

# Everything Old is New Again

*Sometimes tried-and-true techniques still work the best.*

By John Dunlap

In the movie “All That Jazz,” one of the musical production numbers echoes the refrain, “Everything old is new again!” And while nostalgia can be a potent part of our memories of happy times, it should not be counted out as an important part of marketing in self storage. Indeed, when *SSA Globe* recently spoke to a number of marketing gurus in the industry about the value of old-fashioned promotions, the concept was met with almost universal acclaim.

That acclaim is especially resounding in an era when owner/operators and managers may have to watch their advertising and marketing dollars more closely. In the good times (which seem to be on their way back), self storage professionals may be a little more free to try a variety of modern-day techniques, notably those associated with the Internet. But in good times and bad, some old-fashioned techniques still have validity.

Remember the “Get Out Into the Community” concept? Still valid. How about the “Host Chamber of Commerce Gatherings” or “Attend City Functions” strategies? Still golden. And there is always the “Drive-By Appeal” and “Word of Mouth” angles. Solid gold. The great thing about all these marketing concepts is that they can be accomplished without spending much money.

We spoke with Susan Barrow of Pankey Properties in Alabama, Jim DiNardo of Jim DiNardo Consulting in Massachusetts, Jay Graham of Self Storage Advisors in Idaho and H. L. (Hank) Saipe of Frederick Ross Company in Colorado to get their opinion on the value of old-time

marketing concepts versus modern-day techniques. Their thoughts follow.

**With so many new Web-based marketing techniques out there these days (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, etc.), why do some of the old-time marketing techniques (like getting out in the community, good signage, customer word of mouth) still stand tall?**

**Saipe:** With all of my properties, when we do evaluations on how our customers find our place, the answer is “drive-by” followed by “repeat/referred customers,” says Saipe. “As of January 2010, we will no longer be advertising in the big yellow pages book. I hope this is not a big mistake, but I always ask customers/friends when was the last time they used yellow pages compared to the Internet. I really think that the yellow pages is history. Knowing that drive-by is very important in getting new customers, I try to have my places look well landscaped, clean, and I ask myself, “Is this a place that my customers would like to do business with?”

**DiNardo:** Just because more and more people are using the Internet to learn about new products and services, it doesn’t mean they are living their lives in a (computer) vacuum. For example, people still drive around in their cars (more so than ever, actually), so signage and visibility will always be at the top of the list. People are also more active than ever in their communities—participating in charities, business associations, networking forums, etc.—

*See Marketing Techniques, page 20*



H. L. (Hank) Saipe  
Frederick Ross Co.  
Colorado



Susan Barrow  
Pankey Properties  
Alabama



Jim DiNardo  
Jim DiNardo Consulting  
Massachusetts



Jay Graham  
Self Storage Advisors  
Idaho

so there are more opportunities to get your company name in front of people. And, although people may not do as much homework and “asking around” when renting a storage unit as they might when buying a new car or an electronic device of some sort, word of mouth will always be at the top of the list. In fact, computers and the Internet make it easier today to poll your friends, relatives and people you know when making a purchase of some sort, so you could argue that good old word of mouth recognition is more important than ever.

**Barrow:** We have tried many forms of marketing, but none work better than word of mouth, good signage and community relations.

**Graham:** These challenging times have helped owners and managers focus on what marketing techniques work best for them in their markets. Many owners and managers are returning to the basics because the techniques work and they can be more affordable than modern marketing channels. When times were easy most of us got a little lazy and stopped doing many of the small, time-tested marketing techniques that kept our facilities full. The best thing about these old-time techniques is, they are mostly inexpensive but on the other hand can be very time consuming. They are the first things we stop when we hit our income or occupancy goals.

#### Tell us some ways in which old-fashioned marketing actually is more desirable than modern techniques.

**DiNardo:** I think desirability of marketing techniques boils down to two issues: cost and effectiveness, not necessarily old versus new. For example, operators might prefer to drop yellow pages advertising completely because Internet marketing can be less expensive, but the last time I checked (which was yesterday), there are still a lot of storage ads in the books. So, to answer the question...I don't think it's really a case of old fashioned marketing being more desirable, it's all about effectiveness. That being said, I'm sure many operators (especially since storage has always been dubbed a “people business”) would prefer to host a chamber of commerce meeting or do something to be out in the public's (physical) eye, versus advertising on the Internet where you never get to communicate with people in person. But, again, at the end of the day it comes down to rentals and focusing on what works, which is why tracking is critical.

**Barrow:** One of our managers has developed great phone solicitation skills, calling area apartment managers, realtors, fellow chamber members and other prospects to inform them of our facility and services. It seems that the personal touch has especially good results in the South or smaller markets, where we market with cold calls or

revisits to restaurants, hair and nail salons, professional groups, associations, strip malls, moving companies and large corporations. They are all good, because they will refer their customers to us if we have made the effort to establish even a casual relationship.

**Graham:** I noticed over the last few years that many of the managers I know have lost touch with the community and people of influence. These relationships are free, normally very successful in generating leads and keep the owners/managers in touch with what is going on in the market. Your facility will market itself to potential clients. Curb appeal can also be an inexpensive and overlooked item. Are there some exterior burnt out light bulbs that can be changed, flower beds that could use some attention or cobwebs that need to be swept? All of these are little things that can make a difference to some clients and take very little time and money to attend to.

#### Is there a happy medium between old and new marketing techniques? What would be your perfect combination of the two?

**Saibe:** The most important part of the rental to a new customer is: How good is the manager behind the desk? I can develop a great site in an excellent location that is very clean, but if the manager is not attentive to the customer's needs the sale will not happen. Hiring great managers means: Do you have a good place for them to live; what is the office layout; is there plenty of sunlight; and are the managers treated with respect and paid decent money?

**Graham:** Make sure to focus on the tried-and-true and implement the new. It is great if you are Twittering daily about your facility's Facebook page, as this helps increase your Google ranking so a client finds you listed first on the Internet. But what if the client has trouble finding your facility because your signage is blocked by an overgrown bush, and when they do find your facility they trip over a step because the light bulb is burnt out and you are overpriced because you have not kept in touch with the market?

**DiNardo:** The perfect combination depends upon the facility and the market it's serving. Self storage is a fragmented industry, which is why experienced operators always say, “it depends upon local market conditions.” Advertising is no different. You have to track how your customers are hearing about you and make adjustments accordingly. I've heard some operators say they are rapidly shifting to Internet-based advertising, while others stand by yellow pages, drive-by, and other tried-and-true marketing. The happy medium is a function of what is working!

**Barrow:** I wish I knew the perfect combination or the exact size ad or the amount of money to spend on marketing. Results vary so much, I just keep trying anything and everything. ❖