issues and enhancements, then continuously refine your automation strategies. This ensures your technology remains aligned with the evolving needs of your self-storage business.

### Potential Challenges

One of the biggest obstacles to the adoption of automation in the self-storage industry is the perceived high initial investment. However, when considered against the backdrop of long-term savings, efficiency gains and potential revenue growth, the return on investment is often substantial. It's also worth noting that the increased adoption of AI has led to an overall decrease in costs, making the technology more accessible every day.

There's also a concern that automation might lead to impersonal customer experiences; however, when implemented thoughtfully, it can actually enable more personalized interactions by leveraging tenant data to provide tailored services. For example, chatbots can gather tenant preferences and needs to create recommendations and support.

While adopting automation does come with challenges, self-storage operators should be open to the possibilities. Consider tasks that can be automated, then seek products that'll benefit your business, staff and tenants. **ISS**

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# The Automation Impact on CX

**Automation is being adopted** within the self-storage industry at a rapidly increasing rate. In fact, in a survey conducted by my company, 82% of respondents indicated that automation is a higher priority for their organization this year than last. In addition, 89% reported noticeable business growth attributed to automation over

the past year. These statistics underscore a significant transformation within the industry as operators strive to meet the evolving needs of a younger, more tech-savvy customer base.

More than half of Millennials (54%) who use self-storage visit their unit at least twice a month, with 36% stopping by once a week or



more, according to the most recent Demand Study by the Self Storage Association. This trend is mirrored by Gen Z renters, with 65% visiting at least once a month and 46% weekly. These frequent visits present a valuable opportunity for you to leverage automation technology, including online-rental platforms, digital payment systems, and advanced access control and security.

The aim of these tools is to streamline business processes and enhance the rental experience for you and your customers. The elimination of repetitive and tedious tasks allows you to dedicate your work time to more meaningful and productive activities; but more than that, technology helps you provide a seamless, efficient interaction with your business that aligns with the demands of modern life. If you hope to meet the needs of today's consumers, automation may be the answer.

### What Do Tenants Care About Today?

The self-storage industry has undergone a significant transformation in recent years. As a facility operator today, you're expected to

adapt to your shifting consumer base, which has evolving needs and expectations. The question is, what do they want?

First and foremost, they desire convenience. They're more likely to choose a self-storage facility that's close by, safe and affordable. They also expect quick, efficient service. According to Sprout Social's 2023 Social Index Report, 79% of consumers who reach out to brands on social media expect a response within the first 24 hours. This expectation underscores the need to be responsive and accessible.

In addition, today's customers expect modern, tech-driven experiences. When choosing between two similar self-storage properties, it often comes down to which provides a more seamless experience including online rentals, automated billing, mobile access and other digital conveniences that fit into the user's lifestyle.

Finally, your younger and more tech-savvy customer base values ease of use and personalized experiences. They expect your facility to offer user-friendly platforms that allow them to easily manage their self-storage needs. Automation can

help you meet all of these expectations by simplifying processes and enhancing the overall user experience.

### Removing the Friction

While there are many benefits to automating a self-storage business, there are also challenges. The most common concern for most facility operators is the financial investment required. The good news is technology doesn't have to break the bank. There are many low-cost ways to embrace it, including tools that don't come with any real barrier to entry.

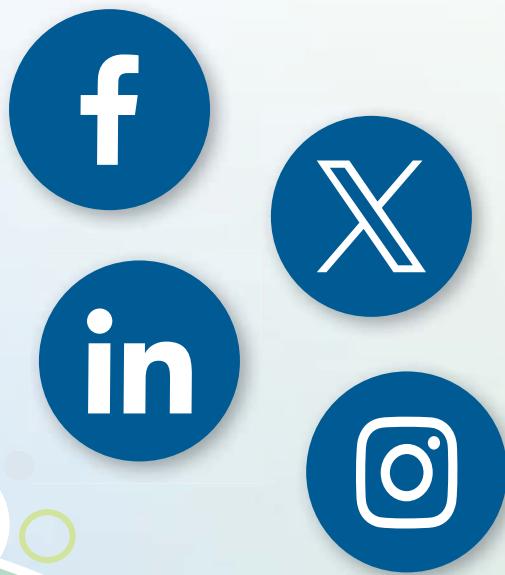
Transitioning to automated systems also requires staff training, so your team can use their new tools effectively. Fortunately, most technology providers offer a seamless onboarding process. Continuous education and support ensure that employees are confident and proficient in their work. This might involve regular training sessions, access to online resources and a dedicated support team to address any issues that arise.

Like any technology, automation tools can experience glitches and malfunctions, which can disrupt operation. You must have



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**66** The aim of these tools is to streamline business processes and enhance the rental experience for you and your customers.

a robust technical-support system in place to resolve issues quickly. This means having knowledgeable staff, maintaining regular system updates and creating a contingency plan for potential downtime.

#### Moving Forward

There are numerous affordable options available to self-storage operators who are interested in adopting automation, from basic systems to comprehensive setups. The key is to start small, assess the benefits, and gradually scale up as the business grows and tenant needs evolve. The return on investment is often substantial and includes a significant increase in staff productivity. Instead of

wasting time on mundane tasks, team members can focus on higher-value activities that drive revenue growth and enhance customer satisfaction.

When you use automation to improve self-storage operational efficiency and customer service, it can also lead to better tenant attraction and retention, ultimately boosting facility profitability. As the industry evolves, finding ways to take advantage of technology tools will be key to staying competitive and meeting the demands of today's tech-savvy customer base. **ISS**

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# The Next Level: Artificial Intelligence

**Over the past year or so,** self-storage operator 10 Federal has cut its call-center staff by nearly 25% while expanding its portfolio. That's quite an accomplishment, considering that payroll often represents the biggest expense for most companies, according to ProjectionHub, which helps business owners create financial projections. Despite the reduction, 10 Federal executives feel the company's customer experience remains strong.

How is it possible to trim headcount while maintaining a high level of service? For 10 Federal, the answer is artificial intelligence (AI). For instance, an AI-powered chatbot now handles 80% of customers' frequently asked questions, rather than call-center agents, says Brad Minsley, co-founder and principal of the Raleigh, Carolina-based company, which operates nearly 80 locations. Minsley goes so far as to equate the rise of AI to the advent of the internet.

"AI is tremendously exciting for us," he says. "We've been a frontrunner, I think, in using technology to automate facilities."

In fact, that "frontrunner" status has helped 10 Federal drop its employees-per-facility ratio to 0.8 from an industry norm of roughly 1.8 to 2.0, according to Minsley. Further adoption of AI and automation should enable the company to decrease this to 0.4, he adds. "AI is the extension of automation. It's the next level of automation."

#### Not Just Automation

Rodolfo Ramirez, co-founder and chief operating officer of Denver-based self-storage automation platform Swivl, notes that there's a distinction between automation and AI, though. "AI is often incorrectly used as a buzzword to describe any automation. True AI is technology that can mimic human thinking in an autonomous way."

For the self-storage industry, AI might represent a new frontier, but it's gaining momentum as vendors introduce new technologies and

operators add them to their business. It has the potential to benefit facilities on many levels including customer service, marketing, data analysis, security, and inventory management.

It can even help self-storage operators create content, which is something Storage Asset Management (SAM), a York, Pennsylvania-based third-party management firm, began doing three years ago. The company leans on AI to create material for its websites, social media platforms and paid media efforts. "As SAM started to grow, it was important that the quantity and quality of content on our websites were sustained," says Melissa Stiles, chief marketing officer.

SAM's content producers now churn out two to three times more with the help of AI. However, Stiles emphasizes that AI should supplement—not replace—human involvement in the creation process. For instance, employees responsible for this task might shift from writing content to editing AI-generated information.

## Exploring the Pros and Cons

As with any technology, AI comes with advantages and disadvantages. Masha Nova is a self-storage owner and founder of investing firm Your Freedom Investments. She's also an advocate for AI use. According to her, the primary pros are:

- Enhanced operational efficiency
- Improved and personalized customer experience
- Better data-driven decision-making
- Heightened security

Among the cons, she cites:

- The need for technical expertise to install and manage the technology
- Concerns about data security and privacy
- The risk that less human interaction could dampen customer relations

At 10 Federal facilities, customers don't realize they're interacting with a chatbot or being handed off by one to a human agent, Minsley says. And that's the goal: creating a seamless, hassle-free experience.

Next Door Self Storage, which operates 20 locations in Illinois, has found a balance between a great customer experience and AI support. Some of its facilities are equipped with AI-powered voice agents to navigate callers through things like renting a storage unit. For instance, they can hold a conversation with a caller and ask what they'd like to store, then estimate space needs and quote prices, says company president Phil Murphy. For self-storage operators, AI represents a "force multiplier." It just streamlines their operations, he says.

Meanwhile, Murphy's other business, technology provider CallPotential, is counting on AI to help analyze the millions of calls its *human* customer-service agents take. This enables the company to find out whether agents are adhering to scripts or mentioning rent promotions, for example.

Even so, there are still challenges for operators who choose to use AI. "AI is still in its infancy," Murphy acknowledges. "There's going to be those things that it doesn't correctly process or understand, or there's going to be those times when customers are frustrated."

As a result, it's vital for self-storage tenants to be given the option to speak with a human agent when necessary. Furthermore, facility operators must tread carefully if a voice agent is taking a customer's credit card information. Any AI tool accepting this information must be compliant with the Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard, Murphy adds.

## Using AI for Software Development ... and More

Gazing into his AI crystal ball, Minsley says 10 Federal expects to embrace AI innovations such as security drones that detect people and objects, bots that perform landscaping tasks, and technology that handles accounts payable. The company has already latched on to several advances that, at one time, would've seemed futuristic.

For instance, it now depends on AI to assist its in-house developers with software programming. AI-powered GitHub Copilot technology is writing a "material portion" of the company's new software, under the developers' guidance, "to the point that we've rapidly expanded our code output without adding headcount" to one of its software teams, Minsley says.

Yet another application for AI in self-storage is competitive analysis. The technology allows an operator to go beyond looking at competitors' rates to include an examination of their service offerings, market positioning, customer reviews and social media presence, among other factors, Nova says. This AI-fueled exercise "provides insights into competitors' strengths, weaknesses and strategies, enabling storage businesses to make informed decisions and stay ahead in a dynamic market," she adds.

## The Future of AI

While AI is still evolving, its use in self-storage promises to keep growing. Ramirez predicts future applications will include "smart" storage in which AI can adjust temperature or humidity levels in units as needed. Among the array of other potential uses are forecasting foot traffic, better managing power consumption and foreseeing maintenance needs, he adds.

Nova mentions Columbia, Missouri-based self-storage operator StorageMart as an example of a company that has adopted AI for predictive maintenance. "AI algorithms analyze data from sensors installed on equipment to predict potential failures before they occur," she says. "This proactive approach enables StorageMart to schedule maintenance activities promptly, preventing unexpected downtime and minimizing disruptions to customer service."

Furthermore, StorageMart is relying on AI to help combat fraud. "AI models are trained to identify patterns and anomalies in customer transactions, credit card usage and other data sources," Nova says. "This AI-powered fraud detection system helps StorageMart protect its business from financial losses and safeguard customer information."

## If You're Considering It

While AI already delivers a lot of value to a self-storage operator, Ramirez cautions against leaning on it too much. "Over-reliance on AI could

lead to challenges if the system malfunctions or fails. It's important to have backup systems and processes in place," he says, adding that incorporating the tech into business operation demands careful consideration of ethical and privacy issues.

There also are legal factors to ponder. A self-storage business must comply with data-protection laws. It must also clearly inform customers about the use of AI and AI-generated data and keep up to date on AI-oriented legal requirements, Nova notes.

"If AI leads to job displacement, operators must handle layoffs in accordance with employment laws to avoid potential legal issues," adds Ramirez.

To ensure AI is correctly and efficiently deployed, a self-storage operator should come up with a straightforward strategy that focuses on areas where it can provide the most benefit, balance it with human oversight, and regularly evaluate the system's performance and make any necessary changes, Nova advises. Ramirez adds that owners should ensure their employees understand how their roles will or won't change as a result of incorporating AI into the business. They also need to define areas where the tech will complement their work vs. handling tasks automatically.

At 10 Federal, further adoption of AI will mean the company needs fewer call-center agents, lawn technicians and accounts-payable representatives, Minsley says. However, it'll create new job opportunities for people who are well-versed in the technology.

Even so, it might not make sense to automate certain tasks or processes, especially if doing so would have little impact on the business or the customer experience. "To get started, review the customer touchpoints in your self-storage business, from the initial rental inquiry to the move-out, and identify where this can have the greatest impact," Ramirez recommends. "If you're feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of possibilities, the best thing you can do is start small. Consider automating just one or two tasks."

Nonetheless, the return-on-investment potential for AI is so compelling that self-storage operators can't afford to ignore it. "You can't be an operator who's going to compete successfully if you don't have some of the most basic tools. And that's where AI is going to go," Minsley says.

AI adoption will require help from outside vendors, Murphy says. But the cost savings should outweigh the expense of implementation. One thing that's certain is it's absolutely critical for self-storage operators of all sizes to plug into AI to be competitive. Soon, it'll transition from a "nice to have" to a "must have," Murphy says. "AI is something that needs to be interwoven into all of the different pieces in your vendor pool." **ISS**

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# Harnessing AI as a Competitive Edge



## Artificial intelligence (AI)

is quickly being adopted across multiple industries, including self-storage. There are many tools being applied to streamline facility operation and enhance the customer experience, from website chatbots and data analytics to predictive-maintenance solutions and real-time pricing platforms. The technology is evolving and will continue to do so, but embracing it can give you a competitive edge in a rapidly changing market.

## Common AI Tools Used in Self-Storage

Let's start by looking at just a few ways in which AI is being used by self-storage operators today. Website chatbots are among the most common. These customer-service tools allow you to respond to inquiries without human intervention, though it's important that users don't get caught up in a loop of automated responses. Make sure you personalize messages and that users have a way to speak with a person if necessary.

Savvy self-storage operators are also using AI to create content for their website and social media platforms including blogs, web pages, articles, whitepapers and other marketing materials. Just be careful to personalize anything you generate, as Google regularly updates its algorithm to identify non-original content that was created by an AI platform.

Data management is another area in which AI can make your self-storage operation more efficient. By collecting, processing, storing and analyzing data, AI tools help you track important information such as occupancy rates, customer preferences and payment trends. By creating the correct algorithms, you can even set your rental rates more accurately by using historical data to predict and set the appropriate rents for each facility.

We're also starting to see how AI can streamline the loan-underwriting process and baseline financial analysis during the early phases of the self-storage acquisition or development process. However, it should be used to assist decision-makers rather than replace them.

## Predictive Maintenance

One of the most intriguing areas of self-storage operation to be transformed by AI is maintenance. AI-driven innovations including Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing and machine learning are creating a paradigm shift in how property care is managed. For example, modern sensors communicate with your various technology systems to alert you when attention is needed and provide guidance on how to optimize performance. AI algorithms analyze the data from these devices to predict potential failures before they occur, enabling you to schedule maintenance as needed.

Here are two areas in which predictive maintenance has proven to be particularly useful:

**HVAC.** AI has transformed field service for HVAC systems by automating and optimizing maintenance scheduling. Sensors within the equipment communicate with AI, allowing it to anticipate issues before they occur.

Solutions like CoolAutomation use an intuitive, cloud-based application and a plug-and-play IoT device that not only communicate with any HVAC system, they automatically detect the system setup. Once connected to the cloud, the app continuously collects, analyzes and presents all brand-specific system parameters. The data is streamed to the AI system, enabling the algorithm to remotely monitor performance and alert self-storage managers to anomalies.

**Elevators.** The elevator industry has also benefited from predictive maintenance. By

analyzing vast amounts of data, algorithms can forecast wear and tear, including when maintenance is needed. This reduces downtime, extends equipment lifespan and improves safety. It also leads to more efficient resource allocation, as technicians prioritize urgent tasks and plan accordingly.

## Energy Efficiency

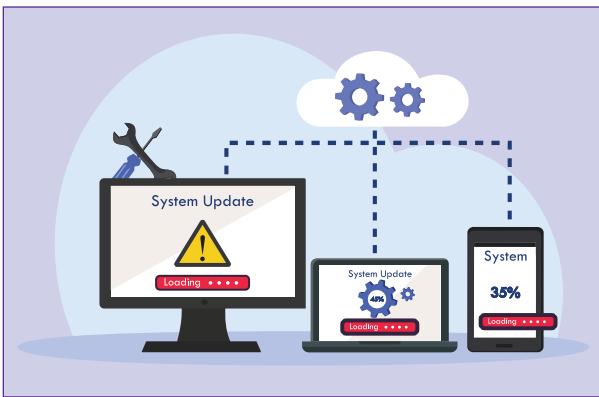
The ability to monitor your self-storage space and equipment using AI means you have real-time visibility into the health and performance of your facility. It's obviously beneficial for preventive maintenance, as described above; however it's also great for energy efficiency.

Energy-performance modules deliver detailed insights to your facility's energy consumption and production, allowing for effective analysis and optimization. In fact you can expect a 5% to 15% reduction in energy costs by implementing these tools and strategies. Calculate those savings across your self-storage portfolio, and you'll see that an investment in AI-powered technology can improve your business' bottom line.

## The Future

AI-driven platforms offer a comprehensive suite of capabilities that address various areas of self-storage management, offering significant cost savings and enhancing user satisfaction in an increasingly commoditized industry. While you may not feel this is a top priority, implementing AI technology is becoming essential to compete in today's competitive self-storage market. **ISS**

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# Choosing MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

**The burgers you saw** in a recent commercial looked so *good* that you actually hopped in your car and made the trip to buy what you saw on TV. But ... it was slop. Disappointing. And it turns out you weren't really in the mood for a burger anyway—at least not that one.

Powerful marketing can make even a cheap cheeseburger look delicious, and the same is true for self-storage management software. *Look how easy it is to use! Look at all the things it can do! Look at how affordable it is!* Next thing you know, you're a few thousand dollars poorer and stuck with a program that doesn't work—at least not in the way you need.

Choosing a software for your self-storage operation is a lot more important than buying a cheeseburger (though perhaps not as enjoyable). The specific one you need depends on the job at hand. There are features every facility-management program should have and others that only some operators will use. In this article, I'll cover the basics as well as advanced options to consider. I'll also discuss how to identify the program that's going to hit the spot and not leave you disgruntled.

## Basic Self-Storage Software Features

First, let's talk about the basics features to look for when purchasing self-storage management software. The most obvious is the ability to process unit rentals. Any program you buy should track your inventory, including which units are occupied and who is renting each. It should also work through your website or kiosk, though some older versions still require manager intervention. Here are a few other essentials:

### Customer-relationship management (CRM).

This feature allows you to keep track of each self-storage tenant, their contact information, what they've paid, what they still owe and other information. It's necessary to keep your business running smoothly and help you provide exceptional service. Most CRM modules can automatically send communication to customers, such as billing emails or payment-reminder texts.

**Communication.** Your self-storage software should allow you to send mass messages to your tenants, for example, a notice that your office will be closed on a holiday or a reminder that the parking lot is under repair on a certain day. You might also use this feature to send marketing promotions to prospective customers or referral reminders to existing renters.

**Billing.** You need a way to invoice your customers, and this is one of those tasks that computers can do much better than people. The automatic-billing feature within your self-storage management software ensures you never miss a beat.

**Payment processing.** This feature allows your customers to pay with a credit card or make automatic payments, which is good, as it's what they expect. Fair warning: Payment processing can be expensive. Vendors usually charge a percentage of the payment being processed as a fee. Though some self-storage management programs will allow you to choose your processor, in some cases, you'll be stuck with the one your provider chooses.

**Gate-access integration.** This software feature can save you headaches, especially if you offer online self-storage rentals, which you absolutely should. When a tenant rents a unit through your website or kiosk, you need a system in place to immediately send them a gate code. If they pay but can't access the facility, it's a terrible start to your relationship.

## Advanced Self-Storage Software Features

Once you've found a self-storage management software that includes all of the above basic features, you can start to look at more advanced options. Just don't shop for tools you don't actually *need* or won't actually use. Make sure you and your team are well-versed on the essentials before attempting to layer in new functionality. Depending on the size and complexity of your operation, the following features may be beneficial:

**Revenue management.** This feature is focused on setting rent rates for new and

existing self-storage tenants. It can create a huge boost in income! If you haven't raised your rates at least once per year, you may have tenants who are paying substantially less than what their unit is worth. A revenue-management module can also help you set and offer discounts, send rate-increase notices, and ensure all customers are on a level playing field.

**Lead management.** This self-storage software feature helps you turn prospects into paying tenants. Its main goal is to help managers follow up with people who've interacted with your business. Maybe you missed the customer's phone call or they submitted an inquiry through your website. However the communication took place, your lead-management module can greatly improve your conversion rate.

**Marketing-performance tracking.** If you're serious about taking your operation to the next level, you need a strong grasp on your marketing data. Some self-storage software programs can help you track the performance of your website, Google ads, direct mail and other campaigns, so you know which are working and which aren't. Digital efforts are easier to follow, but even offline marketing like billboards, signage and fliers can be monitored, especially if you use tracking phone numbers and landing pages. Knowing how much you're paying for each new tenant is vital. Software makes this easier.

## Choosing a Self-Storage Software Program

If you're looking to choose a management software for your self-storage facility, whether shopping for the first time or replacing an older program, ask yourself:

- What features are critical to my business?
- What features would be nice to have?
- Will those nice-to-have features actually be used?
- How easy will it be to train my team on the new software?

First, know your budget. How much can you afford to spend? If you really want some of the more advanced software features, know how

that impacts the cost, both during the initial purchase and down the road. Are there ongoing fees for service or support? If a feature would be “nice to have,” but the additional revenue it might generate won’t offset the cost, reconsider.

The best thing to do with any self-storage software program is *try it out!* Better yet, test a bunch of options simultaneously. Get the demo versions and do an assessment.

Make a list of operational tasks you and your self-storage team will need to execute often, such as renting a unit, taking a payment and selling retail products. Next, explore how each activity is accomplished through

every software candidate. This can help you understand how intuitive and user-friendly the various products are.

### Software That Meets Your Needs

Self-storage operators will sometimes get excited about a management software while they’re at a tradeshow, where the energy is high and vendors are showcasing their best product features. But in time, they may realize they don’t like the way the product is set up, it isn’t making facility operation any easier, or their team simply isn’t using it. This is why it’s important to take your time, do your research,

and make the choice that works best for you and your operation.

The most expensive self-storage software isn’t always the best, and the cheapest isn’t always the worst. You’re looking for a program that meets your business needs. If those are simple, get a simple software. If they’re more complex, you may need a tool to match.

Your self-storage management software needs to solve problems and make it easier to run your facility. If it doesn’t, it’s time for a change. **ISS**

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# More Software Advice



### For self-storage operators

to keep up in today’s fast-paced, cutthroat environment, it’s important to leverage management software that makes your facility more efficient and profitable. However, sifting through all the products on the market can be overwhelming. Below is basic advice to help you start your journey. We’ll look at software types and common features, new functionality emerging within the industry, and third-party integrations to consider. I’ll also walk you through criteria for weighing the options, so you can determine which software will best fit your business needs.

### Software Types and Common Features

Most of today’s self-storage software programs are web-based. This means the information is stored in the cloud instead of locally on a computer. One of the biggest advantages of these products is they can be accessed on almost any device from anywhere as long as you’re connected to the internet.

In contrast, a desktop application is installed directly on your machine and can usually only be accessed via that one device. This used to be the norm in the self-storage industry but is much less common now.

Following are the most prevalent functions of today’s self-storage management software. These are necessary no matter which platform you choose because they allow you to perform core business tasks such as renting units and collecting money, which are the lifeblood of an operation.

