Maintaining Maintenance

A yearly checklist can prevent smaller problems from becoming bigger problems.

By John Dunlap

Most men and women are all-too-aware of the “honey-do list,” and everyone has heard about spring cleaning. But how many people in self storage put together a yearly “maintenance checklist?”

If you are an owner/operator or manager, you probably should pick a date each year to organize one. Of course, many larger self storage companies have checklists for their employees to be updated weekly, monthly and quarterly.

The idea, of course, is to head off maintenance problems before they occur. They can involve issues of safety, security, water leakage and general appearance.

It may be the difference between happy customers or someone storming into your office to ask why everything in their unit has been ruined by a leaky roof. Or grilling you on why thieves made their way onto your property because your security gate was out of commission. Or inquiring as to why the outside of your facility looks bad compared to your competition down the street.

“I think it is very important for owner/operators to put together a yearly checklist of maintenance needs, because that means they are proactive rather than reactive,” said Jamey Fawcett, president and COO of Accent Building Restoration (ABR), Inc., which has been in business since 1994.

“By being proactive, they are keeping their properties functioning at a higher efficiency level, as well as saving money,” he said. “Reacting to a problem is more costly and usually means more work than would have been the case if the property was on a routine maintenance schedule.”

Jamey’s brother, Andy Fawcett, the CEO of All From 1 Supply—which provides construction, building and maintenance supplies with an emphasis on the specialized needs of the self storage industry—agrees.

“The old saying of ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure’ is especially true when it comes to facility maintenance,” said Andy. “When left undone, costs become exponentially more expensive.”

Andy cites a few examples: “A metal door can easily be painted for $50 when it starts to first show weathering; allowed to go too long, it will cost several hundred dollars to replace; if fluorescent bulbs are not changed quickly, it can cause the ballast to go out too; gutters not cleaned can cause roof leaks; roll doors not properly tensioned can lead to springs breaking, or worse yet, injuries; and swing doors not closing properly can lead to torqueing. It is a lot cheaper to service air conditioners yearly than to replace them after five years.”

Where to Begin?

Any self storage facility owner/operator or manager should heed the call to establish a maintenance checklist day, but where to begin? Needs may vary based on how old or new a facility is and what the weather is like in the area. Facilities in hot areas will definitely have different needs than those in cold-weather zones.

At Advantage Storage in Texas, the key concerns are heat and lack of rain. Its 18 Texas facilities (soon to be joined by more in the Oklahoma City area) not only have quarterly checklists that need attending to, but also weekly and monthly.

“Heat is a major concern for us,” said Corey Horne, COO of Advantage Storage. “Our soil around the buildings needs to stay moist because the concrete and metal can shift in the extreme ongoing heat. So, foundation spraying is a must. We also put energy efficient coating on our roofs.
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And we have to be sure that our air conditioning is working for the customers, as well as our climate control.

Horne also addressed other items on the Advantage Storage checklist concerning the heat.

“We check air filters and coils for our AC units on a quarterly basis. We also have to regularly monitor our climate control because of customers changing the temperatures. The point is that we make sure our managers have checklists to use, and they serve a very useful purpose.”

For Main Road Self Storage (MRSS), a family-owned business with two facilities in South Carolina (Johns Island and Summerville), a huge part of putting together a checklist has to do with the weather, overall appearance and bugs.

“Outside maintenance such as landscaping needs to be done weekly,” said Ryan Buck, owner of MRSS. “We have a tropical climate and the grass grows quickly. Pruning the shrubs and trees yearly is also important.

“Also, we power wash the building once or twice a year. We have a lot of bugs in South Carolina that tend to build their nests on and around the buildings—spiders, mud daubers, wasps, etc. Power washing the building is not only important to keep the building looking clean and fresh but also important for the safety of the customers.”

Buck’s checklist regularly includes facility lighting.

“Replacing burnt out light bulbs is important,” Buck added. “A well-lighted facility not only shows off the facility, but it is also important for the safety of your customers.”

“Obviously, weatherizing in the cold climates is a high priority,” added Andy Fawcett. “Corrosion in wet climates or those close to the ocean should also be watched closely. Hot climates put more stress on all things mechanical as well as rubber seals and gaskets. Those in hurricane, tornado or other high wind areas also have unique needs to be reviewed.”

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In Summary: Check!

So you now have a good idea regarding the need to stay up to speed at your facility with a yearly maintenance checklist. Here are items our experts said you should consider including when putting together your checklist:

• Life safety (fire extinguishers, exit signs, sprinkler systems, ADA compliance)
• Access controls (gate operator, keypads, etc.)
• Roof inspections
• Siding/flashing inspections (leakage)
• Security system checks
• General appearance, especially frontage of property
• Signage
• Keep your place aesthetically appealing—make sure the place is free of trash, and doors and hallways are clean
• Monitor the big-ticket items like air conditioning units (fresh filters, coils)
• You also need to consider the sort of vendors who you will be working with to keep your place in top-notch condition.

“Always make sure the company is licensed and insured,” added Jamey Fawcett. “Ask for and check references. Does the company have line item pricing for the work they do, or is everything done on a time and materials basis? How long have they been in business, and have they done work similar to what they would be doing at your property?”

Fawcett also feels that being too frugal can work against you, as well as not finding a company that understands the self storage business.

“Cheap is not always best when hiring a company,” Fawcett concludes. “As the saying goes, ‘you get what you pay for.’ Doing your homework is a must. Finding a company that specializes in the self storage business is always a plus, as they will be more in tune with the specific needs of the industry.”

“The old saying of ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure’ is especially true when it comes to facility maintenance.”

~ Andy Fawcett, All From 1 Supply

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