- Access-control connectivity
- Inventory management
- Online rentals
- Online payments and autopay
- Automatic late notices
- Sales of ancillary products and services
- Robust financial reporting

A current hot topic within the self-storage industry is fluid rate management, which is the ability to change street prices based on unit availability and competitor pricing. Many

of today’s software programs also allow you to adjust rents for existing tenants based on similar criteria and other trends. Some have the ability to do all of this for you automatically based on parameters you set. This can save quite a bit of time and ensures optimal profitability based on market conditions.

### New Features

Self-storage software suppliers are constantly adding new features to provide a better experience for facility operators and their tenants. For example, a recent innovation is contactless rentals that allow a customer to move in without the help of a manager. They can rent online, e-sign a lease agreement, and then receive move-in instructions and a gate access code via text or email.

Of course, not everyone pays their bill on time or keeps their account current. When a self-storage tenant becomes past-due, there are software systems that can manage the entire collections process for you. They identify delinquent tenants, then deny gate access or lock them out of their unit. Some will even

send delinquency notices via text and email, and place automated collections calls.

There are many more options available today, but not all of them are necessary for every self-storage facility. Just because a software program issues a new feature doesn't mean you need to implement it right away, either. When vetting products, discern which have the most functions you can use right away while considering future scalability.

### Third-Party Integrations

These days, self-storage management software is most effective when combined with additional products and services that help provide a complete customer experience. However, not all platforms integrate with all third-party options. Each software provider has their preferred partners. That said, when choosing a program, consider whether you'll be using any of the following:

- Automatic gates
- Smart locks
- Call center
- Security cameras or alarms
- Self-serve kiosk

Also, will you be selling any ancillaries such as retail merchandise, truck rentals, or tenant

insurance or protection programs? It's helpful to know which products and vendors you use or intend to use for the above, as those decisions can dictate which management software will work best. For example, if you plan to hire a call center, it's wise to check whether it has a formal integration with the platform you're considering or agents will need to access your system using a manager login, which isn't the most secure approach.

### Weighing Your Options

When comparing self-storage software solutions, do your homework. Conduct research and ask questions that are relevant to your operation. This requires more effort up front but will save you time and energy down the road.

One of the biggest mistakes self-storage operators make when looking for a facility-management software is being easily lured by flashy new features, which can be expensive and unnecessary. When evaluating your options, consider facility size, location, client demographics, site traffic and budget. A site in New York City will have different requirements than a small-town property in Southern Utah.

It's important to understand your target market and what your customers will be

most comfortable with when interacting with your business. A self-storage software feature might seem cool, but if the user experience is complicated or clunky, it could result in poor tenant experience. Instead, opt for those that make your life easier as the facility operator and enhance customer engagement.

Everything you purchase should go through a cost-benefit analysis. You can only charge so much for a self-storage unit based on your market, so finding a software that fits your budget is critical. Ask yourself, "What problem am I solving, and how will this allow me to be more efficient and profitable?" If the product you're considering can't deliver on at least one of those, it might not be worth the cost.

Purchasing a new self-storage software system should not be taken lightly. If you're switching from an existing program, the task can be particularly difficult and time-consuming because of the data that must be transferred and the integrations that must be set up. Ultimately, you'll be much happier in the long run if you take the time to match the right solution to your current needs and future goals. **ISS**

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# Wireless-Network Connectivity

**How's the network connectivity** at your self-storage site? Most facility operators tell me it's fine. If there's an internet connection and decent Wi-Fi in the management office, they figure that's all they really need. But the answers to the following questions quickly tell another story:

- Do your renters and employees feel safe when walking around the site at night?
- Do you know, in real time, if there's a problem in one of your units or public spaces?
- Do you ever miss sales opportunities because you're away from your office?
- Do your renters feel confident that their belongings are protected?

- Are renters able to use app-based amenities like mobile gate or unit access?

Those may not seem like network questions, but their answers can reveal gaps in wireless connectivity. Small annoyances like "VoIP call quality isn't great when I'm walking the site" are usually the tip of the

iceberg, indicating much bigger failures in the customer experience while restricting your ability to upgrade and modernize your facility.

### Defining Strong Network Connectivity

What does “good enough” network connectivity look like in a self-storage environment? There are a few key characteristics.

**The Wi-Fi reaches everywhere.** Your network should be free of blind spots in public areas and storage units. Self-storage sites are often at a natural disadvantage because the materials used for traditional construction, such steel and cinder block, are especially effective at blocking Wi-Fi. They also block 5G and LTE signals, so asking people to just use their cell service isn’t a good alternative.

#### Time-sensitive signals arrive

**consistently.** Having five bars of signal is one thing; getting crucial messages across is another. If many devices are simultaneously using the same network—VoIP phones, cameras, thermostats, sensors, smart locks, etc.—some information may be lost or delayed in transit as they all compete for bandwidth. The missing data can result in unintelligible VoIP calls, or leak-detection alerts showing up 10 minutes after a renter’s belongings begin to get soaked.

**The site is future-proofed with connectivity options.** Many smart-building solutions rely on alternative wireless technologies with better range and lower power requirements than Wi-Fi. However, most require specialized networking gear. If you’re planning to modernize your operation and improve your renter experience, you’ll need the right network infrastructure to support these protocols.

### Why Make the Investment?

You might be thinking, “Who cares if I have great Wi-Fi in my self-storage units?” That’s easy: your current and potential renters. In fact, according to research conducted by my company, more than 50% of customers are more likely to rent from a facility with strong Wi-Fi coverage, and more than 70% are more likely to choose one with in-unit cameras. While most renters haven’t experienced a storage-unit theft, many are concerned about the safety of their items and their personal safety while on site.

A strong Wi-Fi network is an important piece of the security puzzle, just like gated access and ample lighting. Knowing that you can always call for help—or text your

**66** A future-proofed wireless network with support for dedicated smart-device networks also enables you to offer next-generation renter experiences like app-based access or in-unit monitoring.

partner if you forgot which box they put the camping gear in—offers peace of mind that many self-storage tenants are currently missing.

A future-proofed wireless network with support for dedicated smart-device networks also enables you to offer next-generation renter experiences like app-based access or in-unit monitoring. These are features for which renters routinely say they are willing to pay extra, partly because they can use them to check their unit status from anywhere.

Your self-storage employees may be facing subconscious stressors as well. Many site managers tell me they hate conducting lock and door checks because it causes them to miss sales opportunities when they’re pulled into network dead zones. They’re also worried about their physical well-being and want the ability to call for help if needed. Frankly, your team shouldn’t risk their safety by investigating an alert or performing routine checks. With strong, sitewide network coverage, they can do their walk-throughs, validate alerts and call for appropriate responses without ever leaving the front office.

All of these efficiencies add up to cost savings and improved business transparency. Potentially damaging incidents get caught earlier, and rapid response reduces potential impact on your insurance premium and repair costs. One manager can effectively monitor more sites over a larger area. Renters are happy to return to your facility and repeatedly recommend it to others.

### How to Get a Better Network

If there are issues with your self-storage facility’s network connectivity, it doesn’t mean you need a new internet service provider (ISP). Your pipe to the outside world is probably fine. However, you might need to make sure that your network is robust enough to reach all parts of the property, not just the front of the store.

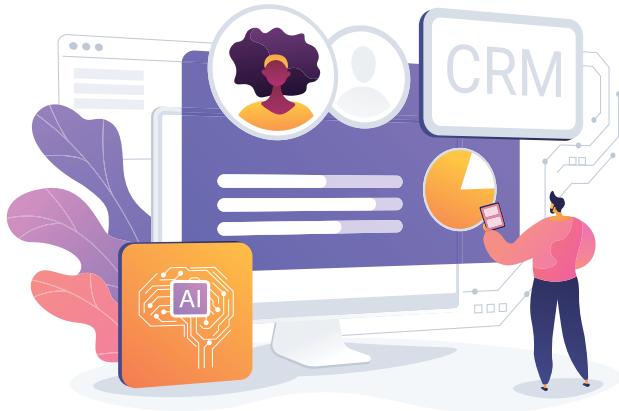
Generally, the goal of upgrading is to extend wireless connectivity and future-proof the network to support a variety of smart devices. That usually means deploying hubs and repeaters in strategic locations, so your signal receives a boost if it’s weakened by passing through a steel door or concrete wall. It’s critical to install the necessary infrastructure to support current and future technology. Make sure you know what protocols and platforms your current smart devices and subsystems use. You want to be sure your legacy systems are supported while considering your future goals.

A commercial network-services provider is an essential partner in this process. There are local area network (LAN) and information-technology (IT) service providers who specialize in creating site-wide wireless networks for commercial properties. However, self-storage facilities have unique characteristics.

Look for a provider who’s familiar with self-storage construction, multi-building and multi-story facilities, technology subsystems, and business models. Someone who’s part of the self-storage community will advise you better on what protocols and platforms you’re likely to need in the future. I highly recommend partnering with someone who can offer ongoing services and support, too, so you have a resource to help deploy and manage new technology systems as you adopt them.

When you think about whether your self-storage facility has adequate network coverage, consider more than the internet connection in the management office. Your wireless network should support efficient management practices as well as smooth, safe employee and customer experiences throughout the entire site. An upgrade can strengthen your connections and prepare your business for a smarter future. **ISS**

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# TODAY'S CRM SYSTEMS

**CRM (customer-relationship management) systems** have come a long way. Initially used for basic lead tracking, they've evolved to become must-have tools for self-storage operators who want to streamline their processes, enhance relationships with tenants and remain competitive. Today's systems don't just log data. They're crucial for delivering top-tier service, making informed decisions, and running a more efficient, technology-driven business.

As the demands of self-storage tenants and operators have grown, so has the need for integrated, customizable CRM systems that adapt to the nuances of our industry. Let's see how they're transforming facility operation.

## Seamless Integration

One of the biggest advantages of CRM technology is its ability to seamlessly integrate with your self-storage management software. This interconnectivity allows you to view all of your critical business data in one place, making life easier and reducing the time you would otherwise waste jumping between systems.

This isn't just a convenience, it's a game-changer. When a CRM is connected to your self-storage software, you can automate everything from lead tracking and tenant communications to payment reminders. By eliminating these manual tasks and reducing errors, you can spend more time focusing on what really matters: delivering a better customer experience.

## Customization and Personalization

A modern CRM system is fully customizable. This means you can tailor it to fit the unique needs of your self-storage business. Whether you want to create sales scripts for your onsite staff or branded templates for your customer communications, you can ensure that every tenant interaction reflects your company standards.

You can also handle routine tasks like answering customer inquiries or making payment follow-ups more efficiently, all while adding a personal touch. The result is a professional, consistent experience across all your self-storage locations. Your tenants will feel well taken care of, you'll maintain your brand integrity, and you'll improve operational efficiency.

## Omni-Channel Communication

Like customers in every other industry today, your self-storage tenants expect communication to be fast and seamless. In fact, my company recently learned just how important speedy customer service really is. In a recent survey, 83% of respondents identified it as a key factor when choosing a facility.

Your CRM system can now meet customers on their terms. In other words, it allows you to connect with them via their preferred channel, whether it's a phone call, email or text message. And the best part? It's all managed in one place.

For example, you can integrate your voice communications directly into the CRM, allowing you to log every call and keep records all in one platform. This means you never lose the thread of a conversation with a prospect or tenant, and follow-ups become effortless. There's no more juggling multiple tools or systems, just smooth, straightforward interactions that build trust with your customers.

## Smarter Decision-Making

A modern CRM system also provides data-driven insights that can drastically improve your self-storage business. It captures data across different channels, so you can track key performance metrics like lead conversions, tenant retention and operational efficiency.

This real-time data empowers you to make smarter decisions quickly, which is

especially important for a couple reasons as we approach the end of the year. First, the self-storage industry is becoming increasingly competitive, with a record number of facilities expected to open in 2025. Second, operators are preparing for an influx of new tenants as lowered interest rates finally encourage Americans to pack their bags and move.

So, if you notice a particular communication approach is leading to more successful sales conversions, you can implement it across other self-storage locations. Additionally, if the data reveals patterns in tenant behavior, you can use those insights to forecast occupancy trends and adjust your strategies. Ultimately, the more informed your decisions are, the better your business will perform.

## A Win-Win

As the self-storage landscape evolves, CRM technology has transitioned from being a nice-to-have to an absolute necessity. By integrating a system with your facility-management software, you're setting up your business for long-term growth. Automating routine tasks, keeping your brand messaging consistent, and managing communication across multiple channels creates benefits that extend to your business, staff and tenants.

A fully integrated and customizable CRM system can enhance your service, streamline your operation and keep your business competitive in a digital-first world. The future of self-storage lies in embracing these technologies, not just to stay relevant, but to deliver the seamless, customer-focused experiences that will define the industry's leaders for years to come. **ISS**

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# The **Positive Impact** of a **Mobile App**

## 2. Payments

The ability to collect rent from tenants is central to any self-storage operation. Allowing customers to pay via a mobile app adds convenience and reduces friction. It also takes cash and payment cards out of the hands of your onsite staff, minimizing human error and potential risk. In fact, it removes cash from the equation altogether.

An app-based system makes the payment process faster and more efficient. Not only does it facilitate situations in which a tenant is locked out and frustrated due to delinquency, it means rent can be paid at any time, even when the office is closed.

## 3. Move-Outs

A move-out feature is another great customer convenience, as many people avoid in-person and phone communication these days. Tenants will appreciate being able to notify you of their intent to vacate their self-storage unit on the mobile app. It can facilitate things for your managers, too. It helps minimize miscommunication and eliminate instances of no communication.

## 4. Activity Monitoring

Whether you own or manage a single self-storage facility or multiple locations, the ability to view gate activity via your app can be extremely helpful. An activity log lets you see when tenants entered the property and the access code they used. If a tenant calls and says they've entered their code three times but the gate won't open, you can check the log in real time to troubleshoot the issue remotely.

## 5. Access Control

A feature that allows tenants to open the facility gate via their phone is one of the most sought after options for a self-storage mobile app. Mobile access allows traffic to flow quickly and safely onto the property. No longer do drivers of large vehicles like RVs or moving trucks need to hop out to use the keypad, which is often positioned to accommodate a standard car window. You never want a large vehicle or trailer extending into the street and potentially obstructing traffic. An app helps minimize this risk.

## 6. Feedback

Another solid option to include on a self-storage mobile app is the ability for customers to report an issue or share feedback. What happens if your gate fails to open, or someone has trouble using your kiosk or getting into their unit? Unfortunate incidents can occur on any property, and staff should be made aware of them as soon as possible. Allowing tenants to report problems quickly and easily through an app can be a saving grace. After all, they're often the first to know! This is especially true at remotely managed sites.

## Building Your App

When seeking to create a mobile app for your self-storage operation, start by compiling a list of features you'd like it to include. Consider conveniences and functions for customers as well as ownership and staff. Next, search the web for providers to find a solution that matches your needs.

As you examine potential vendors, take note of their customer service and inquire about their tech support. Look for ones whose platform will integrate with your existing facility-management software. Further, read their online reviews. Users will often comment when they're frustrated or upset, or when they're particularly impressed with a company or product.

Additional research can be conducted by attending tradeshows like the annual **Inside Self-Storage World Expo** in Las Vegas, where industry suppliers showcase their products, offer demonstrations and answer customer questions. There's no better place to connect with other operators who can share their experiences and point you in the right direction.

No technology is perfect, but the pros of adding a mobile app to your self-storage service mix outweigh the cons. It'll quickly increase brand awareness, create more appeal for your business and personalize the customer experience. It can even be used as a new marketing channel. Most of all, an app will enable faster and more secure rentals and payments and help take the load off of your onsite management team. **ISS**

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## Mobile-app use has become

commonplace for consumers. Today we use apps to shop, make reservations, read news, bank, monitor our health, communicate with friends and much, much more. So, why not consider developing an app for your self-storage prospects and tenants? As technology evolves, facility operators must adapt, particularly if new tools can streamline property management and optimize the rental and move-in process for customers.

In essence, mobile apps should be designed to make life easier for business operators and users. When built correctly, they drive sales, enhance convenience, bolster service and ease staff workload. Let's look at six specific ways an app could positively impact your self-storage facility.

## 1. Rentals

We live in a largely contactless world, and customers frequently want to conduct business remotely. When it comes to self-storage, they often want to rent a unit online and even move in on the same day. Good news! You can configure your self-storage mobile app to show them available inventory and rent units. Users can choose their space, e-sign a lease and get a facility access code, all without having to call or visit the facility.

This enhances user convenience and speeds up the move-in process, but it also helps you capture more sales leads and frees up managers' time to handle other responsibilities. It's particularly appealing for locations that don't regularly have staff on site.



# Smart-Lock Technology

## In this era of rapidly advancing

technology, self-storage operators have been presented with a transformative opportunity to switch from traditional unit locks and keys to "smart" products. The legacy systems that have long secured units are finally giving way to intelligent, connected solutions that not only bolster security but enhance operational efficiency.

Smart locks provide a seamless experience for operators and tenants. They offer monitoring and tracking features, access to customer data, and streamlined management via mobile applications. As the desires and demands of modern consumers evolve, particularly those of younger demographics, operators who embrace this technology will position themselves for long-term success. In fact, this new level of convenience, innovation and heightened security will ultimately redefine the self-storage landscape.

## Lock Types and Key Benefits

Self-storage smart locks use Bluetooth, WiFi or NFC (near-field communication) to enable secure access control. They connect with authorized devices (typically smartphones) to authenticate users through encrypted communication, then grant or deny access based on predefined permissions. You already use many of these technologies in everyday life, for example, when you wirelessly connect to a printer via WiFi, sync to CarPlay with Bluetooth or use "tap to pay" in a store.

A smart lock can come in one of a few forms: a battery-operated or hardwired latch, a Bluetooth or battery-operated padlock, or an NFC padlock, cylinder lock and latch. Whichever style you choose, you and your staff and tenants will enjoy a host of benefits:

- Tenants no longer need to carry or keep track of a physical key.
- There's no more concern about lost keys, which can easily be copied and pose a security risk.
- Facility managers no longer need to cut locks on past-due units.
- Staff can track who accessed units and when, which enhances security and provides valuable insight to tenant activities.
- Tenants can manage unit access through a user-friendly mobile app, which simplifies their experience and ensures a higher level of security.
- Smart locks eliminate the possibility that a tenant will move into the wrong space or a manager will auction the wrong unit.

The transition to smart locks in self-storage isn't just a technological upgrade, it's a strategic move toward a safer, more streamlined and customer-centric business. To help you fully grasp the impact, let's look at how to implement a successful transition at your property.

## Making the Transition

The first step in transitioning to self-storage smart locks is to research and select the

product that best aligns with your security requirements and operational needs. When contacting vendors, request a full demo and introduction to get a clear sense for how the technology will work on your property, including any software integration.

Once you find a product you believe will work, implementation typically begins with a pilot program or small-scale deployment to assess functionality and gather user feedback. If you'd like to move forward following a successful trial, a broader rollout will ensue to install the locks across all applicable units and locations.

By working with your vendor, you might be able to pursue a slower, phased approach in which you start the transition by assigning smart locks only to empty units and issue them as you gain new rentals. This allows you to practice the new move-in process to get up to speed rather than onboarding all units at once.

Cost will depend on your vendor and product; however, solutions typically have a monthly subscription fee to cover all backend reporting and the mobile application. For NFC padlocks and cylinder locks, expect to pay about \$45 per unit. For systems with Bluetooth latches, the entire hasp is required, which can run upward of \$300 per door, plus setup fees.

Strategic planning and effective communication will provide the foundation for a successful transition with minimal disruption. Overall, the timeline for a smart-lock conversion can vary based on the size of the self-storage facility and the complexity of the system. Most projects can be completed within a few months. Don't rush it! You want to ensure there's a smooth and effective adoption of the product.

Start by providing ample, advance notice to tenants, typically one to three months before implementation. Highlight the benefits of the change, along with the expected timeline, and give clear instructions on the new access procedures.

In addition, conduct thorough staff training to ensure a smooth rollout and responsive customer service. To create as little friction as possible, seriously consider your support channels. Perhaps create a helpline to promptly address tenant queries and issues.

Maintaining open communication throughout the process, keeping tenants informed about milestones, and ensuring their input is considered and shared with staff will pave the way for a smooth transition. This proactive and considerate approach will foster a positive experience for all involved.

## Be Prepared

As with all technology, there will be kinks and sometimes failures to work through when

you implement smart locks at your self-storage facility. It's critical to tackle and overcome issues as they arise. Again, tenants must have clear channels for reporting problems and seeking assistance. Staff should know how to effectively help customers as well as how to troubleshoot common glitches.

Schedule regular maintenance on your smart locks and use digital reporting to stay proactive.

Dealing with potential issues promptly will go a long way toward ensuring customer satisfaction. Also, stay informed regarding technology updates to ensure your systems are up-to-date.

Smart locks aren't going away. The trajectory of access control in self-storage points toward even more sophisticated and integrated solutions. To prepare your facility for the future, now's the time to consider an

upgrade. If you take the time to consider your options and select the solution that best fits your needs, you'll be poised to satisfy tenant needs and stay ahead of your competition. **ISS**

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# Using Camera and Software Data

## Collecting and analyzing data

isn't just a matter of convenience today; it's a strategic imperative. It's about transforming raw information into actionable insights that empower us to make informed business decisions, optimize processes and seize opportunities.

In the ever-evolving self-storage industry, embracing technology and harnessing the power of data is essential for long-term success. It not only offers unparalleled efficiency and accuracy, it yields insight that allows us to adapt and innovate.

As facility operators, we aren't just custodians of physical space but vast amounts of information regarding customer activity and behavior. The key is to untap its potential to drive our business forward. However, it isn't enough to simply collect data; we have to actively observe key metrics and trends to uncover hidden opportunities and address potential challenges. By keeping a vigilant eye on relevant data points such as occupancy and rental rates, foot traffic, customer demographics, and unit turnover, we can comprehensively understand our facility performance and identify areas for improvement.

Moreover, technological advancements have made data collection and analysis easier and more efficient than ever. Through effective monitoring, we can equip ourselves with the knowledge to make informed decisions, optimize resource allocation and drive sustainable growth in our self-storage operations. Let's look specifically at what we can accomplish when we gather and analyze data through remote-management software and smart surveillance cameras.

## Uncovering Facility Intel

If your self-storage facility uses smart cameras, you can pull raw data regarding human movement throughout the property.

Strategically placed devices in parking lots and offices allow an even clearer understanding of who's visiting your site and when. You can customize alerts for suspicious activity, license-plate recognition, activity during certain times of day, etc. The list is outstanding, and the potential for curating a custom security system is endless.

Remote-management software is another technologically advanced tool that takes self-storage operation to the next level. Not to be confused with traditional facility-management programs, this software integrates with smart cameras to pull that coveted customer data. It can log foot traffic, conversion rates, capture rates and more.

## What the Data Facilitates

By using a combination of smart cameras and remote-management software, you can have eyes on your self-storage facility at all times, but there are many other advantages. By analyzing historical data such as rental trends, access-control activity, seasonal fluctuations and tenant demographics, you can:

- Generate significant insight to human movement through web-based platforms and mobile apps, thus allowing for proactive vs. reactive responses to tenant issues and suspicious behavior
- Understand customer behavior, preferences and demand drivers
- Provide immediate feedback to property managers and review operational inefficiencies in real time
- Identify recurring patterns and behaviors among your customers and even market conditions
- Forecast future demand and anticipate market trends



Perhaps most importantly, harvesting and studying your self-storage operational data allows you to make continuous improvements. This is an ongoing process through which you can evolve in response to changing market dynamics. By regularly monitoring key metrics and analyzing trends around foot traffic, conversions rates and customer communication, you can assess performance and identify opportunities for innovation, ensuring your business remains agile and competitive in the long term. For example, you might use it to:

- Adjust hours of operation and manage staff scheduling
- Make informed decisions about pricing, marketing and more
- Uncover patterns to forecast future outcomes

The goal is to turn your data insights into actionable strategies that benefit your self-storage business as well as its staff and tenants. As the industry landscape evolves, collecting and analyzing your operational information creates a strategic advantage. It can result in compelling, positive outcomes, particularly for those who are embracing smart cameras and other remote-management solutions. **ISS**

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# Using IoT in Site Maintenance

## Protecting the optimal physical

condition of your self-storage property is a constant challenge, particularly when you have multiple sites. Technology offers new ways to streamline maintenance tasks, reduce costs and keep facilities in top shape. It also allows you to be proactive rather than reactive, which means you avoid unnecessary stress and expense.

By using Internet of things (IoT) sensors and other devices that connect to a centralized monitoring platform to provide data-driven insights, you can proactively address maintenance issues before they escalate and become major problems. Let's explore six ways you can use technology to improve the condition of your self-storage site, so it looks better, functions better and is safer all around.

## Centralized Management

If you manage multiple self-storage sites, you need a maintenance-management platform that can gather and display data from various smart devices and sensors across all facilities. This should provide a comprehensive view of maintenance needs so you can prioritize tasks efficiently. A good platform will come with a unified dashboard that shows important data and urgent needs in real time. This information allows you to quickly identify issues, like a malfunctioning heating or cooling system or a water leak, allowing you to respond faster.

A centralized maintenance system also enables you to schedule maintenance tasks so nothing gets missed. With the right technology integrations, you can also view error messages and troubleshoot problems remotely, then send a technician with the right knowledge and tools to fix the problem. This reduces the need for site visits, minimizes travel costs and enhances operational efficiency. You can quickly verify from anywhere that all properties are being maintained according to your expectations.

## Predictive Maintenance

Predictive maintenance is essential for smooth, continuous self-storage operation. Use IoT sensors to track environmental conditions (temperature, humidity, leaks) and equipment performance, so you can identify problems like mold, corrosion and structural damage before

they lead to serious problems. For example, smart HVAC units, gates and elevators provide important information about their status and performance. This allows you to detect early signs of wear or malfunction, so you can prevent unexpected failures and extend equipment life.

## Energy Management and Cost Savings

One of the key benefits of using an IoT-enabled maintenance platform in a self-storage environment is the ability to monitor and manage energy use, so you can reduce your power bill and minimize wear and tear on equipment. For example, you might notice that your HVAC unit is using more energy than expected, which might indicate that maintenance is required. By addressing issues early, you can prevent failures, reduce energy costs and enhance operational efficiency.

Smart HVAC technology can automatically adjust self-storage facility temperature and humidity based on building occupancy, reducing the hours the unit runs and the amount of energy consumed. This lessens the strain on equipment, leading to longer service intervals and a longer lifespan. By leveraging real-time usage data, the IoT system can even optimize your maintenance schedule.

## Automated Workflow

Automation is a powerful tool for streamlining maintenance workflow, reducing the time burden on self-storage staff and ensuring that critical tasks aren't missed. Today's systems can initiate work based on sensor alerts. For example, an IoT-connected pest trap can automatically generate a work order to guarantee the trap is inspected and emptied. This reduces manual oversight and ensures issues are addressed promptly, preventing unnecessary labor while keeping the facility sanitary and safe. Here are a few other examples:

- Smart locks can automate daily tasks like manual lock checks.
- Smart cameras and sensors can simplify inspections of hard-to-reach or frequently overlooked areas, such as rooftops or perimeter fencing.

- AI-enabled cameras can automatically identify deteriorating physical conditions that need attention, such as roof damage, debris buildup or exterior wear, eliminating the need for manual checks.

## Security Monitoring

Site security is a top priority in self-storage. Thankfully, IoT sensors can monitor your gates, fencing and other perimeter features, providing real-time alerts about malfunctions or physical damage to this critical infrastructure.

Sensors installed on access gates and fencing can detect physical damage, unauthorized access attempts or operational failure. They trigger alerts that help you promptly address security concerns, ensuring the perimeter remains intact. This proactive approach minimizes the risk of breaches and liability and reduces the need for emergency repairs.

In-unit smart cameras are becoming popular. The peace of mind they provide is so valued that many customers are willing to buy and install the equipment themselves and pay a subscription fee for real-time access to the data. This allows facility operators to generate new revenue and provides a network of sensors and cameras that can generate real-time alerts about issues affecting specific units.

## Data-Driven Decision-Making

Analyzing data from IoT sensors allows you to identify and prevent recurring issues, such as equipment that frequently requires repair or areas of the self-storage roof that consistently leaks. These insights allow you to proactively adjust your maintenance schedule while focusing resources on high-priority tasks.

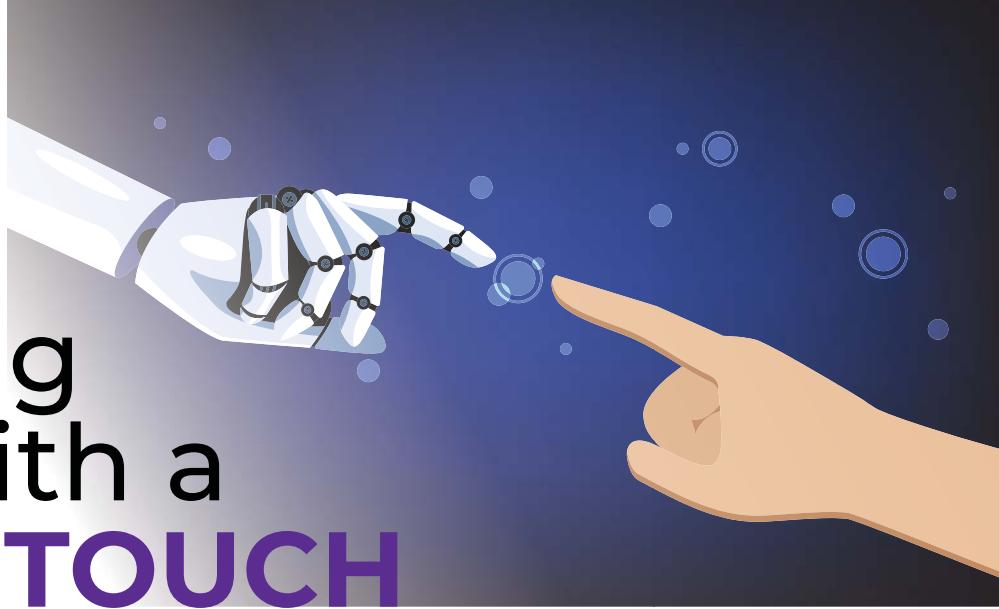
Continuous monitoring of your smart devices also ensures that maintenance activities meet safety and compliance standards, reducing the risk of fines or injuries. By tracking performance data, you can ensure that all your self-storage facilities comply with regulatory requirements, protecting your assets and business reputation.

## Maintenance for the Future

Using smart, connected IoT devices is the next frontier in self-storage operation. A unified, technology-abled management platform helps you keep your property in excellent condition while reducing costs, minimizing downtime and enhancing efficiency. These tools and strategies enable you to sustain high standards across your portfolio and ensure that your facilities remain safe, attractive and well-functioning. Embracing these technologies is essential for modernizing and future-proofing your self-storage business in a competitive market. **ISS**

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# Balancing TECH With a HUMAN TOUCH



**Technological innovation has become** a necessity and an opportunity within the self-storage industry. From online rentals and mobile apps to customer support powered by artificial intelligence (AI), digital transformation has left its mark on the way facility operators attract, serve and retain customers.

But even as technology advances and its use grows, the fact remains: Personal, human interactions are still extremely important in business. In fact, my company's latest "Tenant Insights Report" illustrates this, revealing how self-storage customers crave personal connection even as they embrace digital conveniences.

Users of self-storage increasingly expect the same frictionless, digitally enabled experiences they enjoy as consumers of other products and services. However, storing one's prized possessions and navigating life transitions often carries great emotional weight. Because of this, facility operators need skilled employees working alongside technology to meet customer needs effectively.

## The Enduring Value of Personal Touch

Data clearly shows that while self-storage tenants want helpful technology, they also greatly value personal attention. According to our survey, 80% of them say that technology such as online-booking tools and mobile apps are at least "somewhat important" when selecting a facility; but 83% say that having access to good customer service is a key deciding factor when choosing where to store. Technology alone isn't enough. Customers expect responsive support teams and personalized service along with the digital conveniences. They want the best of both worlds.

Further highlighting the importance of human touchpoints, 32% of self-storage tenants prefer getting assistance in person

when they need help with their unit; and 80% say that having a facility manager on site is at least somewhat important. The reassuring presence of staff members remains highly valuable, even in today's digital age. Customers want to know there are real people available to help them and keep things running smoothly. A property manager provides a sense of security and trust that's challenging to replicate with technology alone.

## Bridging the Digital-Human Divide

So, how can self-storage operators strike the right balance between innovation and a personal touch? The answer lies in leveraging technology as an enabler, not a replacement, for human interaction and service excellence.

By embracing digital tools that automate routine tasks and streamline processes, you can liberate your staff to focus on delivering exceptional, personalized customer experiences. For instance, remote-monitoring systems and digital access control can alleviate the burden of manual security checks, freeing managers to engage more meaningfully with tenants and address complex inquiries or concerns.

Similarly, AI-powered chatbots and online knowledge bases can serve as initial triage points, handling straightforward queries and freeing human support teams to concentrate on escalations that require nuanced, empathetic responses. Ultimately, the key is to create a symbiotic relationship between technology and human interaction, where digital tools augment and amplify the personal touch rather than supplant it altogether.

## Personalization: The New Service Battleground

In a market where 69% of customers cite price as a "very important" factor in their business choice, differentiation through exceptional service becomes paramount.

This is where the personal touch can be a game-changer, enabling operators to elevate the self-storage experience beyond mere transactional interactions.

By leveraging data-driven insights and harnessing the power of technology, you can tailor your services to individual needs, preferences and life stages. For instance, our report indicates that 43% of tenants are considering a move within the next year, while 18% seek storage solutions for downsizing, and 13% need space to adapt to lifestyle changes like starting a family or retirement. Armed with such insights, you can proactively offer personalized solutions, tailored communication and targeted promotions that resonate with each tenant's unique circumstances. This level of attentiveness and anticipation of needs can foster deeper connections and enduring loyalty, differentiating your business in a crowded market.

## The Path Forward

As the self-storage industry navigates the intersections of technological disruption and evolving customer expectations, it remains clear: The personal touch isn't a relic of the past but a vital component of future success. By seamlessly integrating cutting-edge digital capabilities with human-centric service models, you can unlock new realms of operational efficiency, customer satisfaction and competitive advantage.

The road ahead will require a delicate balancing act, continually refining the harmonious interplay between technology and human touch. Self-storage operators who master this equilibrium won't only meet the demands of today's customers but will position themselves as leaders in shaping the industry experience of tomorrow. **ISS**

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# Why Outsourcing Makes Sense



**When Tim Davis, owner** of American Storage in Helena, Montana, decided he was ready to transition from a career in construction to self-storage, he had a clear vision for how he wanted to structure his new venture. He recognized that a successful operation has many moving parts, and a facility operator must juggle them all. However, he wanted to do as little of that himself as possible.

"My whole goal 17 years ago was to have a business where I didn't need any employees," Davis says. "The target from the beginning was to have a business I could operate remotely by outsourcing as much as possible. I don't want to be on a lawnmower or snowplow. I want to rent storage units and take payments."

Davis does more than just those two tasks, but he's built his organization so that he doesn't have to do *much* more. He also focuses his time on updating the company website, managing local marketing and, most importantly, answering every phone call. Everything else is outsourced, especially any physical maintenance or repairs and his digital marketing.

Thanks to outsourcing, Davis has seen his vision become a reality. The business that began with one self-storage facility and 165 units has since expanded to three locations with 1,060 units, all while remaining a one-man operation.

"I'm a firm believer in automation and have been since the start," Davis says. "When I only had one facility, I was never on site. Now, I hire the same people to take care of all three."

That's the elegance of outsourcing. While the concept is the same for self-storage operators of all sizes, there's endless flexibility in how you apply it to meet the specific needs of your business.

## Why Consider It

One of the biggest challenges for all self-storage operators, regardless of company size, is deciding how to allocate limited time and resources, especially when you're being pulled in multiple directions. Juggling

everything required to run a successful facility can feel like walking on a treadmill. Yes, you'll continually make progress, but there's no actual end. Real estate investment trusts and other large players often have dedicated departments or teams to oversee specific areas, but smaller operators may not have enough staff or the skills to manage them successfully.

Outsourcing can be the solution by freeing you and your team to focus on the most important tasks that allow your business to flow efficiently and generate more revenue. By hiring an outside expert to cover an aspect of your operation that you are ill-equipped or disinclined to manage, you oil the wheels to turn more smoothly.

"Outsourcing is anything that you can't handle in-house between ownership or employees along with whatever tasks your employees can't complete because of time, money or skillset," says Alex Erbs, vice president of business development at The Storage Mall Management Group, which operates 60 locations in the Midwest and Northeast. "This may be a specific task, something that's performed daily for the operations of the facility, or anything that's not specifically contracted to another group."

While certain functions are essential, wearing too many hats can limit your ability to develop your self-storage business strategically. Outsourcing can address vulnerabilities and fill critical gaps. Bringing in an outside vendor allows you to tap into their expertise and resources. They can often complete the job more efficiently, plus they'll be well-versed in legal and compliance issues.

Just be aware that there can be pitfalls. While your hired partner might be great at what they do, they likely won't care as much about your self-storage facility as you do. Pricing should always be a concern, as should the level of service provided.

"I feel, generally, if you choose the right vendor, the pros will far outweigh the cons," says Adam Gray, sales center manager for

Guardian Storage, which operates 37 locations. "You're dealing with professionals who do these things every day and are less likely to make a mistake."

## Opportunities Abound

The list of jobs that you can outsource on behalf of your self-storage operation is long and diverse. Whether it's for the interior or exterior, seasonal or daily, operational or physical, your choice for what you hire out is extensive. Some of the most common choices include:

- Accounting
- Call answering (call center)
- Cleaning
- Collections
- Credit card processing
- Digital marketing
- Human resources
- Landscaping
- Maintenance and repairs
- Pest control
- Property management
- Snowplowing
- Website administration

Depending on the needs and structure of your company, you might also seek assistance with:

- Budgeting
- Business development
- Data analysis
- Financial auditing
- Investor relations
- Market expansion
- Security monitoring
- Social media

"We outsource gardening and unit cleaning," says Kris Fetter, senior manager at A Storage Place, which operates 38 locations in Arizona, California and Colorado. "Many of our facilities are so large, they can't have managers pulling weeds, cleaning units, spraying for bugs and not be in the office. We would be outdoors for hours, and we can't do that and answer phones."

## When to Leverage It

So, when does outsourcing make the most sense for your self-storage business? Once you've recognized the need for help, there are many things to ask yourself:

- Are you leaving money on the table, or do you put more value on doing the things you love?
- Do you need all the revenue from the asset to live, or can you reinvest it into the company?
- Are you funding a lifestyle with your revenue instead of putting it back into the business, so it can operate better and grow?
- Are you a control freak who struggles to delegate responsibilities because only you can do them perfectly?
- Can you sustain the current pace at which you're working, or do you risk burnout?
- Would outsourcing smaller tasks free you up for bigger items like business development or seeking new investment opportunities?

Small self-storage operators struggle with not having the bandwidth to handle all the necessary tasks and lacking the budget to outsource as many as they'd like. There either aren't enough hours in the day or money in the bank.

"If you're not sure if you can afford to outsource or are hesitant to dive in, just get a taste and find out," Erbs says. "Maybe just hire someone part-time or have a short-term agreement with a vendor. You can always unwind a third-party relationship and go back to how things were done beforehand."

Sometimes the decision comes down to the level of involvement the self-storage owner wants to have or their business goals. Many want to focus on acquisitions and growth, so they hire a third-party management company to oversee daily operation. Others have full-time jobs outside the industry and invest in storage on the side, which means they don't have time to look after the facility. In some cases, a property is so small, the owner is OK with getting their hands dirty.

Outsourcing might also make sense to avoid legal pitfalls such tax laws, human resources and auctions. This is especially true if you own facilities in multiple states where regulations may vary. Ultimately, hiring an expert in a field may be the better choice vs. saving a couple of dollars by doing it yourself.

"Make sure if you do something on your own that you have the knowledge to do it correctly," Gray says. "There are times when outsourcing is needed, especially if you're growing fast. Otherwise, ask if this is something you can do yourself or does a vendor make a good case that they can do it better and it makes sense budget- and time-wise."

## Psychological Barriers

Some self-storage owners are simply reluctant to give up some control of their business. This can be true for several reasons:

- Entrepreneurs often have a deep emotional investment in their assets. They may fear that by outsourcing, they'll lose regulation over important aspects of their business.
- They may have a perfectionist mindset and believe they're the only ones who can complete tasks to their lofty standards.
- For some owners, a company isn't just a source of income but a reflection of their identity. Outsourcing may feel like they're relinquishing a part of themselves.
- There may be trust issues or fear about losing control over time management and experiencing a disruption to their workday.
- A lack of understanding about the benefits of outsourcing or how to effectively integrate it into their business can also lead to resistance.

Overcoming these psychological barriers requires a shift in mindset. Building trust in others, setting clear expectations and focusing on the long-term benefits can help you gradually relinquish control and empower your entity to grow.

When making the final decision, the primary focus should be on your self-storage customers. Do what you must so you can follow through on leads. Ask yourself if a task will take you away from the phone or desk. Is your company structured so you can work on it instead of *in* it?

## Vetting Vendors

It's one thing to decide to outsource a job, it's another to find the right vendor to do it. You likely performed due diligence before you purchased your self-storage facility. You should do the same when hiring an outside expert.

"When you are vetting a vendor, there are three questions to keep in mind," says Jeanne Dotson, marketing manager for The Storage Group, a digital marketing and software firm. "Do they have a proven track record of success? Do they have a deep understanding of the self-storage industry? Do they have the tools and services you need at your storage facility?"

Start by reading the candidate's Google reviews, then consult the Better Business Bureau or your local chamber of commerce. There's also good old-fashioned word-of-mouth.

"If you have a question, talk to other local owners, especially if you're a new owner," Erbs says. "There are usually one or two key vendors who work with a lot of facilities in the area. Some owners may not answer you, but most will."

Once you select a possible vendor, there are important questions to ask. Approach it as if you're hiring a new self-storage staff member. Clearly communicate the definition of when a job is complete as well as fees and contract terms. Ask how they follow up to ensure a job was done correctly and the process they follow if it wasn't. What serves as proof of results? Perhaps inspect a job in person to see how things look. If the provider can't answer your questions, it's a red flag.

Finally, if you're outsourcing a service to a company for which they'll need access to your sensitive company or tenant information, make sure they don't work with your competitors. Ultimately, trust your gut. If all is satisfactory and you decide to hire them, get everything in writing.

"If you plan on being in business for many years, you're going to want to have vendors you can rely on," Gray says.

## A Successful Partnership

A successful relationship between a self-storage operator and their outsourced vendor comes down to two things: accountability and communication. Having providers who perform their jobs the way you expect—and respond appropriately if they don't—is vital. Put checks and balances in place. For example, your pest-control provider or landscaper will typically have a personalized gate code that can be tracked. Make sure your digital marketer provides analytics to show how their campaigns are impacting the bottom line.

Follow-up and transparency are also key. Establish a system for effective communication from the very beginning. This can be as simple as text messaging, emailing photos of a completed job or making monthly calls.

Finally, make sure there's a clear understanding of the tasks at hand and a mutual understanding of expectations. Don't be afraid to ask questions about job status and quality.

"If the vendor knows *you're* paying attention, then *they'll* pay attention," Gray says. "If they never hear from you, they assume everything is running smoothly, even if it isn't."

## Final Advice

Continue to learn what you can about outsourcing within the self-storage industry, so you know the questions to ask and that you're receiving fair pricing. Learn enough about the service you're hiring to make sure the job is done correctly and you aren't being fleeced.

"My message to smaller operators would be don't be afraid to let other people do all the work," Davis says. "Focus on the most

important parts of your facility, which is getting new tenants and collecting revenue."

If you're still on the fence, it's important to recognize the value of seeking help and delegating. Even the most capable leaders need assistance to manage their responsibilities.

In essence, working on your self-storage business means being proactive rather than reactive. It's about prioritizing tasks that'll have a significant impact on the growth and success of your operation in the long run, rather than just keeping things running

in the short term. It involves leveraging resources effectively to maximize efficiency and productivity. **ISS**

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# Working With Vendors and Contractors

**At some point, every self-storage operator** will need to hire an outside vendor or contractor for repairs or monthly services such as landscaping or pest control. There might also be times when significant renovations or replacements are necessary. You never want to risk these jobs by retaining an unlicensed, uninsured company, even if they are the cheapest by far. If a problem occurs, you'll regret your choice! Instead, follow the below guidelines for choosing and vetting partners and establishing a positive work relationship that'll benefit both companies.

## The Search

When hiring a third party to handle snow removal, elevator maintenance, lawn mowing or other services or projects that are commonly needed in self-storage, get at least three estimates. Remember, cheaper isn't always best. In fact, a low bid could mean the company missed something and their quote is incomplete. Some companies simply charge more than others, but if you're seeing dramatic fluctuations in price from different candidates for the same work, something is wrong and you need to dig deeper. The last thing you want is to start a job and find out along the way that expensive change orders are required.

A good place to start is to reach out to your state self-storage association for referrals, or ask other facility operators in your area about the vendors and contractors they've used successfully. I've found this exercise yields a lot of information about the good, bad and the ugly.

## The Evaluation

Once you have a solid list of potential providers, thoroughly vet each one. The most

important thing is to verify that they are licensed and have insurance.

Verify that a vendor's license is current and request a copy. If applicable, contact the register of contractors in your state or the Better Business Bureau to see if any complaints were filed against the license and whether those disputes were resolved. If you see multiple grievances, that's a red flag. Avoid these companies.

In addition, ask for a certificate of insurance, coverage amounts and evidence of workers' compensation. If the company refuses to provide this information or doesn't have it, move on. It isn't worth the risk. This is especially true if the company doesn't carry workers' comp. I'd rather pay a little more than risk being sued by a contractor who injures themselves on my self-storage site and has no insurance. If any of this is unclear, contact your insurance carrier for guidance.

Also, request references from each vendor and actually *contact them*. Ask about the quality of the provider's work and product, if they showed up on time, and whether they were adept at complaint resolution. Look for potential workmanship or performance issues. If you can, see real-life examples of the company's work, as that's the best way to know their capabilities. For example, if you're seeking a new landscaper, drive by other sites it services and see whether the curb appeal is up to your standards.

Once you decide to move forward with a vendor or contractor, ask it to add your self-storage company to its insurance policy as an additional insured. This guarantees that if there's an issue and a claim is necessary, your business and site will be covered. This is especially critical for a large project like exterior or unit-door painting, asphalt, or any remodeling.

## The Contract

Before signing any service agreement, read it word for word. If it contains anything you don't understand, consult your attorney. Unscrupulous companies are notorious for roping business operators into multi-year contracts. Others layer in easy-to-miss renewal clauses.

When possible, hire local. It not only supports your community, it's easier to build a positive business relationship. Furthermore, a smaller, private company may be more flexible in its policies than a large, national chain.

As a savvy self-storage operator keeping on top of your expenses, you want to negotiate the best possible contract terms. For example, consider cancellation. Any service contract you sign for your business should include a 30-day cancellation clause that allows you to withdraw with or without cause. You want to be able to get out of the contract for any reason, whether it's non-performance of the vendor, dissatisfaction with their work or a better price available elsewhere. If the provider pushes back on this request or insists on a cancellation penalty, move on.

Finally, get a guarantee of workmanship and materials in the contract, so there are no misunderstandings.

## Payments

There are also best practices to follow when it comes to paying any contractor that does work at your self-storage facility. I'm not talking about service providers you hire for simple tasks like mowing grass and shoveling snow. In this case, I'm referring to large projects that require a down payment.

First, never give a contractor a down payment of more than a 50% at contract signing. The balance should be paid upon completion and

inspection of the work. If your job is large, there may be additional scheduled payments. Once you've negotiated these with your contractor, pay on time and in the agreed upon amounts. Just don't render the *final* payment until the work is finished and both parties are satisfied with the outcome. In fact, some self-storage operators use project timing of completion in the contract to guarantee a finish date.

Be wary of any contractor who offer you a discount to make additional, non-stipulated payments before project completion. A contractor often has to pay for materials, labor and other supplies out of their own pocket to keep a job going while they await final payment. If they're putting their hand out to you for money before you agreed it would be due, they're likely trying to support someone else's project with your money rather than their own cash flow.

Also, make sure you understand what a mechanics lien is and how it works. If you fail or refuse to pay a contractor's final invoice, even if it's because there's a problem with their work and you intend to withhold funds until they fix it, they can file a document with the county recorder's office to put a lien on your property until the debt is satisfied. In some cases, you might even have paid your contractor but *they* in turn failed to compensate one of their *subcontractors*, who can also file a lien against you.

When you make your down payment, get a partial lien release, so if things escalate, you can only be penalized on the unpaid portion of your contract and not the entire amount. Also, make sure the release is notarized and signed by an officer of the contracted company, not the receptionist. The same goes for the final payment.

Save all of your payment confirmations, including the address of the facility where the work was done, the amount paid, and a check or credit card confirmation number. Keep them somewhere safe and accessible in case the contractor files a lien and you need

to prove that payment was rendered. If you've been withholding final payment to resolve an issue with the contractor, don't remit payment until the lien-release document has been properly executed.

### Do Your Part

Working with service vendors and contractors to support your self-storage business is a two-way street. You rightfully expect a lot from your provider, but you also need to be a good customer and work diligently to resolve any dispute before taking legal measures. Always communicate if there's an issue and the work isn't progressing as planned. Give the company a chance to fix things. This will go a long way toward building trust and goodwill.

Smart self-storage operators take the time to vet service providers and contractors before hiring. Never rush or be pressured into a contract. Demand the proper required credentials, verify references and work performed, and check the register of contractors for complaints. Never put down more than 50% for any project, and require lien releases. These precautions will help you avoid being taken advantage of by unscrupulous companies. **ISS**

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### Providers You May Need

- Landscaper
- Exterminator
- HVAC technician
- Security or gate technician
- Trash remover
- Snow remover
- Plumber
- Electrician
- Paver or mason
- Door-maintenance specialist
- Painter

### Financial Benefits and Obligations

At the core of any self-storage venture lies the basic goal to enhance cash flow, net operating income and property value. Partnering with a management company can be pivotal in achieving this objective. The collaboration allows you to leverage extensive industry experience, operational efficiencies and scalable resources to accelerate the growth of your investment in ways that might not otherwise be feasible. By entrusting your property to seasoned professionals, you're capitalizing on the potential for heightened financial performance and the long-term appreciation of your asset.

That said, engaging a third-party company comes at a cost, typically in the form management fees. These might be a percentage of the gross profit, often with a minimum requirement, or an independent flat fee. Personally, I recommend the former. When the fee is a percentage, it ensures that the partner's incentives are closely aligned with the profitability of your self-storage asset. Both parties are equally invested in the growth and financial success of the property.

# The Ideal Management Partner

**Whether you're an experienced** self-storage owner or a real estate investor eyeing this market, hiring a third-party management company to support your asset is a crucial choice. The right one can significantly improve operational efficiency, customer service, marketing, technology and, most important, revenue and property value.

Property management is a highly specialized service. In most cases, the provider's platform has been built through years of experience, including trial and error and some blood, sweat and tears. Through

this type of outsourcing, self-storage owners and investors can focus on their broader goals and core competencies—development, acquisitions, equity raises, fund management, etc.—instead of dealing with day-to-day operational details and occasional headaches.

Each self-storage facility is a unique investment requiring a bespoke approach to maximize its potential. Generic strategies won't suffice in a dynamic and fluid market. This article discusses the essentials of third-party management, highlighting the top factors to consider before choosing a partner.

## Day-to-Day Operation

Exceptional self-storage management involves meticulous oversight of operational systems and controls to ensure remarkable customer service and effective revenue management. It also includes dealing with unexpected or unpleasant situations, such as an upset customer or the discovery that someone is attempting to live inside one of the storage units. Your chosen partner should ensure a secure, efficient operation that consistently meets and exceeds the expectations of your prospects and tenants.

## Administrative Support

The operational success of your self-storage facility significantly depends on the often-unseen efforts of back-office personnel including human resources (HR), accounting, marketing and maintenance. These roles aren't just supporting functions; they're essential. A good management company must deliver exceptional support that encompasses every aspect of employee management, financial oversight, regulatory compliance and operational effectiveness, ensuring these processes are seamless.

## Cultural Alignment

Equally important is your management partner's company culture. Its core values and general business ethos must align with those you've set for your self-storage operation. How does the organization approach problem-solving? How does it treat clients and staff? Are team members given performance incentives? What about opportunities for training and development? These things must fit with the way you envision your business being run.

In the end, you must ensure that your management company can meet your operational needs while meshing seamlessly with your vision and expectations. This cultural fit is key to establishing a productive, harmonious partnership that'll drive the success of your self-storage business.

## Marketing and Brand Differentiation

In the crowded self-storage market, achieving standout status requires more than deliberate and customized marketing initiatives; it takes a compelling brand-differentiation strategy. It's imperative for a third-party management company to have specialized marketers who are adept in leveraging digital and traditional channels. They need to exhibit a keen understanding of brand identity and its impact on market presence.

A pivotal aspect to consider is whether the company's brand and its strategies resonate

## What Can a Management Company Handle for You?

- Staff hiring and training
- Marketing
- Revenue management
- Accounting
- Maintenance and repairs
- Auctions
- Reporting
- Budgets
- Call-center support
- Tech support
- Legal compliance

distinctively when compared to others within the same market. The essence of the brand—whether it's perceived as dynamic and engaging or cold and static—plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining self-storage customers.

Today more than ever, it's vital for a brand to align with the values and expectations of its target audience, particularly with an eye toward upcoming generations. The preferences, values and behaviors of younger customers such as Millennials and Gen Z, who prioritize authenticity, sustainability and digital connectivity, should be factored into the branding strategy. In evaluating a management company, assess its ability to craft a brand identity that stands out, engages younger generations and delivers a lifestyle-oriented approach. Look at its track record in brand innovation, strategy for digital engagement, and commitment to investing in a client's unique identity.

It isn't enough for your marketing dollars to be spent. They must be invested in ways that genuinely amplify your self-storage facility's distinctive appeal, ensuring it not only reaches but resonates with your intended audience.

## Technology and Innovation

The effectiveness of a self-storage management company is profoundly influenced by its technological infrastructure. A sophisticated tech stack forms the backbone of a highly efficient operation and should integrate:

- Property-management software
- Omnichannel CRM (customer-relationship management) platforms
- In-house call-center software
- Cloud-based accounting solutions
- Advanced revenue-management systems
- Modern access-control systems
- Effective collections systems

The quality of the company's API (application programming interface) and its capacity for online rentals are also critical factors. These technologies streamline operation and enhance the self-storage customer experience, ensuring convenience and security for users. Their integration is pivotal, as they collectively

determine the management company's overall effectiveness and its ability to adapt to current and future market demands.

When evaluating a potential management partner, delve into their technological capabilities and understand how they plan to integrate their tech stack within your self-storage operation. Also, explore their roadmap for innovation over the next one to three years. A commitment to technological advancement is key to ensuring that your facility remains competitive and can meet evolving market needs.

## Crisis Management

Anticipating and preparing for unexpected events is essential in self-storage management. Whether it's a power outage, severe weather conditions or infrastructure issues, emergencies are inevitable. It's imperative that your management partner has a comprehensive crisis-management strategy in place as well as case-study proof of its efficacy. This preparedness ensures continuity, safety and resilience, safeguarding your investment and the well-being of your customers.

## Customization

While management companies are generally adept at providing services tailored to the broader self-storage industry, the level of customization they offer can vary significantly. A one-size-fits-all approach may provide some level of efficiency, but it can fall short of unlocking the full potential of your business in terms of revenue, profit and value. It's crucial that any company you choose can demonstrate how its array of services will be specifically adapted to suit the unique aspects of your operation.

Critical to this customization is an understanding of your local market dynamics and competitive landscape. The management company should offer a clear, detailed plan that showcases how its services will be modified to effectively address these considerations, ensuring its approach isn't just effective but highly relevant to your situation. This bespoke strategy should not only meet but exceed your business objectives, driving significant growth and success.

## Track Record

It's essential that any credible management company you consider can offer case studies and references. These should be relevant to the self-storage industry and closely aligned with your specific circumstances. They must underscore what sets the company apart from its competitors, focusing on its unique strengths and the tangible results it has achieved for businesses like yours.

Furthermore, any potential partner should present you with a customized performance projection tailored to your unique situation rather than relying on generic industry models.

## Contract Terms

Contract terms play a pivotal role in defining the scope, expectations and boundaries of the self-storage management relationship. These should be carefully crafted to ensure clarity and mutual understanding, covering essential aspects such as contract duration, services provided, payment structures and conditions for termination. It's crucial that the agreement is transparent and aligns with your business objectives, providing a solid foundation for the partnership. Additionally, to safeguard both parties' interests, attention should be paid

to any clauses that delineate responsibilities in various scenarios, including dispute resolution mechanisms.

## Brand Identity

When collaborating with a self-storage management company, you're presented with a critical decision: whether to retain your existing self-storage brand identity or transition to theirs. This choice is highly situational and should be grounded in a strategic evaluation of which option brings greater value, considering the historical performance of your business and your aspirations for its future. Weigh the benefits of the brand recognition and customer loyalty you've already built against the potential advantages of aligning with the broader reach and reputation of the management company's brand.

## Partnership Fit

Ultimately, the success of any partnership with a self-storage management company hinges on the alignment between its services and your business needs as well as a shared commitment to trust, transparency and integrity. These providers offer a broad spectrum of services crucial for the comprehensive operation and

enhancement of your self-storage business. They should be able to handle daily administrative tasks, amplify your market presence, and boost profitability and property value. If they can't, look elsewhere.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. In fact, it's essential to engage in strategic questioning from both sides. The right partner will be open and responsive to all inquiries.

Choosing a management firm that aligns with your expectations for the partnership and your overarching business objectives is a nuanced decision that requires careful consideration of all the factors mentioned above. It's about finding a partner whose capabilities, culture and strategic vision not only complement but elevate your business objectives. As you embark on this journey, remember that the ideal partnership is built on a foundation of mutual respect, open communication and a shared commitment to excellence. With the right partner by your side, your self-storage business will be well-positioned to navigate the complexities of the industry and achieve sustained growth and success. **ISS**

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# HIRING A REMOTE-MANAGEMENT COMPANY

**The self-storage industry's evolution** toward a technology-driven management model marks a significant shift from the traditional, hands-on approach to facility operation. Remotely managed sites that leverage automation tools can enjoy many benefits such as

greater efficiency and accuracy, fewer staff, less payroll, lower operational costs, and more scalability, all of which lead to higher overall profitability.

However, the success of these properties hinges significantly on the quality of the management team and the technology that

supports them, as all critical functions like rentals and payments occur through advanced digital systems. One way to ensure both are on target is to hire a third-party company that specializes in remote self-storage operation. Following is insight to help you find a strong partner.

## Technology

To begin, any company you choose to manage your remotely operated self-storage facility must have a robust technological infrastructure. This is critical! Their comprehensive tech stack should include:

- Sophisticated software to handle site management, including tenant accounts and security
- Advanced surveillance and alarm systems that can be monitored and managed from afar
- Automated access-control and door-lock systems that allow tenants to enter and exit the facility and their unit using their smartphone
- A mobile app that enables customers and staff to interact with key facility systems from anywhere, enhancing convenience, accessibility and productivity

## Customer Experience

The customer experience (CX) at remotely managed self-storage properties is fundamentally different from that of traditional, manned operations. Rather than engage with human staff, tenants interact with a suite of digital tools and interfaces designed for ease of use and efficiency. To ensure you're delivering a quality CX, your management partner must provide the following to address basic functionality and customer support:

**Online rentals.** Customers should be able to quickly rent a storage unit via their mobile device or an onsite kiosk, with the ability to choose size, location and additional features. This process is often supported by virtual tours and detailed facility information.

**Communication.** Customers need ways to submit inquiries or get help with service issues. Your third-party management company might use chatbots powered by artificial intelligence, dedicated helplines, email support or two-way video. These platforms need to be robust and responsive to ensure user satisfaction. Two-way video allows for a more personalized interaction, enabling people to speak directly with company representatives for complex issues or real-time assistance.

**Tenant education.** An understanding of consumer behavior is essential in a remote self-storage model, so you can optimize the customer journey. A strong management partner will educate prospects and tenants and help them navigate your property through clear wayfinding signage and marketing



materials. Strategic placement of QR codes around the facility can also help you deliver need-to-know information, enhancing the user experience and operational efficiency. The goal is to make the property more intuitive and accommodating, thereby boosting customer satisfaction and retention.

**Emergency response.** Your remote-management company must have a way to learn about and quickly respond to urgent customer-service issues, such as a gate that won't open. These are often handled through an automated system with escalation protocols for matters that require human intervention. Two-way video can be instrumental here, providing a direct line of communication for rapid resolution and user reassurance.

## Reporting and Business Intelligence

Any competent firm that offers management for remotely operated self-storage facilities must be equipped to provide you with detailed reporting and advanced business-intelligence tools. For example, regular reports on operational metrics and financial performance will help you identify trends plus areas for improvement. Quick identification of performance gaps is crucial for timely remediation of issues, ensuring they don't impact customer satisfaction or operational efficiency.

Consider your field-operations team, too, meaning the people who conduct physical walk-throughs and maintenance at your self-storage facilities. They need technology to support their audits, so they can report issues in real time and ensure any repairs or other tasks are performed proactively, protecting the quality and security of the property.

## Evaluating Potential Partners

When selecting a third-party management company for a remotely operated self-storage facility, consider the following:

- Establish the provider's technological expertise, including its ability to function with a sophisticated tech stack.
- Any candidate should be able to demonstrate proven success in managing automated sites and a history of positive customer feedback.
- Evaluate their customer-service approach and capabilities as well as the effectiveness of their communication channels.

It's vital to clearly define your objectives at the outset of the partnership. Before entering an agreement, tell the provider about your financial and operational goals to ensure they align with the company's offerings. Next, negotiate a contract that includes specific self-storage performance benchmarks and indicators. Finally, have a contingency plan. Ensure there are strategies in place for technological failures and other potential disruptions.

Remote management offers a promising avenue for the self-storage industry, potentially transforming facility operation and customer interactions. However, its success depends heavily on the appropriate technological infrastructure. A well-chosen partner with a robust tech stack and a strong focus on CX can make this model highly effective, enhancing profitability and overall satisfaction. **ISS**

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# HELP WITH HUMAN RESOURCES

## Self-storage is a fast-growing

industry, but with rapid progress comes change, and with change often comes challenges. Facility operators are facing increased competition, rising operational costs and a seemingly endless cascade of technological advancements. To keep pace, owners will need to develop coping strategies, and outsourcing is a common one.

In particular, human resources (HR) functions can be time-consuming and even daunting, as there are laws to follow and severe consequences for non-compliance. By farming out these responsibilities to an experienced and competent third party, you can free up time to focus on your portfolio rather than get bogged down in staffing concerns. Let's explore the key benefits and what an HR company may be able to provide, so you can determine if outsourcing is the right choice for you.

## The Benefits

There are many benefits to outsourcing your self-storage operation's HR tasks. At the top of the list is cost savings.

According to Talent.com, the salary of an HR professional can range from \$40,000 to 100,000 annually, depending on experience, staff size and other factors. While the cost to outsource can vary, it's typically less than hiring a full-time employee. In general, you'll pay 2% to 15% of your payroll, according to Zamp HR, a professional employer organization.

Here are some additional benefits:

**Freedom.** HR tasks can be time-consuming and complex, especially if you don't have expertise in this area. Hiring a third party frees you to focus on other aspects of your business.

**Access to expertise.** HR providers have specialized knowledge as well as systems, procedures and templates in place to support your company and its goals. They're specialists in employee hiring and onboarding, work policies, payroll processing, and employee benefits.

**Regulatory compliance.** HR regulations and federal requirements are constantly changing, and noncompliance can result in costly penalties and legal issues.

Outsourcing ensures you're up to date with the different laws, which can vary by city and state. A good provider is also adept at handling unusual circumstances like unemployment-insurance claims.

**Scalability.** As your self-storage business grows, managing certain HR functions can become increasingly complex. For example, some regulations apply only once a company reaches a certain number of employees. Outsourcing allows for scalability, as the provider can easily adapt to changes in your business size and structure, whether you're expanding or scaling back.

## Types of Support

There are three main types of HR support available to self-storage businesses. The first is employee management, which covers a range of staffing needs. A provider in this area can:

- Create company policies and procedures
- Oversee regulations and compliance
- Assist with hiring tasks such as writing job descriptions and conducting interviews
- Supervise staff onboarding and training
- Administrator performance reviews
- Manage staff complaints and disputes

You can also hire a company specifically to assist with health insurance and other employee benefits. This can give you access to better rates (group coverage) than what you'd get on your own. This support might include employee-assistance programs, retirement benefits, and administration for qualified life events and other changes.

Finally, there's payroll administration, which often requires scrutiny. Outsourcing in this area ensures employees are paid efficiently and on time without errors. In addition, work schedules and paid time off can be better managed. You'll also gain access to labor analytics and reporting, which is valuable for audits and budget reviews. Finally, you'll have assistance with employee garnishments.

## Finding a Partner

If HR outsourcing is something you'd like to pursue on behalf of your self-storage

## HR-Support Options

There are several types of HR support available to self-storage operators. Here are the four primary options.

**Technology platform.** You may have the staff to manage your HR functions internally but lack the tools to do so efficiently. In this case, you can seek access to an appropriate technology platform. Payroll processing is the task most frequently managed this way, but you'll still have to do most of the heavy lifting.

**Consulting firm.** This works best for businesses that need limited assistance with a specific HR issue. A consultant can help you identify problem areas and then work with you to develop a resolution plan. Once the concern has been addressed, the partnership ends.

**HR outsourcing firm or administrative services organization.** If you need more expertise or ongoing service, consider outsourcing some of your key HR functions. The provider can take over one or more designated tasks including payroll processing, benefits administration, regulatory compliance, etc.

**Professional employer organization (PEO).** If you're looking for a full-service solution, a PEO can perform all the core functions of an HR department and provide strategic guidance on related matters. It also allows you to access less expensive health and financial benefits for employees.

**Source:** *insidestorage.com*, "Outsourcing Human Resources for Your Self-Storage Operation: Benefits, Options, Costs and More," by John G. Allen

business, begin by considering what's most important to you. Is it technology, service, cost or the relationship you'll develop with your provider? From there, think about the tasks you currently do that take the most time and how you'd benefit from having that time back to focus on other areas your operation.

Next, thoroughly evaluate your vendor prospects to see if their programs align with your goals. Ask about their fees for your existing staff but also determine how prices might change as your company grows or

shrinks. Be clear about your expectations and communicate regularly.

Outsourcing your self-storage HR functions enables you to prioritize core business operation over administrative duties. By delegating staff-related responsibilities, you minimize the likelihood of errors and fraudulent activity. Service providers employ robust systems and procedures to guarantee precision and safeguard against costly mistakes. Additionally, outsourcing can enhance

employee satisfaction by ensuring punctual and accurate payroll processing, along with providing access to expert assistance on matters like benefits and policies.

Ultimately, entrusting HR tasks to seasoned professionals empowers you to concentrate on your strengths in managing and growing your self-storage enterprise. Isn't that what you really want? **ISS**

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# Call-Center INTEGRATION

**In the ever-evolving self-storage** landscape, success requires a strategic and personalized approach to delivering exceptional customer experiences. A crucial element is efficient and well-structured communication, which is precisely where a call center comes in.

A call center serves as a centralized hub for managing customer-service and sales interactions. When your self-storage facility gets an inbound call, a trained agent handles it professionally, asking and answering a variety of questions based on your specific business needs.

Call centers offer a variety of solutions for self-storage operations. With advancements in technology, they've become cost-effective and customer-centric partners that are very adept at closing

new business opportunities. If you think hiring one might be right for your business, consider the following benefits and tips for choosing the right provider.

## Key Benefits

Whether you operate a small self-storage facility or manage multiple locations, a call center provides a variety of advantages. Primarily, using a call center can eliminate the need to hire and maintain a full-time property manager or additional staff, which can be expensive. According to ZipRecruiter, the average national salary for a storage manager is \$39,054 per year, not including costs such as benefits, taxes and training. A call center can also extend your operational hours, optimize efficiency, close new and previously missed leads, and boost customer satisfaction.

## Choosing the Right Provider

Selecting the right call center for your self-storage operation involves thorough consideration of several factors:

- **Industry experience.** Research each company's reputation and experience in self-storage. Choose a partner with a proven track record of delivering exceptional service and understanding industry nuances.
- **Integrations.** It's critical that the call center can seamlessly integrate with your facility-management software. This ensures a smooth connection between your two entities and the accuracy of information given out by call-center representatives.
- **Communication channels.** What communication does the call center use? Some providers use VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol), email and SMS (texts). Diverse options enhance accessibility and cater to different customer preferences.

Ask if the call center offers a chat feature for your facility website. This type of support is increasingly favored by customers and provides an additional option for assistance. While automated responses may be off-putting, interactions are customizable, and you can always let trained representatives manage the chat tool.

- **Pricing.** This can vary widely between providers. Generally, it's based on the workload assumed by the vendor. For effective cost management, you must understand the pricing structure and anticipate potential extra costs, especially during busy periods when call volume escalates.
- **Overflow vs. full time.** Understand the levels of service the call center provides. Overflow involves handling calls only when facility staff are unavailable, while full-time service means continuous call management. Consider your call volume and existing team to decide which option best suits your business requirements.

### Your Role in a Successful Partnership

While a call center can alleviate much of the day-to-day call volume your self-storage facility receives, you and your staff play a key role in the success of this partnership. For example, you need to provide detailed information about how your facility operates.

The call center will need to know important facts such as:

- Tenants are required to give X amount of notice before moving out.
- Tenants are required to sign an e-lease before moving in.
- Our facility offers tenant protection and/or tenant insurance.
- Our entry gate is synced with our property-management software, which means access will be denied if rent is X days late.

Once fully onboarded, your call center will need updates about price changes, promotions and new facility details. Regular communication and feedback between you will foster collaboration and continuous improvement in delivering excellent customer service. Educating this partner about your business ensures that the correct information is consistently communicated to customers.

Incorporating a call center into a self-storage operation is a cost-effective, customizable way to

Once fully onboarded, your call center will need updates about price changes, promotions and new facility details.

deliver outstanding customer experiences while enhancing staff efficiency. With technology advancement and integration, the right partner can seamlessly connect your facility with prospects and sign on new tenants. **ISS**

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# When It's Time to Hire a Trainer



**Are you a self-storage owner** whose facility isn't performing at its best? Is occupancy slipping? What about rates? Is penetration low for your autopay program or tenant-insurance enrollment? Is your staff having trouble getting five-star reviews? Or is it just time for a customer-service refresher? If you answered yes to any of these questions, it might be time to bring in outside experts to get your team where it needs to be.

We all know the pandemic created golden days for self-storage and business was almost guaranteed. Now that it's in the rearview, we find ourselves back in a traditional market in

which we must work harder for every lead. The ability to effectively and profitably run a facility takes a comprehensive skillset. If your staff doesn't have it, your self-storage business will suffer. A third-party trainer can help you maximize its potential.

### What You Get

Self-storage management requires specific expertise. As an owner, do you know every facet of your operation? Do you know how to use your software to its full potential? Are you a customer-service expert who can de-escalate any situation? Do you know all

of the sales-closing techniques for various scenarios, or the best way to overcome sales objections? Do you follow best practices for time management?

Most owners don't have the knowledge to thoroughly train self-storage managers on daily operation, or they simply don't have the time. In these cases, they often turn to existing staff members to oversee training for new employees. However, just because someone is a great store manager doesn't mean they're good at teaching. It isn't uncommon to find an employee who runs their site magnificently but can't explain to others how to do the same.

On the flip side, you or your designated trainer could be teaching bad habits to your new recruits. What may have worked years ago might no longer apply in today's competitive market.

Self-storage trainers bring years of expertise to the table. They know the industry inside and out. They can teach according to your particular market and customer base. They can help your staff become storage experts.

They also understand how to adjust their teaching methods based on the needs of the individual employee. For example, some people are very visual learners while others need hands-on experience. Your outsourced expert will be adaptable to the needs of your team. Consequently, they offer an increase in efficiency and productivity, helping you save time and money in the long run. In addition, your staff will know you value and care about their growth by helping them get the training they need to succeed.

## Training Options

You might think that finding a trainer who's a good fit for your self-storage team will be a daunting task, but there are so many great resources available.

**In-person.** This type of training is the most effective and can be done in a few ways. Your staff can go to the trainer's off-site location; the trainer can visit each of your self-storage facilities; or you can designate a single facility to serve as a centralized hub for learning. It facilitates team interaction and role playing, which provides a more personal experience. You also get a more fluid exchange of ideas and higher retention when your participants

don't have the temptation or ability to multi-task.

That said, there can be a lack of flexibility in terms of scheduling, and it can be difficult to get everyone in the same place at the same time. If you need to train teams at multiple sites and it isn't easy to consolidate, you'll need to conduct multiple sessions. Finally, in-person training is more expensive than the other options. Pricing depends on the trainer, number of pupils and program, but it usually starts at \$800 and goes up to \$2,500 per day. Most providers will give reduced weekly rates, but you must first decide how extensive you want the training to be.

**Remote.** The wide accessibility of video conferencing makes remote training a great option, especially if you want to accommodate multiple self-storage sites or a large group at once. It also offers flexibility for scheduling purposes. Remote can be more cost-effective than in-person training, too, as you won't need to cover travel expenses for your trainer. Pricing usually starts around \$250 to upward of \$500 an hour, depending on the program.

But you should also understand the shortcomings of this method such as lack of interaction, potential distractions and occasional technical difficulties. For remote training, you'll need to ensure that everyone has a strong and stable internet connection.

**Online.** If you're just starting out and have little to no budget for training, there are a myriad of online resources that can help your staff improve their skills. There are many companies that offer free webinars on a wide range of topics, for example.

**Industry vendors.** Your self-storage suppliers can also be a great resource for education. In addition to providing training manuals and video, they often have someone in the company who can offer your staff more personalized guidance. This might include how to download and use reports from your management software, how to price and market retail products, or how to sell your tenant-insurance or property-protection plan.

**State associations.** Your local self-storage association is another great place to go when in search of training assistance. They often have consultants among their members or can help you find local third-party instructors.

## Final Advice

The best advice I can give any self-storage owner who needs help with team education is to find a trainer with knowledge of your operating system and who has years of industry experience. They should have a proven track record of success.

Trainers strive to establish a symbiotic relationship with facility owners, but they do need clear guidance on expectations, goals and desired topics. Once you've provided that, take a step back and let them do the job you hired them to do, so as not to confuse your team or the process. You're all in it together. The goal is to set up your staff for success and maximize business revenue. **ISS**

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# Outsourcing Facility Maintenance

**Should you handle facility** maintenance in-house or outsource instead? For a self-storage operator, this is a pivotal decision that impacts curb appeal, safety, customer experience and, in the end, business profitability. Both options work. In

fact, many companies take a DIY approach. However, there are compelling reasons to consider partnering with one or more vendors who can help you with landscaping, pest control, snow removal, painting, roof inspections, gate repair, security-system

updates, HVAC servicing and a whole host of other critical tasks.

Let's look at the top factors that impact decision-making in regard to self-storage facility maintenance and their greater implications for the operation. I'll discuss how

to vet potential providers, ensure a productive partnership and evaluate the quality of their work. I'll also share general best practices. After all, the ability to know when, why and how to outsource could help you save money and avoid future headaches.

## Decision-Making Factors

It can be tempting to manage self-storage facility maintenance on your own, and many operators do. It makes sense, considering the advantages to a DIY approach. First, you can handle issues promptly, minimizing downtime and inconvenience, which is crucial to customer satisfaction and retention. Here are a few other reasons why you might continue to control these tasks:

- Schedules and procedures can be tailored to the specific needs of your facility, without the need to rely on anyone else's team.
- In-house maintenance can be cost-effective. According to a study by "Facility Management Journal," companies can save 20% to 30% by handling tasks internally.
- Often, you or another member of your team can learn to do many tasks, leveraging payroll dollars that are already in use.
- Over time, you and your staff develop valuable knowledge of the facility's infrastructure, and this expertise can reduce reliance on external help.
- You can maintain direct oversight of work quality, ensuring it meets your standards. This control can prevent recurring issues and ensure long-term solutions.

It's a convincing case, but there are drawbacks to handling this type of work in-house. To begin, setting up a maintenance team requires an initial investment in tools, equipment and training, which can be a significant upfront expense. There may also be hidden costs in the form of workman's compensation benefits and other insurance.

Moreover, maintenance tasks can be time-consuming, diverting attention from other aspects of your self-storage business. You must balance these duties with other key responsibilities like sales, marketing and customer service.

Perhaps the biggest reason why many self-storage operators consider outsourcing is expertise. You and your team may simply lack the special skills required for complex systems such as HVAC and plumbing. This limitation can lead to delays and additional costs if external help is eventually needed. You could also be exposed to fines or legal liability for attempting to complete work that is officially required to be completed by a licensed technician due to its complexity or state and federal regulations.

## The Outsourcing Solution

Outsourcing provides answers to all of the above challenges and more. It not only gives you access to self-storage system experience and expertise, it frees up staff time, allowing your team to focus on other areas of the business. This can lead to better overall management and growth opportunities.

Contracts with vendors can also make your self-storage maintenance costs more predictable. This aids in budget planning, as fixed service agreements can simplify financial forecasting.

Finally, outsourcing can reduce your business risk, as your hired vendors are responsible for their work quality and adherence to regulations. This transfer of liability can provide peace of mind.

Just bear in mind that maintenance services come at a cost. You'll be paying for parts, labor and service fees, sometimes even fuel surcharges. These expenses can negatively impact profitability if not managed properly. You'll also be at the mercy of your providers' schedules, which may result in inconvenient delays. Finally, you'll have to monitor work quality to ensure that jobs live up to your business standards. This can be greatly alleviated with proper vetting of maintenance providers, which I address below.

## Evaluating Vendors

Choosing the right vendors to handle your self-storage maintenance will require research. Gather recommendations and read reviews from other facility operators. This can provide insight to each company's reliability and quality of work. You'll also want to:

- Call and get verified references from contract customers the vendor has served previously.
- Verify the vendor's licenses, certifications and insurance. Ensuring they meet industry standards is critical for quality and safety. This includes bonding, if necessary, and any local, state or federal licenses required to do work on specific tasks in your area.
- Evaluate the provider's experience with similar facilities. One with a proven track record in self-storage is more likely to meet your needs.
- Compare quotes and understand what's included in each vendor's service package. Transparent pricing helps avoid hidden costs and ensures value for money. Ask for time packages vs. per-item repairs, as this may save you money and allow you to get numerous repairs done at the same time.
- Carefully review contract terms, including service guarantees and response times. Clear conditions will protect both parties and set expectations.

Perhaps the biggest reason why many self-storage operators consider outsourcing is expertise. You and your team may simply lack the special skills required for complex systems.

## Your Role in a Successful Partnership

Once you've hired one or several vendors to help manage your self-storage facility maintenance, you have a responsibility to ensure your relationships with them are productive. This starts with setting expectations and maintaining open communication. Clear directives ensure mutual understanding and goal alignment.

Complete a full quality and standards checklist and have each vendor sign it before allowing them to start work. It might include specific materials you want them to use or tasks you want completed in a certain way. If you don't put your preferences in writing, providers will choose the path that's most cost-effective for them and not necessarily the best for your business.

Hold regular meetings to review performance and address any issues. Consistent interaction helps build a strong partnership. Also, know who exactly will be working at your self-storage facility. If they aren't a company supervisor or owner, establish a clear line of communication with that person in case of necessary discussion.

Finally, provide constructive comments to your self-storage maintenance vendors and be open to receiving it in turn. Mutual feedback fosters improvement and strengthens the bond. At times, suppliers will know a better way of accomplishing a task. Be open to their input, but the final decision needs to be your own.

## Evaluating Maintenance Quality

You'll also need ways to ensure the work performed by your maintenance vendors meets expectations. There are several ways to do this.

The first and most obvious approach is to conduct an inspection after any repair or maintenance job is complete. Regular checks

help maintain standards and will allow you to address issues promptly. Never sign off on or pay for work until it has been fully reviewed and meets your requirements. As a self-storage operator, you should already be regularly auditing the physical condition of your site, so this shouldn't demand too much additional effort.

In addition, request detailed reports from your maintenance partners. Documentation ensures transparency and accountability. Require that all reports are itemized for parts and labor, so you can be sure you're receiving fair treatment in your charges.

Finally, monitor the satisfaction of your self-storage tenants to gauge the effectiveness of your facility maintenance. Collect their feedback to identify areas for improvement. It's good practice to send periodic emails or texts asking for input, as people often believe you know about a specific issue even when you don't. They may assume you're ignoring the problem, which makes you look negligent. No one wants that! Satisfied customers are less likely to leave and more likely to recommend your business.

### General Best Practices

Following are some other key factors to consider when outsourcing self-storage maintenance.

**Accounting.** Maintenance requires careful bookkeeping. When doing things in-house, you're tracking wages, equipment and parts; but for outsourcing, expenses are recorded as vendor payments. Make sure you differentiate between everyday repairs and those that require licensed technicians.

**Emergency preparedness.** Develop a plan to handle unexpected maintenance issues promptly. It should include a list of essential contacts including any in-house maintenance staff and all outsourced vendors. Consider pre-assembling some kits that contain the necessary tools and supplies for common emergencies, as this can help you keep things functional until your hired partner arrives. Regular training for staff on emergency procedures and quick fixes is also smart.

**Risk management.** Proper insurance coverage is crucial for mitigating risks associated with self-storage maintenance activities. Ensure your facility has comprehensive coverage for property damage, liability and worker's comp, and verify that your vendors have appropriate insurance to cover any damage or injuries that occur during their work.

**Customer communication.** Keeping your self-storage tenants informed about maintenance activities can enhance their satisfaction and trust. Provide advance notice for tasks that might affect facility access or services, and be transparent about the steps you've taken to improve the facility. Establish a system through which customers can provide feedback and report maintenance issues. This will ensure they feel valued and reassure them about the facility's quality of management.

**Technology.** Even if you're working with multiple vendors on maintenance, it's up to you as the facility operator to keep track of routine tasks and unexpected repairs.

The right tools can help you streamline the process. There's software available to assist with scheduling, task tracking, inventory management and communication.

**Eco-friendliness.** Sustainability is becoming increasingly important in all industries, including self-storage. Consider the impact of your own maintenance practices and those of the vendors you hire. For example, encourage the use of energy-efficient lighting and HVAC, and always opt for environmentally friendly materials and products. Implement proper waste disposal and recycling practices and confirm that the companies you support use them, too.

**Prevention.** Implementing a robust program for prevention is essential in self-storage maintenance. Regular inspections and routine upkeep can prevent small issues from becoming major problems. Leverage your vendor partnerships to ensure your HVAC systems, roofing, gutters and downspouts, security systems, lighting, and pest-control measures are all performing as they should.

The choice to outsource your self-storage maintenance needs depends on various factors including cost, flexibility, staff expertise and availability, potential liability, and others. By carefully evaluating potential vendors and maintaining strict quality controls, you can ensure your property is well cared for, thereby enhancing curb appeal, safety, customer satisfaction and asset profitability. **ISS**

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**Self-storage is a constantly** progressing industry. Macro-economic factors like inflation and interest rates influence facility acquisitions as well as customer behavior. Natural disasters, new construction and evolving consumer expectations can greatly affect individual facilities or groups of

properties at the local level. When you add in the forward march of technology, what seems simple—marketing your company online—can quickly become difficult.

When it comes to digital-marketing services, you need the right people and strategies to help your self-storage business

grow; but the question on many operators' minds is whether to consider outsourcing. Let's explore it.

### The Main Reason

When thinking about digital marketing, it's helpful to compare it to a house, which



has many important parts that comprise the whole. When you build one, you must have the right skills. If you don't have the expertise to manage certain tasks yourself, you hire a professional. Still, you must have a strong idea of what makes a house good and what goes into the building process, so you can evaluate the progress and performance of your team.

Fortunately, there are lots of companies that know exactly how to build a house. They've done it before, and they've dealt with the various problems that can arise. They know what a great structure looks like, what designs to use and all sorts of tricks because this is what they do all day, every day.

Digital marketing is similar. It encompasses many types of services including website design, search engine optimization (SEO) and paid media. To do it correctly, you need specific proficiencies and knowledge. Partnering with a professional agency can allow you to focus on what you do best while taking advantage of dedicated marketers who will expend time and effort to carry out your business goals.

## Services Available

Digital marketing isn't a single monolith, it's a collection of strategies and services that work together. A worthwhile vendor partner should offer a variety of solutions that address the following important components.

### Website design and maintenance.

Your website is the core of the digital self-storage experience. While there are industry best practices based on what a website should look like and how it should function, the devil is in the details—and the details are many. What should your unit-size table look like? What might your location list entail? What's in your menu, and where does it lead visitors? How should you display facility images? Can your

website work with your internal technology solutions and operating software of choice?

It's impossible to overstate the importance of having a fast self-storage website with a clean and clear online-rental feature. That's a good user experience. To get back to our house analogy, your website is the foundation. Without it, none of the other digital-marketing options can exist or perform optimally.

**SEO and content.** Google's search algorithm has evolved, but one thing is still true: It's very difficult, if not impossible, to rank for certain online search terms without a designed effort. In our house analogy, think of your SEO strategy as the framing, shaping how your business will be interpreted. You can think of your content as the furniture that fills the various "rooms," meeting the specific needs of each visitor but also providing your own unique image to prospective and existing customers.

An excellent organic marketing strategy involves technical SEO and content. They're two sides of the same coin, as your content fuels your SEO engine.

**Paid advertising.** This is one of the oldest, most reliable methods of getting eyes on your self-storage business. Google has made it accessible, but don't get lulled into a false sense of security. An effective paid-media strategy involves regular investigation into your campaigns and ad groups and constant tweaking. Think of your campaigns as light-dimmer switches you regularly adjust, turning them up, down, off and on.

We have access to more marketing data than ever before thanks to artificial intelligence and machine learning. As a result, paid ad campaigns are an integral part of digital marketing, especially for focus facilities and markets.

## Choosing a Partner

If you've decided to outsource your digital marketing to an agency, the next step is to determine which provider is right for your self-storage business. It's important to remember that an effective partner is just that—a partner—and thinking of them as just another vendor won't get you to where you want to go. Examine these factors.

**Industry experience.** Ideally, any digital-marketing agency you choose should have direct self-storage experience. This business can be unexpectedly complicated, and what works for ecommerce or business-to-business doesn't necessarily work in our industry.

**Reputation.** Ask agencies for references and examples of their work. There are a lot of providers out there, and not all of them are great at what they do. Building a good standing takes time and effort.

**Communication.** The right marketing agency for you communicates well, though that could mean different things to different people. Just remember: Cultural fit is just as important for outsourced partnerships as it is for your internal self-storage team.

**Accountability.** Digital marketing is more trackable than ever. There's zero excuse for an agency not to show you how your investments are performing. Establish clear goals and expectations for every dollar spent and hold your partner accountable for meeting them. Request reports and know what to watch. When in doubt, ask!

**Transparency.** Know where your marketing dollars are going. It's impossible to hold an agency accountable when you don't know what portion of your investment is going to which aspects of your overall strategy. Demand a detailed itemization of the work to be performed along with the associated costs.

**Customization.** Know if and where you have this flexibility with your agency before signing on the dotted line.

Choosing to outsource digital marketing can be a big step, but it's one that many self-storage companies choose to take for lots of good reasons. At the end of the day, you want the best people in charge of the things your company does and hopes to achieve; and professional marketers are a vital part of that success. **ISS**

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# Finding a Pest-Control Provider

## Let's jump straight to the ugly truth

**ugly truth:** No matter how clean the interior and exterior of a self-storage facility is, the property is still vulnerable to pest infestations. Operators have little control over what tenants bring into and out of their units, making it nearly impossible to ensure that all contents are uncompromised. If left undetected and untreated, even the smallest pest issue can quickly spread, putting the building, employees, customers and stored belongings—even the reputation and integrity of the business—at risk.

The solution is to implement a pest-control program to help protect your business. Below I discuss the importance of this effort, why it makes sense to outsource vs. doing this work on your own, plus options and pricing. I also provide guidance to help you evaluate and choose the right vendor and explain your role in fostering a successful partnership. I close with some final advice for safeguarding your property against insidious little intruders.

## Are Pests Truly Dangerous?

You may be thinking, "We're a storage business, not a restaurant. People typically aren't on site for very long. Should I really be that concerned about a tiny little insect or pest crawling around?" The answer is always yes! Pests pose multi-faceted threats, from damage to stored items to contamination of space with pathogens and allergens. Their presence can be a serious danger.

Mice and cockroaches are two common invaders, but self-storage facilities are vulnerable to many types of pests. Once inside, critters can chew through packaging, gnaw on furniture, and leave droppings that can soil and spread disease. Such incidents can lead to financial loss due to property damage. They also erode customer trust and can incite negative publicity.

The presence of pests can also attract regulatory scrutiny and legal liabilities. Health and safety regulations mandate cleanliness and pest-control measures in commercial spaces, including storage facilities. Failure to comply with these standards can result in fines, lawsuits and even closure orders, further amplifying the importance of proactive pest management.

## Why Outsource?

While the idea of handling pest control internally may seem cost-effective or convenient initially, the complexities and risks involved often outweigh any perceived benefits. Without the expertise and experience of trained technicians, you may struggle to accurately identify the extent of an infestation, select appropriate treatment methods and implement control measures. DIY efforts often lack the precision and comprehensiveness

needed to address underlying causes of infestation, resulting in recurring issues and escalating costs over time.

Also, DIY pest-control products available to consumers may not have the same potency, safety profiles or environmental considerations as those used by professional companies. Improper handling or application of pesticides can pose health risks to people, pets and the environment while also potentially contaminating surfaces and stored goods. Professional technicians are trained to use specialized products and techniques that minimize risks to human health and the environment, ensuring safe and effective outcomes.

Attempting pest control on your own can also expose your self-storage business to legal and regulatory liabilities if you inadvertently violate applicable laws or regulations governing the use of pesticides. A professional will be well-versed in the requirements and adhere to strict protocols to ensure compliance, reducing the risk of fines, penalties or legal consequences for you as the facility operator.

Still not convinced? Just think about the time and labor it would save to hand over this responsibility to a trusted pest expert. Outsourcing allows you to focus on your core competencies and strategic initiatives without diverting valuable time and resources toward pest-related issues. By entrusting this responsibility to seasoned professionals, you can streamline operation, mitigate risk, enhance customer satisfaction, improve service quality and expand market reach, all while protecting the standing of the businesses in the long term.

## Plan Options and Costs

The cost of outsourcing pest control can vary depending on facility size, the severity of infestation and the range of services required.

“Professional technicians are trained to use specialized products and techniques that minimize risks to human health and the environment, ensuring safe and effective outcomes.

Typically, providers offer several pricing models, including one-time treatments, recurring maintenance plans and customized packages tailored to the unique needs of self-storage operations.

One-time treatments can be suitable for addressing isolated pest problems, but a recurring maintenance plan or a customized package is recommended for the most effective solutions. Work with a trusted pest expert to identify the most appropriate plan based on your operational needs and budgetary constraints.

### Choosing the Right Vendor

Selecting the right pest-control vendor is a crucial decision that requires careful evaluation. When assessing potential partners, prioritize the following:

**Reputation and experience.** Seek out companies with a proven track record of excellence within the industry. Look for testimonials, reviews and references from satisfied clients to gauge reliability.

**Licensing and certification.** Ensure that the vendor holds all credentials required to perform pest-control services in your jurisdiction. Accreditation from reputable organizations demonstrates compliance with industry standards and best practices.

**Comprehensive and customizable services.** Evaluate the range of services offered by each vendor, including inspection, treatment, prevention and ongoing maintenance. Opt for one that offers a holistic approach to pest control with the ability to customize services based on your unique needs.



Attempting pest control on your own can also expose your self-storage business to legal and regulatory liabilities if you inadvertently violate applicable laws or regulations governing the use of pesticides.

#### Environmental considerations.

Inquire about the provider's commitment to environmentally friendly practices and integrated pest-management options. Sustainability and eco-friendliness are increasingly important considerations for conscientious self-storage operators.

**Cost and value.** Compare pricing plans, contract terms and service guarantees from multiple vendors to ensure competitive rates and maximum value for your investment. Avoid choosing solely based on price, as quality and reliability should remain paramount.

### Your Role in a Successful Partnership

While outsourcing relieves you from the day-to-day responsibilities associated with managing pests, your involvement as the self-storage operator remains integral to ensuring a successful partnership. Actively collaborate with your chosen vendor by taking these steps.

**Communicate expectations.** Clearly express your priorities and concerns from the very beginning. Establish open channels of communication to facilitate ongoing dialogue and feedback throughout the partnership.

**Facilitate access.** Provide the pest-control team with unrestricted access to all areas of your self-storage facility that require treatment including units, common areas and exterior spaces. Timely access enables prompt inspection and intervention, minimizing risks.

**Maintain cleanliness.** Implement and enforce rigorous protocols at the facility to reduce factors that attract pests such as food debris, moisture and clutter. Regular maintenance and sanitation efforts complement pest-control measures and enhance their effectiveness.

**Monitor and report.** Stay vigilant for signs of pest activity or environmental conditions that are conducive to infestation such as cracks, leaks or gaps in infrastructure. Promptly report any concerns to the provider for swift resolution and preventive action.

**Evaluate performance.** Periodically assess the effectiveness of pest-control measures and the performance of the vendor in meeting established objectives. Provide constructive feedback and collaborate on adjustments or improvements as needed to optimize outcomes.

### Additional Advice

In addition to outsourcing and fostering a collaborative partnership, you can further enhance pest-management efforts at your self-storage facility by implementing these best practices.

- Educate staff and tenants on proper sanitation practices, pest-prevention techniques, and the importance of promptly reporting any pest sightings or concerns.
- Implement integrated pest management (IPM), and talk with your provider about ways to incorporate it into your daily operation. IPM combines multiple methods to address issues holistically while minimizing reliance on pesticides.
- Seal entry points including cracks and gaps to prevent pests from infiltrating. Install door sweeps, weather stripping and screens to reinforce barriers against intrusion.
- Conduct routine facility inspections, internal and external, to identify and address vulnerabilities or signs of pest activity before they escalate into full-blown infestations.

Pest management is paramount for protecting your self-storage facility and its reputation. By selecting the right vendor, actively participating in the partnership and implementing best practices, you can effectively mitigate pest-related risks and ensure the long-term success of your businesses. Through proactive collaboration and a commitment to excellence, you can create a safe, sanitary environment for staff and customers alike. **ISS**

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# The Professional Technology Evaluation

**The self-storage industry is** at a crossroads. A surge of new investors has led to some regions being oversaturated, which is driving down rental rates. At the same time, high interest rates and inflation have increased expenses per square foot. Operators who are looking to protect and increase revenue in this competitive environment must ask themselves: What can I do to ensure my business thrives?

The smart money is on technological advancement. In its 2024 "National Self-Storage Outlook," market-intelligence provider Yardi Matrix asserted that the real estate investment trusts are increasingly relying on technology to optimize operation and maximize income. It's a logical strategy. In this economic environment, operators need to focus on controlling expenses, identifying new revenue streams and appealing to potential tenants. Smart technologies are effective in achieving all three goals.

Technology implementation can secure your self-storage facility's healthy future, but under present circumstances, any significant financial outlay can seem like more risk in an already challenging market. While a tech-forward approach may seem like a luxury only institutional operators can afford, it's more accessible than you might think. The trick is to make smart investments that are aligned with your budget and will futureproof your business. Engaging an outside expert to evaluate your current tech stack and make recommendations is a great place to start.

## Expert Insight

Self-storage may have been slower to adopt technology than other commercial real estate markets, but that's actually great news! It means there are already providers with deep experience in the creation of Internet of Things (IoT) ecosystems for industrial buildings. Storage operators don't have to reinvent any wheels. You can draw upon decades of connectivity expertise to plan upgrades that'll

serve your goals and give you the flexibility to evolve your business over time.

Smart technology, though mature, is also fairly complex. For any given objective, such as improved site security, better remote monitoring or a more modern customer experience, there are dozens of solutions on the market. Not all connect in the same way. Some use familiar wireless protocols like Wi-Fi or Bluetooth, while others employ an alphabet soup of alternative technologies that help improve signal range or communication through materials like steel and concrete.

Choosing the right solutions and getting them to work together in, for instance, a monitoring dashboard for an unstaffed self-storage facility takes expertise. A third-party evaluation outsources the complexity, allowing you to focus on your business goals and how technology can help advance them.

## The Evaluation Process

A self-storage technology evaluation should be tailored to the facility operator's needs, desires and business reality. It starts with an in-depth discussion of site characteristics, priorities, pain points and goals. You should also be prepared to discuss any legacy technology systems on site and what you'd like to do with them. Maybe you want to leverage them in an updated, more unified ecosystem or replace them altogether. Perhaps you'll choose to leave them in place but will phase them out at new sites or during future maintenance.

Your technology consultant will use this information to develop recommendations. They'll likely suggest new devices and subsystems that can help modernize your self-storage operation. They should also propose solutions for uniting system monitoring and control. You'll always get more value out of systems that work together than from devices that have to be painstakingly managed separately.

This phase should include some "boots on the ground" network testing as well. The tech expert will need to understand the current state of wireless network coverage, including Wi-Fi signal strength, bandwidth, interference and dead zones. They'll also need to assess what other networking technologies are needed to support current and future smart applications. This testing and research will inform network design, including multi-protocol components and repeaters to future-proof the self-storage site for any application.

## Choosing a Partner

When it comes to a self-storage technology evaluation, look for a partner who can offer you two things: expertise and ongoing service. Many providers can offer design, consultation and integration services that'll result in a system that functions perfectly on day one; but it's critical that you have a trusted partner who'll support you for the long run. Inevitably, you'll have new needs as your business matures. An ongoing service relationship makes it easy to adjust to changing requirements.

The right partner can help you build and maintain a unified smart-technology ecosystem without overextending your business. Have early, honest discussions with the vendor about your budget. They should be able to adhere to your requirements while providing a future-proof solution that can grow with and protect your investment.

Ultimately, to beat your self-storage competition, you need to invest in technology. It's the key to attracting the next generation of renters and growing new revenue streams that'll carry the industry through the current period of capacity glut. An expert evaluation now will position you to make the right strategic decisions for years to come. **ISS**

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# Pursuing Add-On Profit



## From retail to vehicle storage

to ancillary offerings you haven't even dreamed up yet, add-on profit centers can have a positive impact on your self-storage operation's revenue, reputation and more. Every single one of your competitors offers unit rentals. If you want to differentiate yourself in a busy market and kick up your income, it's smart to consider your ancillary options.

You may be thinking, "I don't have the time or energy to do more. Besides, if it ain't broke, why fix it?" Perhaps you already have a portfolio of reliable properties. You're satisfied with your rental and occupancy rates. You have a great team in place. So, why change?

News flash: If you aren't generating optimum revenue from your self-storage asset, it is broken.

This industry is incredibly competitive but not immune to disruption. Your market might not be crowded now, but that could change. You may currently have tenants who pay on time and employees who can be counted upon, but what if that changes? When profit stagnates—or worse, declines—add-on products and services can make a positive difference to your bottom line and peace of mind.

If you're interested or even ready to take the first step, this article covers ancillary options that can work in a self-storage environment. You'll get guidance on choosing the right offerings for your market and what you need to succeed.

## Research the Possibilities

The add-on products and services that have been explored by self-storage operators over the years range from common options such as retail merchandise, truck rentals and boat/RV storage to much

more original offerings such as fine-art storage, propane-tank rentals, pack-and-ship services and boutique sales. Their success hinges largely on your specific location and customer base as well as the way you present them to tenants and the public.

After conducting a market analysis, West Coast Self-Storage (WCSS) found that wine storage would be the perfect fit for some of its facilities. The decision involved weighing the cost of the required conditions against profit potential. While this product isn't without its challenges, in the end, this gamble paid off for the Pacific Northwest company.

"The great thing about wine-storage customers is they often are also self-storage customers," says Derek Hines, marketing specialist with WCSS. "They also typically stay much longer than the average self-storage customer." Customer retention can be more cost-effective than acquisition, which is exactly what makes this a smart choice.

Third-party management firm Storage Asset Management (SAM) also relies on market analysis to make its ancillary decisions. "Down South, offering propane makes sense because we have a lot of local market areas where propane is incredibly popular in terms of heating your house," says Lee Kunkel, director of operations. "In other markets where propane isn't common, it wouldn't make sense."

SAM has also experimented with Amazon Hub lockers to draw traffic to its managed facilities. The company first tried it in 2015 and was pleased with the simplicity of implementation and outcome. "We had the space, the infrastructure, electricity, clearance and parking to meet Amazon's specifications," Kunkel says. "The Amazon locker didn't pull the staff from the facility,

but it did drive people to our facility and helped us sell additional merchandise."

Location can also play a pivotal role in your choice. "Some of our locations have excellent visibility with opportunities for cell towers and billboard leases," says Kurt Kleindienst, senior vice president of marketing for Safeguard Self Storage, which operates more than 80 locations nationwide. "These can provide additional revenue to the property but must be evaluated on an individual basis."

Carol Mixon, owner of industry management and training company Skilcheck Services Inc., was able to leverage the location of a Hawaii facility she operated. "We had some people who wanted to store surfboards. I didn't really have storage for small things, so I came up with a chain-link fencing area and gave them a lock," she says. "They put their surfboards in there. It was about \$15 a month. We put quite a few in the area and we rented them out in maybe a month and a half. We were right across the beach, so it was easy to do."

Contents coverage for self-storage renters in the form of a tenant-insurance or property-protection program is a reliable revenue stream that can work for any facility, anywhere. "We require proof of customer storage insurance at the time of rental," says Charlie Fritts, president of third-party management firm Storage Investment Management Inc. "Customers can satisfy this requirement by providing a copy of their homeowner's or renter's insurance policy or purchasing insurance [through us] and paying with their rent. This is a great add-on income source, as it serves many purposes."

It's also a great customer-relations tool if a problem ever arises. "We provide them

## More Products and Services to Explore!

- Vehicle-charging stations
- Propane sales
- Mailboxes
- Tenant insurance or protection programs
- e-Recycling
- Shredding services
- Pack and ship services
- Truck rentals
- Amazon lockers
- Vehicle storage
- Vending machine
- Crafts or baked goods
- Wine storage
- Retail products
- Business services
- Office space
- Technology upgrades
- Video machine rentals
- Coffee shop
- Records storage
- Equipment rentals

with the insurance-claims info rather than shrugging our shoulders and saying, "We are not responsible for your stored property," Fritts says. "We collect the insurance premium with the rent, the insurance company in return pays us a percentage of the premium as an admin fee for collecting their money."

### Assess the Requirements

Whether you're adding something as simple as a soda machine or a service as complex as wine storage to your facility, you need to consider the resources required to turn your plan into reality.

**Space.** Do you have enough of it? For example, a retail store requires room for product displays but also for the storage of inventory. If you'd like to add truck rentals, you'll need a place for parking and ample room to maneuver trucks around the property. Boat and RV storage will require significant room for open, canopy or covered rental spaces, not to mention the appropriate drive aisles and turning radii to accommodate large vehicles.

**Staffing and training.** Do you have enough staff to support the new profit center once it's up and running, and how much training will your team need? The answer to both questions will depend on the specific product or service. For example, partnering with a truck-rental vendor will require employees to learn new software.

If you sell retail products, learning to design the displays and track inventory is imperative.

"Always figure out the training development needed ahead of time," Kunkel says. "If we're going to hire a new person tomorrow, how would we train them to run this service? Do they need to be certified in any way? What do they need to know? How are you going to maintain that profit center? The last thing you want is to roll something out before the pieces are in place to make it work. Many times, we've taken over properties that offer these different products and services and the staff just isn't trained on how to get the most out of them."

Depending on the ancillaries your self-storage business intends to offer, employees might have to be knowledgeable regarding the needs of RV/boat owners, for example, or wine terminology. You may even have to do some hiring. This means weighing the cost of additional payroll against potential new revenue. "If we're paying \$1,000 in payroll extra per month and only bringing in \$600 worth of commissions, that's an easy evaluation that this isn't worth the investment," Kunkel says.

**Regulations.** Are there any you must follow? For example, when WCSS decided to offer pharmaceutical storage, it had to follow a strict protocol. "The FDA mandates the proper storage of drug samples to ensure their stability, integrity and effectiveness," Hines says. "This necessitates storage units equipped with temperature regulation and good ventilation. Fortunately, several of our facilities meet these stringent criteria, and as a result, we've been able to attract pharmaceutical reps as valued customers."

**Marketing.** Once you've trained your staff and launched your ancillary service, customers need to know about it. What marketing will be necessary? Will you need to explore new platforms or campaigns you wouldn't normally use? To start, you'll want to promote your new product or service on your website, across your social media channels and your Google Business Profile. You can also advertise in your offline marketing materials and through community or vendor partners.

### Weigh the Pros and Cons

Some self-storage profit centers are so low-risk that you might not even think about the pros and cons—selling boxes and packing tape, for example. But low risk can also mean low reward. If you're considering a product or service that requires construction, investment in inventory,

software or new staff, it's important to look at the opportunities and obstacles.

Any profit-center crusader will tell you the advantages of ancillary services are myriad: increased foot traffic at your facility, new tenants, better reviews, a positive reputation in your community and, most important, greater revenue. But what about the cons?

Depending on the scope of your offering, these might include disruption to your day-to-day operation in the form of construction as well as a potentially tough learning curve and increased workload for your staff. If employees are busy assisting customers with truck rentals, for example, what does that mean for your self-storage sales inquiries? Everyone should know to always prioritize the essential mission of the operation: renting storage units. Ancillary services are meant to support that, not take away from it.

"Keep in mind any ancillary income should add to the bottom line and not detract from the real money-maker of self-storage," Fritts says. "It's important for staff to understand this as well."

### Make the Leap

Adding supplementary products and services to your self-storage operation is important to help you stand out from competitors and grow your business. "I would say that it's imperative to add ancillary profit centers and to be looking for others to add," Hines says.

Mixon sees them as a benefit to the owner but also to employees. Increased revenue means owners can pay staff more. "By adding these ancillary services, you can be a better employer."

The question isn't whether you should offer ancillaries but which ones to pursue and how to go about it. It comes down to analyzing your market, choosing options that complement your existing operation, and ensuring that you have all the resources necessary to support your new venture.

Once you've launched, you must regularly assess how the new offering is performing. Be prepared to make changes or even start over with a new revenue stream. In the evolving world of self-storage, the ability to try new things and adapt is essential.

"One thing we do is build evaluations directly into our audit," Kunkel says. "Just because something works right away doesn't mean it will continue to work. Don't lose sight of constantly evaluating." **ISS**

**Contributor:** Kate Ramsey, Freelance Author

# Exciting NEW! Ancillaries

## Over the years, self-storage

operators have introduced a variety of add-on products and services to their offering mix. Most sites sell some moving and packing supplies, for example. Truck rentals and vehicle storage are also incredibly common. These extras not only feed into the business revenue stream, they help meet consumer demand. But what about trying something new?

To compete in today's market, it's time to think beyond the basics! Self-storage is evolving, and shoppers are looking to do business with companies that provide more—of everything, including variety and convenience. Following are fresh ancillary ideas from some of your fellow facility operators, including words of profit-center wisdom. Use them as inspiration to jazz up your own business. **ISS**

**Contributor:** Amy Campbell, Inside Self-Storage,  
[insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com)

### App-Based Facility and Unit Access

Submitted by Nick Moulder, Business Development Manager, Storage Asset Management

Every business and market is different, but generally, adding something that brings value to the customer and business is the way to go. One way to do this is to upgrade the access-control system to a cloud-based model that allows tenants to access the property and/or building by using an app and their cell phone's Bluetooth technology.

There's a greater sense of security for the customer when adopting a high-tech access-control system, and the business benefits from this in a few ways. The greatest advantage is having the ability to pass on a monthly technology/maintenance fee to customers. Depending on the market, this can range from \$2 to \$10 per month. In addition, the apps for these systems typically allow the business to have better tracking of who's coming in and out because a cell phone is used at each access point instead of a digit sequence.

**Ancillary advice:** Seek out companies that offer this product and see if this upgrade makes sense at a property. Dig into the market. Research what's being offered by competitors to determine which add-ons bring a strategic advantage over other facilities in the area.



### Retail Space for Rent

Submitted by Denise Bowley, Owner, Self Storage Science LLC

We have just recently started remodeling our old rental offices at our remote locations to lease as retail space. Our business can charge a premium for this newly renovated space, and our tenants feel better knowing someone is on site.

To offer this, first, you'll need to secure a lease with a retail tenant. We have these renters sign a three-year contract.

**Ancillary advice:** When it comes to add-on products and services, I suggest starting with one item at a time and giving it a good enough go before adding another.



## Individual Unit Motion Detectors

Submitted by Dwight Broering, Vice President of Self-Storage Operations,  
The Jenkins Organization

We recently added the option of portable motion detectors in our storage units at select properties. For a monthly fee, customers get a text message any time the device senses motion in their unit. It goes through a progression of texts to see if the tenant or another authorized person is at the space. Based on how the renter responds, authorities can be called, management is informed, etc. We're currently evaluating the return on investment.



**Ancillary advice:** Try to gauge customer interest ahead of spending money to roll out a new product or service—word-of-mouth, surveys, talking to others in the industry who may be doing the same thing. Run models to determine how much to charge. Make sure the technology or service works as intended. Again, do your homework or due diligence by researching and talking to others.



## Warehouse Space

Submitted by Bill Webb, Manager,  
Helm Storage, Cleveland, Ohio

My suggestion is to rent open, climate-controlled warehouse storage for motorcycles, ATVs, boats and other toys people would like to store in a worry-free space. Many people don't have room at home to store these large toys. For most properties, it would take new construction of an open warehouse building with access control to offer this.

**Ancillary advice:** Ask customers what they need and/or could use as well as what would save them a trip if we offered it. Then, capitalize on these items or services.

## Package/Delivery Acceptance

Submitted by Helen Ng, Chief Executive Officer,  
General Storage Co. (Lock+Store Singapore  
and Malaysia, The Store House in Hong Kong)

In a highly competitive market, product differentiation is key to success. We've launched a new service at The Store House Hong Kong: the receipt of goods on our e-commerce and small-business customers' behalf. By helping to receive our customers' goods, with official documentation of the receipt and eventual handover, we free them from the hassle of traveling to our facility just for this purpose. They can focus on other business priorities.



**Ancillary advice:** Conduct market research and be sensitive to customer feedback. If different customers consistently ask for a specific service over time, it means there's market demand. As facilities become increasingly remote-managed, operators should also think about offering accessible online channels for customer feedback and analyzing the data for pain points to improve the customer experience.

## More Bright Ideas

- Vending machines
- Notary services
- Passport photos
- RV rentals
- Electric-vehicle charging stations
- Packing and shipping services
- Mailbox rentals
- Animal-adoption services
- Sales of ice, beverages or snacks
- Daily car parking
- Garage or craft sales
- Car washing

**Sources:** Carol Mixon, Owner, Skilcheck Services Inc.; Alisha Mullis and BJ Rashidi, Managers, American Store and Lock in Charlotte, North Carolina

## Advertising Space

Submitted by Andrew Barcenas, Property Manager, Ultra Storage in Ventura, California

A great source of untapped income for self-storage facilities would be renting advertising space on the exterior of the facility and, in some cases, the interior. I worked for a storage company that had a huge wall right next to a Walmart parking lot, and all they had there was a small logo. If they had a process in place for renting advertising space, I'm sure that would've brought a steady source of income, especially for that location. It might also help customers learn about local businesses and special offers.



Implementing this would involve determining ad spaces, ensuring the facility is complying with regulations regarding outdoor advertising, and learning about ad pricing and structure. It would also take a sales and marketing team with a strategy to attract local businesses as advertisers, a contract/agreement specifying terms and conditions, and regular maintenance for ad spaces.

**Ancillary advice:** When adding a new service in general, I would say that making sure the rollout plan is airtight is important, and doing market research and getting pricing right is key.

(Photo courtesy of Reybold Group)

# YOUR RETAIL ONE-STOP SHOP



**Self-storage facilities have evolved** into versatile hubs for customers' moving and organizational needs. One key revenue-generating opportunity for operators is the sale of retail products. Following is advice on how to effectively stock, market and sell moving and packing supplies at your location.

## Choose the Right Merchandise

Selecting the appropriate products for your self-storage retail store is a crucial first step. When deciding what items to sell, keep in mind customer needs, item quality, pricing and seasonal adjustments.

The most common products to stock are moving boxes, tape, bubble wrap or packing paper, and unit locks. However, feel free to include others that might be desirable, such as dish-packing kits, moving blankets, mattress pads and packing materials for large items such as TVs. If your facility offers boat and RV storage, consider items that target these renters such as tie-down straps, rope, an assortment of batteries and even toilet paper.

When shopping for retail supplies, choose high-quality, durable products that can withstand the rigors of moving and storage.

Opting for cheap goods is a disservice to your customers and could harm your business' reputation.

Finding self-storage retail products at a good price is essential, as it'll determine your profit margin; but don't aim so high that your inventory won't move. Price items so they entice people to buy but still provide decent revenue to your business. Also, keep shipping and quantity requirements in mind when choosing your vendor.

Finally, understand that the sale of moving and packing supplies will fluctuate throughout the year. For example, many people move and rent storage during the summer, so keep more stock on hand at that time. Tailoring your merchandise selection to match seasonal needs can help you capitalize on the sale of these products. Also, be on the lookout for bargains and close-outs. Just make sure you're purchasing items that'll sell in your store.

## Create Effective Displays

Once you have the right self-storage retail merchandise, it's essential to create compelling in-store displays. You need an eye-catching layout, clear signage, sample setups and accessibility. To grab customers'

attention, arrange products in an organized and visually appealing manner. Grid walls are ideal for smaller products, as they keep everything neat. You can also artfully stack a variety of cardboard boxes. Just make sure they don't block walkways or obstruct other displays.

To create a welcoming atmosphere, lighting and cleanliness is key. Customers shouldn't have to struggle to read signage or have trouble accessing goods they wish to purchase. Nor should they need help from an associate to reach something they want to buy. Keep all your products neat and accessible. Use clear signage to help customers find what they need quickly. Pricing should also be easy to see.

## Inform Your Customers

Educating self-storage customers about the benefits of your retail products can significantly impact purchasing decisions. Don't make people guess about which supplies are best for which uses. Brochures, posters and online marketing provide valuable information about how these products can simplify moving and storing.

Guides or instructions on ways to pack efficiently or organize their items in a storage

unit will also help customers understand their own needs. For example, set up a wardrobe box and add some hangers and a few inexpensive shirts inside. You can do something similar with a dish-packing kit. Giving tenants a visual can often lead to more sales.

Staff also play a significant role in the success of a self-storage retail store. Employees should have extensive product knowledge so they can answer tenant questions and make recommendations based on customer needs. They should also be skilled at cross selling and upselling. For example, when someone is renting a storage unit, they'll need a lock to secure the space. They'll also likely need boxes and tape. Staff should be readily available to help customers and offer guidance to help buyers make informed decisions. This'll promote your retail sales in a positive way.

### Consider Pricing

When selling self-storage retail products, regularly review your prices to stay competitive. Consider bulk discounts and bundle deals to encourage more significant purchases, which will also assist with a regular rotation of merchandise.

If there are products that simply aren't selling, offer them at a discount as part of a bigger purchase. This can motivate customers to buy more. For example, you might provide a large box for free when a customer purchases five medium ones.

A clearance sale to move old or slow-selling inventory off your shelves can help you prepare for upcoming product demands. Summer season stimulates additional purchases, as it's peak moving

### A Well-Rounded Retail Inventory

- Unit-door locks
- Boxes in various sizes and shapes
- Box-flap holders
- Packing tape
- Padded mailers
- Foam packing sleeves
- Storage bags
- Moving blankets
- Mattress covers
- Markers and pens
- Bubble wrap
- Packing paper
- Box cutters
- Scissors
- Labels

time. The winter holidays, spring cleaning and graduation are also prime times for promotions.

If you have repeat buyers, create a loyalty program with exclusive offers and discounts. This builds trust and appreciation, even when pricing increases are warranted. You can also create a referral program that rewards business partners. Making connections with moving companies and real estate offices that send business to you will organically drive more traffic to your facility. Leverage these partnerships to cross-promote each other's services.

### Promote Your Products

The digital landscape offers numerous opportunities to promote your merchandise.

When someone is looking to rent a self-storage unit, they look online. When storage is partnered with retail products, your facility becomes a one-stop shop.

Social media platforms are a great place to promote your offerings, share testimonials and engage with your audience. Showing a clean display packed with moving and packing supplies allows customers to get familiar with your location and plan for what they need to buy before they arrive.

Local listings and search engine optimization not only improve your website but promote the additional products and services you provide, including your retail merch. Reviews are also a way to fuel your online presence while being a huge part of the customer experience, helping build trust and credibility. Happy tenants should always be guided to leave online reviews about their wonderful and satisfying interaction with your company.

Finally, your retail store shouldn't be limited to only your storage customers. Your products can help a variety of other businesses and organizations in your community. Add these companies to your marketing.

### Adapt as Needed

To continually improve your self-storage retail sales and marketing strategies, solicit customer feedback and adjust in response. Your tenants or community members might request items that'll require you to refine or increase your offerings. You might also find that some products attract zero interest, so be flexible about what's on your sales floor.

The best way to do this is to analyze your data to assess the performance of your merchandise. If a promotion, price or a specific marketing strategy isn't boosting sales, don't be afraid to adjust. Every market is different, so being moldable and creative in your strategies will put you ahead of your competitors and help you reach your sales goals.

Selling and marketing retail products can significantly boost your self-storage revenue and enhance the overall customer experience. By choosing the right merchandise, creating appealing displays, educating your customer and implementing effective marketing strategies, you can tap into this valuable revenue stream. Stay adaptable and always seek opportunities for improvement. With a well-executed plan, you can transform your self-storage facility into a one-stop shop for all your customers' storage and moving needs. **ISS**

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# A Retail-Area Refresh

## When a person is gearing up

to move, they need packing supplies ... lots of them! Essentials include boxes, tape, bubble wrap, markers, labels, foam sheets and more. Self-storage operators often sell these things, not only to their renters but to anyone who needs them. It's a great way to drive more traffic to your facility, create convenience for customers, generate ancillary revenue and increase the profitability of the business.

If your operation already includes a retail store, how does it look? Is it organized, well-stocked and enticing, or is it sad and drab? It's understandable that it may get less of your attention than other aspects of your self-storage facility; but if you want it to succeed, it must attract customers! Let's discuss the importance of maintaining and promoting this store, plus five easy, effective ways to keep it fresh.

## A Strong First Impression

At a self-storage facility, the retail area is often part of the management office, which means it impacts a customer's first impression of the business. Even if it isn't a significant driver of revenue (though it should be!), its role in shaping a positive image is invaluable.

Imagine the contrast between a rundown dollar store and a high-end retailer, like an Apple Store. One has empty shelves, disorganized inventory, stained ceiling tiles, dimly lit hallways and dusty displays. The other is bright, clutter-free, clean, organized and well-maintained. Which is more comfortable? Which one feels safer? Which one would draw you in?

If your self-storage retail space is Apple-caliber, kudos to you! Most facility operators don't devote that much time, effort and money to it, believing the revenue generated doesn't justify the investment. What many don't realize is there are five simple ways to improve this offering—and the income it produces.

### 1. Clean It

What message does a customer receive when they browse through your self-storage retail area and see dusty packaging, dirty floors or damaged product? They get a strong sense that it's neglected and, therefore, must not offer much value. They may still rent a unit, but they might be a little less comfortable with the idea of their precious items being stored in a place that can't even manage to take care of its own merchandise.

So, keep it clean! Dust the shelves and products, and scrub the floor. Remove any products that are scuffed, ripped or broken. Make sure the area is brightly lit and easy to navigate.

Also, signage should be neat, professional and legible. Once signs start fading, cracking and peeling, replace them immediately. You might even consider adding digital signage, which is easy to read and allows for pricing to be changed instantaneously.

### 2. Organize It

If your self-storage merchandise isn't well-organized or is missing clear prices, your customers may be confused and dissuaded from purchasing. Items should be grouped logically, in a way that flows naturally.

For example, a customer might know they need boxes and tape but may not remember that they also need a tape dispenser, plastic wrap, markers, foam roll, bubble wrap, etc. Make it easy for them to remember by how

things are laid out. This way, what started out as a simple shopping trip for a few boxes turns into a much larger sale. This benefits the customer, who now has all they need to accomplish their task and has to make fewer stops, and your business because you'll make more money!

Better yet, consider offering bundles of items, for example, a "mover's starter kit" that includes a variety of box sizes, bubble wrap, tape and a Sharpie. You can also group various box sizes together at a small discount.

The best way to organize self-storage moving and packing supplies without losing too much space is to incorporate wall racks. Several industry vendors offer them as well as products in rack-compatible packaging.

### 3. Stock It

Empty self-storage retail shelves signal neglect and make it more difficult to sell the remaining products. Your customers will think, "If all these items are sold out, what's wrong with the stuff that's left over?" Make sure your facility has a good inventory-tracking system, so you know what your supply levels are on every item at any time. Routinely fulfill purchase orders and stay ahead of the demand. Many management-software programs can assist with this task through inventory tracking.

Typically, best-selling self-storage retail items are locks, boxes of all kinds, tape and dispensers, plastic or foam wrap, and tie-downs. But don't be afraid to try something

## Layout Considerations

Designating a reasonably sized area to house your self-storage retail products means more than just sectioning off part of your office. When planning your layout, consider:

- The number of products to be displayed
- The size and number of fixtures needed to showcase those products
- The amount of foot traffic the space will need to accommodate
- The placement of fixtures and how this affects movement through the space
- Room for backstock
- The positioning of visual displays and signage

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), "Merchandise That Moves: How to Design and Present an Inviting Self-Storage Retail Space," by Lainey Becker

new such as mattress covers, dish-packing kits, box-cutters and labels. Periodically conduct a secret shop of your competitors to see what they're offering. Also, ask your retail vendor what's new or if they have any suggestions for products that could sell well in your store.

Pay attention to which products fly out the door and what seems to linger on the shelves, so you can adjust your purchases accordingly. Also, ask tenants for feedback on items they'd like to see in your self-storage retail area. Finally, shake up your offerings seasonally or reorganize your displays periodically to keep your displays looking new.

#### Refresh 4: Price It

There are two philosophies to pricing self-storage retail items. In the first, you treat the store as a true profit center and see all customers as a captive audience, whether or not they rent a unit from you. Shoppers realize that buying from a one-stop shop is worth the convenience, regardless of price. This means you can charge more for your products than Home Depot or another local retailer. Your sales may not be as frequent or large, but your profit margin will be high.

If you adhere to the second philosophy, you believe your retail offering is purely an added benefit for your existing self-storage customers. You recognize that the bulk of your revenue comes from unit rentals, so instead of pushing profit margins, you offer discounted prices on packing materials to give tenants warm fuzzies about your business. If your average length of stay increases by even one month because your renters are satisfied, it'll have a much bigger financial impact than a slightly higher markup on packing supplies.

Whichever approach you choose, price your retail inventory clearly and consistently. No one should ever have to hunt or ask an employee for the cost of an item. Update your pricing as the market requires.

#### 5. Promote It

Another advantage to having a retail store at your self-storage facility is it can help you close unit rentals. If throwing in a few free boxes or a lock can seal the deal, do it! Similarly, offering specials on moving and packing supplies can bring people in the door. For example, it might be 50% off all moving

materials when you rent a unit or free locks for all new rentals this month.

Put promotions on yard signs and banners in front of your facility: "Today only: 50% off all boxes!" This can lure people who might not be seeking storage right now but are in need of other products. They may purchase a few items and could even become regular retail customers. If they need self-storage someday, your site will be top-of-mind.

You also need to be an expert on your self-storage retail products. While your tenant knows they need boxes, they likely don't know how many. This is where your knowledge comes into play. You can help them choose the correct items for their specific situation.

While retail sales may not be the main revenue driver at your self-storage business, they can still be a great profit center—but only if your store looks good! When kept clean, organized, well-stocked, properly priced, and promoted, moving and packing supplies can create additional traffic and serve as a valuable service for your customers. **ISS**

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# TIME TO TRY TRUCK RENTALS?



## Launching a truck-rental service

to complement your self-storage business can be a lucrative venture, but to do it right, it's imperative that you conduct thorough market research, develop a solid business plan, and be prepared to invest in maintaining and expanding your fleet. You need to consider important factors like insurance, licensing, routine maintenance and overhead costs. You'll also need to offer exceptional customer service and promote your offering effectively.

To gauge whether trucks would be a good fit for your operation, it's helpful to consider general pros and cons. On the positive side, a rental program can provide a consistent, predictable revenue stream. There's scalability, meaning you can start with a small fleet and gradually expand as your business grows. The product attracts a diverse customer base, and demand is relatively constant, even during economic downturns. Finally, you can mix in ancillary products such as moving equipment to increase revenue.

On the other hand, drawbacks include high initial costs. You'll need to purchase or lease one or more vehicles, invest in insurance, and be prepared to manage regular maintenance and repairs. The truck-rental market can also be competitive, with established players and national brands dominating the industry. Demand fluctuates, often increasing during the

summer moving season and dropping in the winter. Plus, managing a fleet of vehicles and coordinating rentals can be challenging, though there's software available to help you navigate.

Now that you know the general benefits and disadvantages, let's look at feasibility, revenue potential, maintenance and staff training.

### Feasibility

Before starting a truck-rental program at your self-storage facility, it's crucial to conduct a comprehensive feasibility study to ensure the path is viable. To begin, identify your target market including individuals, businesses, contractors and event organizers. When considering demand, look for data on moving trends, construction projects and events that might require transportation. Analyze existing truck-rental businesses in your area to gauge the competition and understand their services, pricing and customer base. Don't forget about local population, economic activity and growth prospects.

Next, create a detailed business plan that outlines your goals, target market, pricing strategy, marketing plan and financial projections. This should include a startup budget, ongoing expenses and revenue projections. You'll need to determine the size and types of trucks you want to offer based on market demand (thinking about short- and long-term rental options), then calculate the

initial investment required to lease or purchase them. You'll also want to estimate ongoing expenses such as insurance, fuel, maintenance and marketing. Then project your rental rates and expected customer use to estimate your monthly and annual revenue.

Develop a plan to promote your new business. Consider online and offline advertising, partnerships with local businesses, and other strategies to attract customers. Create a strong brand identity to differentiate your offering from competitors. This can be accomplished with unique custom graphics for your trucks.

Finally, it's helpful to seek advice from industry experts and professionals to ensure you're prepared for all the potential challenges and opportunities. Consult with accountants, lawyers and other self-storage operators to confirm your business plan is sound.

### Revenue Potential

The revenue potential for a truck-rental business in a self-storage environment can vary widely depending on your fleet size, pricing strategy, marketing effectiveness and customer demand. Location can also play a critical factor. High-population areas, cities with a lot of moving activity, and regions with robust commercial activities can offer more opportunity. To help you create estimates, here are some common fees charged by truck-rental businesses:



- **Rental:** This is the core source of revenue. It can be charged on an hourly, daily, weekly or monthly basis.
- **Mileage:** Charged in addition to the rental fee, this set fee per mile helps cover fuel costs and vehicle wear and tear.
- **Fuel:** Rent each truck with a full tank of gas and require customers to return it in kind. If it comes back with less fuel, charge them for the cost of a refill.
- **Late returns:** Charge this when the customer returns the truck later than the agreed-upon time. This encourages them to adhere to their lease and ensures the availability of the truck for the next renter.
- **Cleaning:** This covers the cost of washing and detailing the vehicle.
- **Security deposit:** Require this or run a pre-authorization on the customer's credit card. The deposit is typically refundable upon the return of the truck in good condition.
- **Damages or repairs:** Charge for these costs or deduct them from the customer's deposit.
- **Additional equipment:** Offer the option to rent moving blankets and hand dollies.
- **Special services:** This includes things like vehicle drop-off and pick-up or after-hours availability.
- **Reservation:** Charge this for booking a truck in advance, especially during peak moving seasons.
- **Cancellation:** Implement a policy that allows you to charge a fee if a customer cancels their reservation within a certain timeframe.

## Truck Maintenance

Regularly servicing your self-storage rental trucks is essential to ensure safety, reliability and longevity. Regular maintenance won't only keep your fleet in good condition, it'll prevent breakdowns and costly repairs. Here's an effective checklist:

- Develop a maintenance schedule that outlines routine checks, inspections and servicing. Include daily, weekly, monthly and annual tasks.
- Follow the manufacturer's recommendations for oil changes, typically every 3,000 to 5,000 miles. Use the recommended oil grade.
- Regularly inspect the brake pads and discs for wear and tear. Replace them as needed.
- Change the transmission and differential fluids as recommended by the manufacturer or a professional mechanic.
- Check the coolant level to ensure it has the right mix of water and antifreeze to prevent overheating and freezing.
- Regularly inspect the suspension and steering components for signs of wear, looseness or damage.
- Inspect the exhaust system for leaks and damage. Address any issues to prevent carbon monoxide from entering the cabin.
- Check the battery, alternator and starter for proper operation. Make sure all electrical components are working correctly.
- Rotate tires as recommended to ensure even wear. Align the wheels and balance the tires to prevent uneven wear and poor handling.
- Perform routine checks before and after each rental. Encourage your team to report any issues promptly. In addition, schedule regular inspections by a certified mechanic to identify and address any hidden issues.
- Maintain detailed records of all maintenance and repairs. Keep a log for each vehicle in your fleet.
- Equip each truck with an emergency kit that includes basic tools, flares and other items that may be needed in case of a breakdown.

It's important to follow the manufacturer's recommendations for maintenance. Regular service won't only keep your trucks safe and reliable, it'll enhance their resale value when it's time to retire them from your fleet.

## Staff Training

Training your self-storage staff to effectively sell your truck-rental service is crucial to success. Begin by focusing on general service and sales skills. Your team should be courteous, helpful and attentive to customer needs. Encourage active listening to understand the renter's requirements. Focus on basic sales techniques, such as building rapport with prospects, addressing objections and closing deals.

Make sure your team has a deep understanding of the vehicles you offer, including the various types and sizes available, their features, and any unique selling points. They must be familiar with all rental policies, including reservations, cancellations and late returns, as well as all applicable rental rates, fees, promotions or discounts. They should be prepared to answer questions, provide quotes and make reservations for inquiries that occur in-person, on the phone and via email.

Walk employees through the reservation process, from data collection to rental agreements to payment processing. They should be familiar and comfortable with any software or systems used for reservations and rentals. Train them to identify opportunities to upsell and cross-sell products and services, such as additional equipment rentals or insurance coverage. Finally, consider implementing incentives and rewards to motivate your staff. Recognition and performance-based bonuses can boost their motivation.

Training is an ongoing process, so periodically refresh and update your program to help stay competitive and adapt to changing customer needs and market conditions. Effective sales training not only helps increase revenue but also enhances the overall customer experience.

## Get It Rolling

There are good reasons why truck rentals exist as a standalone business model, but as you can also see, there are many parallels and overlaps that make it an enticing and potentially lucrative addition to a self-storage operation. To leverage a program effectively requires careful planning and research, along with a commitment to proper execution and excellent customer service.

If you determine that your service area is viable to launch a truck-rental program and arm your staff with the sales and training tools to market and run it effectively, you stand to be rewarded with an additional revenue stream that you can rely on with confidence. **ISS**

**Contributor:** CJ Stratte, *On The Move Inc.*, [www.onthemovetrucks.com](http://www.onthemovetrucks.com)



# Operating VEHICLE STORAGE

## My cousin retired from her

career a few years ago and took a part-time job with a seamstress, scheduling alterations and fittings. She absolutely loves working there because every customer she talks to is happy! The owner is well-known for her work on wedding dresses, so the patrons are excited to be there and looking forward to getting married. Life is great!

Boat/RV-storage customers also tend to be very happy. After all, they have a wonderful, prized toy that helps them enjoy life. It may only be a \$2,500 jon boat, but they can tell you a story about the fish they caught that special day on the lake. For some, it may be a \$500,000 RV they take to football games with friends year after year. For many of these tenants, the item they're storing brings joy. That certainly isn't always the case with traditional self-storage, where renters are often dealing with stressful life circumstances.

But a more cheerful customer base isn't the only thing that's different about boat/RV-storage. This product requires a different operational approach and mindset. If you're angling to add this product to your self-storage business, following is some advice to help you succeed.

## Similar but Different

There are generally three types of vehicle storage: open parking, in which vehicles are fully exposed to the elements; covered or canopy parking, in which there's some protection from the sun and weather; and fully enclosed units. Open parking is the easiest and cheapest to add to an existing self-storage facility. Fully enclosed storage involves the largest initial investment, but the resulting revenue often offsets the additional cost.

On the surface, adding boat/RV storage to a self-storage facility may seem easy. If you have around 10,000 square feet of unused land, why not put down some gravel and mark the area with parking spaces? But the business is more nuanced than many think. For example:

- Your insurance policy may not allow you to store vehicles on site. This has become more common, perhaps due to the recurring theft of catalytic converters. If you decide to offer boat/RV storage, consult with your carrier, so you don't risk losing coverage.
- Vehicle storage usually requires a different lease than self-storage due to unique regulations and legalities.
- Trailers and RVs require a tremendous amount of space to maneuver, and many of their owners aren't all that experienced in driving them. You may think you have a large enough area to add vehicle storage, but it shrinks rapidly when you start laying out adequate driveways and turning spots.

Following are additional considerations for operating boat/RV storage as part of an existing self-storage business.

## Marketing

It's important to understand that the marketing for each of your services—in this case, boat/RV storage and self-storage—needs to be different. You can't simply advertise ABC Storage and expect that prospects will know they can store their large vehicles with you. You'll need to spell this out through pointed efforts.

Keep in mind that not everyone in your market is a prospective vehicle-storage client. In fact, this product has relatively few potential tenants compared to traditional self-storage. But the good news is this allows you to conduct much more specific marketing campaign. For example, you can focus on certain keywords such as boats, camping, RVs and other related terms. You can also geo-tag places future tenants might visit such as camping stores, marinas, boat dealerships and similar businesses. Your marketing can be much more effective this way because you know exactly what the storage need is for your target customer.

When promoting your site, don't underestimate the power of facility design. Again, large vehicles like boats and RVs can be

difficult to move around. If you've created your site for easy access, with plenty of room for drivers to pull off of the street while entering and keypads that are appropriately positioned for higher driver windows, it'll go a long way toward attracting the clientele you seek.

In traditional self-storage marketing, it's common to display pictures of clean units and hallways. For boat/RV storage, make sure you focus on your easy access, wide drive aisles and generous turn radii. Take pictures of these things to illustrate just how large and convenient your site is. That's your best advertisement because ample room is the No. 1 priority of these customers.

## Rules and Regulations

For me, enforcement of good curb appeal is critical at any self-storage facility, but particularly if you offer vehicle storage. This is why, at most of my properties, we limit the age of any cars, boats or RVs that can be stored outside. The last thing we want is 30-year-old junkers with broken windows visible on the lot.

Tenants will sometimes violate this rule, however, which can create a quandary. After all, it can be difficult to evict a paying customer who's current on rent. The upshot is it typically isn't too hard to replace them with a tenant who owns a newer, more attractive vehicle.

Of course, just as with traditional self-storage, there can be delinquent tenants; but how you deal with them is very



“ When promoting your site, don't underestimate the power of facility design.

different. The legal mechanics of selling a titled vehicle are more complicated than taking a regular storage unit to auction. Consult your state statute to confirm what's allowed.

The good news is these instances tend to be rare. It's been several years since our company had to auction a stored vehicle. In contrast, we hold self-storage lien sales every week. It's a massive and enjoyable difference, but simple to understand. After all, how often is a tenant likely to let go of a \$20,000 boat or \$200,000 RV?

## Amenities

Another factor that separates boat/RV storage from traditional self-storage is the amenities you offer customers. These tenants are looking for conveniences such as a dump station and fresh-water hose. Both are important assets for these owners and relatively inexpensive additions for you as the facility operator. Compressed air for filling tires, car-wash bays and electric outlets are also a nice touch. In addition, propane and ice sales are becoming more common.

## A Specialty Service

Not all storage services are the same. Whether you offer wine, document or vehicle storage, you must adapt to the nuances of each. Boat/RV storage is a specialty. It requires a different operational approach. It's also a positive experience to work with customers who appreciate the opportunity to store their prized possessions with you. **ISS**

**Contributor:** Gary Edmonds, Pike Co. Storage, [www.thestoragemanager.com](http://www.thestoragemanager.com)



**Boat and RV sales are still** on the rise, which has spurred many self-storage developers and owners to create rental space for the people who own—and need a place to keep—these specialty vehicles. There isn't just an increasing need for boat/RV storage; the industry requires at least five times the current capacity to meet demand in this burgeoning market niche.

As this sector of the self-storage business evolves and builds momentum, facility operators who offer vehicle storage can benefit from this fundamental industry lesson: Creating customer convenience not only increases tenant satisfaction, it encourages renters to open their wallets wider. Consumers will pay a premium to have the things they need or want at precisely the right moment.

This is why smart self-storage operators have amped up their ancillary products and services. By selling retail products that facilitate packing and moving such as boxes, tape and bubble wrap, they simplify life for their renters and other local customers. The same is true of truck rentals, printing and notary services, pack and ship services, and other handy offering <https://www.tampabay.com/hurricane/2024/10/04/tampa-bay-hurricane-helene-storage-unit-full-hotel-rental-car-problems-st-petersburg—boat-and-RV-storage-among-them!>

If it makes sense to offer add-on amenities to your self-storage customers, why wouldn't you do the same for your boat/RV tenants?

# Boat/RV-Storage Amenities

It's a wise move that not only enhances the customer experience, it pumps up your profit. Read on to find out how.

## Comfort and Convenience

More and more self-storage operators are recognizing the importance of providing a better rental experience for customers that includes a well-designed facility, upgraded security and technology, and "extra" products and services. "As a storage operator, you can make good ancillary income by offering a variety of unit sizes to meet tenants' needs, but you can make even more if you also sell products and supplies that appeal to your toy-storage tenants," says Greg Ellsworth, president of Self Storage Consulting Group, a provider of third-party management and industry consulting. "Offering these must-have items will boost your facility's revenue while providing tenants with conveniences and superb customer service."

Knowledgeable operators are experimenting with an array of comfort and convenience amenities to attract long-term boat/RV-storage tenants such as:

- Free water and ice
- Dump station
- Wash bay
- Propane
- Climate-controlled units
- Electrical hookups
- Specialty retail items such as de-icers and bungee cords

- Access to a pressure gauge and air for tires
- Restrooms and showers
- Extended access hours
- Wi-Fi
- Clubhouses and conference rooms
- Lobbies with couches and TVs
- Beverages and snacks

Many of these amenities can be included with unit pricing, but some operators prefer to take a different route. "The subscription model is making waves in the storage industry," says David Perleschi, senior director of Franklin Street, a commercial real estate and management business. "These plans can offer flexibility along with additional perks and priority access to premium facilities, aligning [with] the demand for hassle-free, personalized storage experiences."

## Options to Add

While the above offerings will meet the needs of nearly every boat/RV-storage customer, don't be afraid to brainstorm more creative ways to please this tenant base. For example, folks who travel with pets will be over the moon if you provide a pet-relief area with water bowls and room to roam. Parents will gleefully allow their kids to wear themselves out at a playground before the long drive ahead. These amenities give customers time to ice down their coolers, check tire pressure and charge their hybrids. (Speaking of hybrid vehicles, maybe consider an electric-vehicle charging station.)

Another great way to turn your self-storage site into a one-stop shop is to partner with a local mechanic or boat/RV dealership to offer onsite vehicle inspections and repairs. This is especially handy for tenants who need to quickly patch a tire or top off their oil before hitting the road.

Some premier self-storage operators are also experimenting with luxury valet services. Customers can call ahead and request that their vehicle be parked at the front of the site just before they arrive. To take things a step farther, you might wash the tenant's boat or RV upon their return to the facility, before parking it back in the storage space.

"I think the valet service is a huge delineating point for us, because we have

relationships with our customers," says Jeff Beyer, owner of Central Virginia Indoor Boat & RV Storage in Amelia Court House, Virginia. "Some of them are retired and have time to strike up a conversation, and they just love to talk about their new RV, boats and cars. Either way, they appreciate the personalized service that valeting adds to the experience."

### Wrapping It Up

With the dearth of boat/RV-storage facilities nationwide, some self-storage owners believe that stringing a chain across the entry of a dirt parking lot is all they need to do to start raking in profit. Those who are savvy recognize that this niche is in an explosive growth mode, and it won't be long before competition

intensifies. Customers will eventually be drawn to a classier facility that offers higher levels of protection for their precious vehicles while giving them the royal treatment they'll cherish for many years to come.

"Amenities are often a driving factor for these owners, who seek more than just a parking space," says Barry Sherman, founder of S3 Partners, a self-storage development and consulting firm. "As the demand for high-quality storage facilities grows, owners and operators must consider value-added features to set them apart, which will draw long-term tenants and greater profit." **ISS**

**Contributor:** Drew Whitney, *Toy Storage Nation*, [www.toystoragenation.com](http://www.toystoragenation.com)



**Among the many products** and services a self-storage operator might consider adding to their core business to create ancillary income, wine storage is perhaps the most sophisticated. It has very specific requirements. Still, in the right market, it can produce robust revenue.

A primary perk of offering wine storage in a self-storage environment is product diversification. The goal is to attract as many types of customers as possible. "The more storage needs a customer can meet at the

same location, the better," says Lenorah Durel, operations manager for Elmwood Self Storage & Wine Cellar in Harahan, Louisiana.

In addition, wine storage often yields higher revenue per square foot than traditional self-storage. One reason is wine enthusiasts are willing to pay a premium for certain physical conditions, says Cameron Sieradzan, brand marketing manager at The Carroll Cos., which operates Bee Safe Storage and Wine Cellar.

At Vineburg Wine and Self Storage in Sonoma, California, locker-style wine-storage

units are stacked three high, which means three times the revenue from the same square footage, according to Greg Van Cleave, the facility's managing member and sole proprietor.

For these and other reasons, wine storage can greatly enhance a self-storage operation, but it comes with unique costs and market needs. Let's explore the top considerations for starting—and sustaining—a wine-storage business.

### Location

Wine-storage operators and developers agree: The success of this niche is closely tied to property location. "It's all about demand," says David Meinecke, vice president of Jordan Architects, which has developed several self-storage facilities that offer this service. "It's vital that ownership assesses the need for wine storage in the market prior to considering the addition. Wine storage can be a great component, but it doesn't do well in all markets."

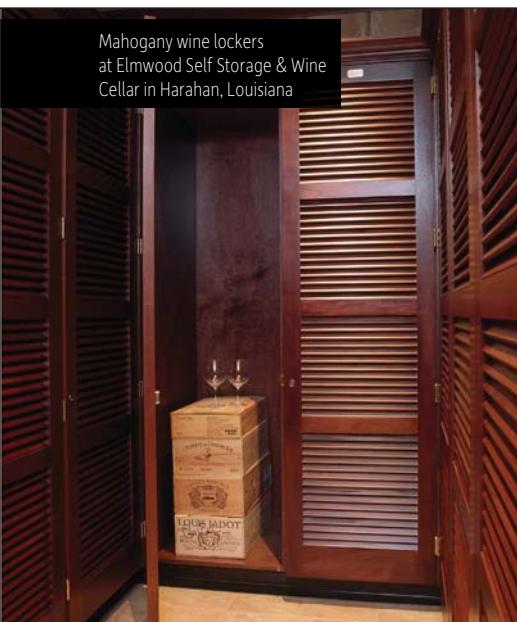
Durel suggests conducting a market study to ensure your location has ample need for the service. An additional way to gauge demand is to evaluate nearby wine-storage operations. "If ownership is seeing other facilities, perhaps even in the 10- to 15-mile radius, doing well and with stabilized occupancy, this is a good indicator that the market could use additional product," Meinecke explains.

Facility location can also dictate the type of wine storage to offer. For example, Vineburg is in an area known for its vineyards and wineries. To accommodate larger customers, the facility includes warehouse-style storage in addition to individual wine lockers. Clients can store their collections on shelving units and

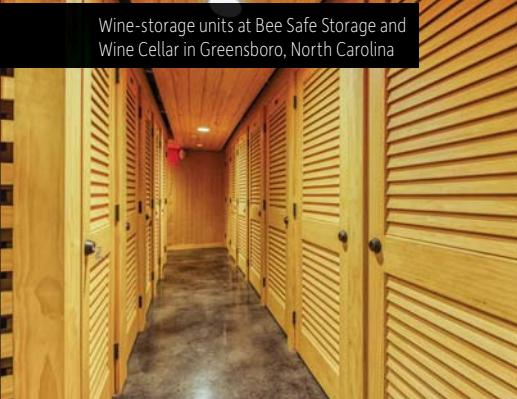
A wine-storage unit at Vineburg Wine & Self Storage in Sonoma, California  
(Photo courtesy of Jordan Architects)



Mahogany wine lockers at Elmwood Self Storage & Wine Cellar in Harahan, Louisiana



Wine-storage units at Bee Safe Storage and Wine Cellar in Greensboro, North Carolina



pallets, or in large metal crates. Both options are secured against earthquakes, which are common in the area.

Carl's Wine Vault in Naples, Florida, another area well-known for wine collection, also provides commercial or "large collector" units in addition to smaller ones. The former consists of 10-by-10-foot, drywalled rooms. The latter is simply a 10-by-10-foot section of warehouse floor, ideal for clients who need more space, according to Linda Lesh, director of client services.

### Design

Looks have become increasingly important in self-storage facility design, and the need for visual appeal is often higher still for wine storage. "Aesthetics matter, as they create a premium image," Sieradzan says. He advises the use of attractive wine racks to showcase the product being stored and facilitate organization.

A great way to add luxury to a wine-storage area is to use upscale features at the entryway, such as etched glass, decorative door frames and wall art, Meinecke says. "In addition, digital displays reflecting the temperature and humidity of the space help illustrate that you are serious about wine."

Using custom cabinetry in lieu of metal construction is another nice touch. Elmwood's units have wooden, slatted doors, for example. Not only are these more extravagant, the slats facilitate airflow, which helps keep the temperature accurate, Durel says.

Including an adjacent customer lounge or outdoor patio is a great way to cater to a more affluent tenant. Like many operations, Carl's offers wine-tasting areas for customer use.

Jordan Architects likes to continue the design theme to the facility exterior, often including wine-country elements like barrels, fountains and lighting. "It's a good idea to spend a little more money in these areas, as people paying to store their collection typically want to be sold on the facility catering to wine owners as opposed to an afterthought addition to a self-storage facility," Meinecke explains.

### Equipment

Wine storage requires specific physical conditions to ward off spoilage. To appease collectors, restaurants and other clients, this means paying close attention to temperature and humidity. Some facilities offer only temperature control, Meinecke says, but it isn't enough. Though the necessary climate-control equipment is an added expense, it's critical to success. When working on your project budget, include funds for equipment acquisition but also for ongoing maintenance.

"There is certainly an added expense with these features. However, the amount of space

with these elements is typically nominal compared to the overall size and subsequent operation costs of the facility as a whole," Meinecke adds.

Vineburg uses a network of sensors throughout its wine-storage area to ensure environmental consistency. "You definitely want to have a monitoring system," Van Cleave says. "If someone's wine goes bad, you need to be able to go back and look at your records and see that the temperature stayed the same the entire time they were there."

Building insulation should also be a consideration for wine storage, as it helps maintain those precious air conditions. For this reason, Carl's added an extra 5 to 8 inches in the ceiling and floor. "It's expensive enough to cool the area, but if you're losing the cool or inviting heat in, you've just shot yourself in the foot," Lesh says.

A back-up power source is another critical piece of machinery in a wine-storage facility. In the event of an outage, it's important to be able to maintain the right temperature and humidity. Vineburg uses a propane-powered generator. The facility has experienced several outages in recent years. "You definitely don't want millions of dollars of wine to go bad on your watch," Van Cleave says.

Carl's has both solar- and diesel-powered generators. The former is the facility's first line of defense, according to Lesh. "When [Hurricane] Ian came and we ended up powerless, the solar kicked in and we had power. It was no problem whatsoever."

Finally, invest in a strong security system. Wine can be extremely valuable, and your storage clients will want to know you've done everything you can to protect their precious collection from damage and theft. Meinecke suggests building the wine-storage area adjacent to the management office, so it's always in sight. This personal vigilance complements the digital surveillance and coded entry, he says.

### Amenities

Adding services to your self-storage operation that complement wine storage is important for attracting potential customers. It can also set you apart from the competition. For example, consider accepting wine deliveries on behalf of tenants. "The delivery drivers bring the shipments directly to the wine unit," Durel says. "The customer can always call and check to see if it has arrived. It's always fun to hear the excitement in a customer's voice when you confirm [that it has]."

Carl's also offers a "pack-up and pick-up" service for wine-storage customers. Facility staff will properly pack the tenant's wine and transport it to the facility in a refrigerated

van. "These are people who are in the above-average income [range], and they know the value of their wine, and they don't want to schlep it around," Lesh says.

## Marketing

Once you've developed your wine-storage area, how are you going to fill it? This is a unique offering that targets a specific audience, which means your marketing may require a fresh approach.

Many facility operators have grown their tenant base by connecting with other

wine-specific businesses and groups. Sieradzan advises reaching out to wine clubs, collectors and local wineries as well as participating in wine-related events. Elmwood has developed partnerships with community wine shops, offering a bonus when one of the vendor's customers rents a wine-storage unit based on their referral.

You may need to think outside the box with your wine-storage marketing, but you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Elmwood has found success by simply emailing current customers about its services, Durel says. Lesh

attributes 40% of her facility's wine-storage business to basic signage.

Still unsure about whether this niche is right for your self-storage business? Don't feel pressured to go all-in right away. "We have seen some facilities bet on wine storage only to later turn the space into standard self-storage or auxiliary office space," Meinecke says. "When you start small, you're playing it safe and dipping your toe in the wine-storage market." **ISS**

**Contributor:** Rachel French, Freelance Author

# Tenant INSURANCE



## Thanks to the protections

established within the self-storage rental agreement, facility operators aren't responsible for theft of or damage to tenants' stored property. If your property managers are doing their job right, your customers are clearly told this at the time of rental. However, many renters will forget; and if they suffer a loss, they're often surprised when they're reminded of this fact.

To help ease the difficulty of these situations and avoid unpleasant interactions with customers, it's wise to require that tenants carry some form of insurance. The trouble is most homeowner's and renter's policies aren't a great solution. The deductibles are often quite high, and they sometimes limit or exclude coverage for off-site property.

The perfect answer can be offering a tenant-insurance program at your self-storage facility. This product financially protects your customers' stored goods and provides peace of mind. For a monthly fee, your renter gets coverage for their items in the event of a loss, up to the agreed upon amount. If an incident occurs, they file a claim and deal directly with your provider. The cherry on top of this cake is that you as the facility operator enjoy a portion of the

revenue created, which creates a fresh new profit center for your operation.

Let's look at some of the key elements to choosing a tenant-insurance program and things you should know about implementation.

## Factors to Choosing a Program

Having the right tenant-insurance product in place can positively impact your self-storage facility's customer experience, thereby boosting loyalty and retention. However, there are many programs available within the industry, and they aren't all the same. In fact, there can be significant differences between them. To help you choose a product that'll be a good fit for your customers and business, let's discuss a few of the finer points.

**Coverage needs.** First, it's important to consider your self-storage facility's features and location along with any prior incidents resulting in tenant claims. In short, you need to analyze your business strengths and weaknesses. For example, if your property is near a body of water, you may want to consider a program that provides flood coverage for stored property. Ask potential providers what exposures they cover and at what levels.

## Customer service and claims filing.

Consider each provider's infrastructure and process. Suffering a property loss can be devastating to tenants. How your insurance company handles a claim isn't only a reflection of their product but, by extension, the quality of your self-storage operation. Today's customers expect convenient service as well as personalized and timely response. So, take note of each provider's business hours. Do they have an experienced and professional claims team? What technologies do they use?

**Legal aspects.** Insurance is a heavily regulated business, often with complex licensing and compliance requirements. Laws are constantly changing, and they vary from state to state. Thus, it's important to select a tenant-insurance program with an administrator who'll help you navigate these waters in every state in which you operate.

**Marketing.** How you market your tenant-insurance program often depends on conditions outlined by the administrator; however, they'll often provide you with useful brochures, FAQ (frequently asked questions) documents and signage. They should also help you send announcements to existing tenants and introduce the new offering.

## More Benefits for Tenants

Many tenant-insurance programs offer coverage for perils that are specific to self-storage but not covered under all homeowners or renters policies. For example, falling objects, building collapse, and the weight of ice, sleet or snow aren't typically covered under basic-form homeowners policies. In contrast, these items are all covered under tenant insurance, no matter what policy form a customer has. In addition, coverage against perils such as rodents, mold, mildew and flood are offered by select tenant-insurance programs. Some even offer other protections such as compensation for a substitute rental space or debris removal as well as coverage for damages sustained in transit within 100 miles of the facility.

**Source:** [insideselfstorage.com](http://insideselfstorage.com), "Busting 5 Misconceptions About Self-Storage Tenant Insurance," by Brynn Lee

**Enrollment.** Some tenant-insurance programs require new self-storage customers to either provide proof of private coverage or elect their product at the time of rental. Others provide an at-will option to enroll. Some will even integrate with your facility-management software and may have unique onboarding processes.

Depending on the provider, they may have an option for automatic enrollment in which the premium is waived by the insurance company for the first 30 days. This approach can be a nice marketing touch and helps simplify the buying process. The main consideration is helping the customer determine the right coverage for their needs.

### Revenue Potential

For many self-storage operators, the big question is how much revenue they can generate by selling tenant insurance. Each provider may offer a different compensation plan. The key is to understand the parameters under which you'll be paid. You'll want to know the

rate structure as well as any obligations, expectations and applicable licensing requirements to help you choose a program your operation can support.

For example, if the payment structure is based on sales, how are you required to sell the insurance, and are you fully licensed and compliant in your state? You also must consider if you have the staff to support the sales process and complete transactions. Alternatively, payment may be based on occupancy. In this scenario, you'll likely be compensated based on the offer of insurance, not individual sales.

Offering a reputable tenant-insurance program tells your self-storage tenants that you value their business. You're providing an option for coverage that'll provide protection and peace of mind while their property is stored at your facility. **ISS**

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# The Psychology of Risk



## Most self-storage operators

**offer** some form of tenant insurance, which provides a safety net for customers' stored belongings and protects against potential financial losses. It covers a range of risks, including natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, hurricanes and tornadoes. It can also protect against theft or burglary and may cover damage caused by fire, water, mold and other threats.

As a self-storage operator, it's important to understand how your customers think and the factors that influence their decision to purchase insurance and in what quantities. In this article, we'll explore how peoples' brains process the perception of risk as well as the impact of

emotions and economic factors on their buying behavior. You'll get insight to the subtle forces that guide your renters' decisions, so you can more effectively communicate the benefits of tenant insurance and close more sales.

### The Perception of Risk

Risk perception refers to the way in which a customer comprehends the probability and impact of negative events. It plays a crucial role in their decision of whether to obtain insurance for their items in self-storage. Essentially, they're assessing the likelihood of something going wrong and the severity of the consequences if it does. Risk perception is influenced by several factors:

**Personal experience.** If a customer has ever had an item stolen or damaged while it was in storage, they're more likely to believe it can happen again. These experiences can make future losses seem more probable and real.

**Socio-cultural.** A tenant's background and values can influence their perception of risk. Some

cultures encourage caution and believe that it's important to safeguard possessions. Conversely, in communities with a strong sense of trust and security, perceived risk might be lower.

**Value of stored items.** Tenants are more likely to perceive risk around belongings they cherish, ones that have monetary or sentimental value.

**Cognitive biases.** Our brains can sometimes misinterpret information. For example, if a customer hears about a self-storage theft, they may overestimate the likelihood of such an event happening to them. I'll address this in more detail below.

A self-storage customer's perceived level of risk directly influences whether they decide to purchase tenant insurance. Those who sense a higher risk are more likely to opt for coverage to mitigate potential financial losses. The extent of perceived risk also affects *how much* insurance a customer will purchase. Those who are more sensitive to risk may opt for comprehensive coverage, while those with a lower perception may choose more basic options.

### Cognitive Biases

Humans don't always make logical choices, and that's because we have cognitive biases that can distort our judgement. Let's explore what these might be when a self-storage customer is deciding whether to purchase tenant insurance.

**Loss-aversion bias.** This is a tendency to avoid loss over acquiring gain. If a self-storage customer fears losing their stored items, it can drive them to purchase tenant insurance. In other words, the emotional attachment to their belongings can override a rational assessment of the actual risk.

**Optimism bias.** It's common for customers to underestimate the likelihood of negative events happening to them vs. someone else. Those affected by this bias may believe that self-storage tenant insurance is unnecessary and may decline to purchase it, even when it could provide valuable protection against potential loss.

**Availability heuristic.** This is a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples when evaluating a situation. Let's say a customer recently heard a news story about a self-storage fire or theft. This may skew their risk perception and cause them to believe that these events are more common than they actually are. As a result, they may be more likely to purchase tenant insurance, even if the actual likelihood of these occurrences is low.

**Anchoring effect.** This refers to a person's tendency to rely heavily on the first piece of information they receive—the anchor—when making decisions. When considering self-storage tenant insurance, an initial exposure to a high

or low premium can *anchor* their expectations and influence their purchasing decisions. If they come across a price that's higher or lower than what they anticipate, they may make a snap judgement rather than comprehensively assess their insurance needs. They may ultimately over-insure or under-insure, depending on whether the initial quote they received was perceived as high or low.

### Tipping the Scales in Your Favor

Understanding the factors that impact a self-storage customer's perceived risk and the cognitive biases under which they may operate can help you tailor your tenant-insurance offering and communication to meet their needs. To help them make better-informed decisions, consider these strategies:

**Provide education and awareness.** Help your customers understand the risks of using self-storage, providing information about theft and various types of damage so their perception is accurate. Launch educational campaigns through various channels including your website, brochures and during the initial rental to help prospects understand the need for coverage and its advantages.

**Be transparent.** Offer honest and accurate information about the likelihood and potential impact of storage-related risks. This will

allow tenants to recalibrate their perceptions and help them develop a more realistic understanding of what it's like to rent a unit. Through clarity, you'll help them make more informed decisions about insurance coverage.

#### Encourage rational decision-making.

Offer tools and resources to help self-storage customers objectively evaluate their risk. Many insurance companies offer online platforms that help renters assess their exposure, evaluate the need for coverage and compare options. These should be easy to use and provide clear, objective information so tenants can make informed choices.

The decision to invest in self-storage tenant insurance depends on many considerations. While your facility's physical safety and security are important, psychological elements also play a significant role.

Understanding the psychology of risk is crucial for all self-storage operators. You can better customize your services and communication strategies by knowing how perceptions and biases affect customer decision-making. This knowledge helps your prospects make better insurance choices, which will ultimately benefit your business. **ISS**

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# Tenant-Protection Plans

**In the ever-competitive self-storage** industry, operators continually seek ways to enhance profitability while ensuring customer satisfaction. Among the challenges they face is how to safeguard tenant belongings from potential damage or theft.

Traditional leases generally relinquish the self-storage operator from liability for stored goods, which can leave renters concerned about potential losses. This is where offering a tenant-protection plan can enhance your customer experience without raising your own risk. Such a program can benefit the business as well as its users. I'll explain how it works, how it differs from tenant insurance, the advantages to facility owners and tenants, and how to choose a provider.

### How It Works

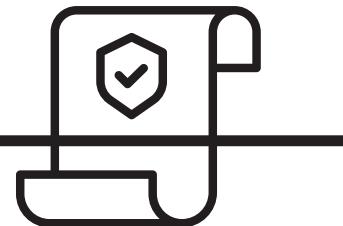
At its core, a tenant-protection plan is an agreement between the self-storage operator and a provider who offers coverage against the loss of tenants' stored belongings due

to damage or theft. The tenant agrees to participation via the rental agreement and pays a monthly fee, usually \$12 to \$25. If an incident occurs, the customer files a claim, and the plan reimburses them up to the selected coverage level, typically ranging from \$2,000 to \$5,000. While the plan is referred to as "protection" rather than insurance to avoid regulatory complexities, it offers comprehensive coverage.

### How It Differs From Tenant Insurance

It's essential to understand how a self-storage tenant-protection plan differs from traditional tenant insurance, as these distinctions can significantly affect owners and customers.

**Regulations and licensing.** Unlike tenant insurance, a tenant-protection plan isn't subject to regulations in most states. This means you don't need insurance licenses, fingerprinting or errors-and-omission insurance to market your plan, thereby eliminating a layer of complexity and cost.



**Flexible terms.** With this type of plan, you work in concert with your provider to determine your rates, commission and terms. This allows you to customize the program to suit the specific goals and needs of the business.

**Coverage for negligence.** A tenant-protection plan covers losses beyond your control, including facility negligence. This eliminates the uncertainty that can exist with tenant insurance when it comes to subrogation and transfer of risk.

With a subrogation clause, an insurance company could sue a self-storage owner to recoup payouts for tenant claims if an incident occurred due to business negligence. Similarly, insurers may use a transfer of rights of recovery—essentially stepping into the tenant's shoes—to go after anyone who might have caused the damage and get their money back.

This is why self-storage rental agreements often include a waiver of subrogation, under

Tenant-Protection Plans vs. Tenant Insurance		
	Tenant Protection	Tenant Insurance
Regulations	None	Subject in all states
Licensing	None	Required
Terms	Flexible options determined by provider and owner	Standardized policies with limited customization determined by Department of Insurance Rates and Commissions
Deductible	No	Yes
Negligence	Covered	May exclude certain losses and negligence
Claims	Filed directly by the tenant to the provider's in-house team or a third-party claims administrator	Filed directly by the tenant to the provider, though process can be lengthy due to subrogation and transfer-of-risk clauses
Changes	Owner may make changes at any time with 30-day notification to tenant	Changes must be approved by state insurance department before tenant can be notified
Cancellation	Tied to lease ending, no tenant notification necessary	Letter must be issued to tenant

*Source: Tenant Property Protection*

which the tenant agrees their insurance company won't sue the facility if something happens to their belongings, even if it was the operator's fault. The problem is if the tenant signs off on the waiver without the knowledge of the insurer, the insurer might not cover the tenant at all because they want the option to get their money back from the storage business.

A tenant-protection plan often eliminates this issue. In the event something goes wrong, it's like a safety net that removes the tenant from being stuck in the middle of any protracted legal battle or potential push of liability back onto the storage facility.

**Claims.** A tenant-protection plan streamlines the process, with claims paid directly to tenants by the provider. This reduces administrative hassle for self-storage operators and ensures a smoother resolution for renters.

At the heart of a tenant-protection plan is its ability to effectively transfer risk and offer a straightforward solution for loss. As the self-storage operator, you can revise your lease to include mandatory protection-plan language or require proof of outside insurance. An additional addendum clarifies that liability for tenant belongings transfers to the protection provider up to the plan limits. This transfer of risk not only provides a solid legal framework but eases concerns and uncertainties for owners and tenants.

### Advantages for Operators

A critical advantage of a tenant-protection plan is it covers losses even if an incident is due to negligence by the self-storage operation. This offers a more comprehensive level of protection for owners and tenants. Here are some other primary benefits:

**Greater revenue.** These plans can boost income by 5% to 8%, thereby increasing facility

value by as much as 12%. This is particularly attractive to investors and potential buyers.

**Claim processing.** A good provider handles claims in a direct but documented manner, reducing the administrative burden for the self-storage facility and boosting business reputation.

**No license required.** Most states require self-storage owners to secure and regularly update a license to sell tenant insurance, but this isn't necessary with a tenant-protection plan. This saves time and money, and streamlines the sales process.

**Flexible terms.** Protection plans offer flexibility in setting rates, coverage limits, commissions and other terms. Through language in your rental agreement, you also have an opportunity to auto-enroll tenants.

**Reduced sales burden.** Many protection-plan providers offer turnkey solutions that can be bundled right into your self-storage lease. This makes it easy for you to implement the program and for tenants to enroll.

### Benefits to Tenants

**Easy sign-up.** Whether conducted on site or online, the enrollment process is typically streamlined and easy, saving customers time and effort.

**Affordability.** Protection plans are generally more cost-effective than traditional tenant insurance. Though monthly pricing may be equal in some cases, the critical savings come from not having to pay a deductible for claim losses—a tremendous advantage over programs that have multiple deductions, stop losses and actual cash value (depreciated value) for claims loss.

**Simple claims process.** Tenants can report claims directly to the protection provider, which ensures a quick resolution.

**Broad coverage and reimbursement.** Protection plans offer comprehensive

coverage, including losses due to facility negligence. Customers should be reimbursed for the full replacement cost to repair or replace their lost or damaged property.

### Choosing a Protection Partner

Selecting a tenant-protection plan is an important consideration that can significantly impact the success of your program. When weighing your options, consider the following factors:

- Insurance rating:** Look for a solid insurance rating (A or higher) to ensure reliability and trustworthiness.
- Revenue sharing:** Seek favorable terms that align with your business goals.
- Turnkey solutions:** Choose bundled options that simplify the implementation process.
- Marketing resources:** A strong partner should help you promote the plan and enroll customers.
- Transparent reporting:** This will help you easily track plan performance.
- Integration capabilities:** Your program should integrate with and enhance your facility software to further increase operational efficiency.

Adding a tenant-protection plan to your self-storage service mix can boost revenue, mitigate risk and provide peace of mind to you and your customers. By understanding benefits and selecting a reputable partner, you'll be able to deliver value to customers while maximizing your profitability. Protection plans aren't just an add-on; they're a strategic investment in the future of your operation. **ISS**

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