

Sharon Ruble Markets In Step with the Military

By John Dunlap

When Sharon Ruble watches the news, she pays particular attention to international doings in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's not that she has a particular fascination with that area of the world, it's just that her success in self storage is tied-in directly to U.S. military maneuvers. If ever a self storage facility manager's ups and downs could be traced to the escalation and de-escalation of troops, it would be Ruble and her Circle Drive Self Storage facility in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

You see, Ft. Carson is located only 15 miles away from Circle Drive Self Storage and the movement of troops is a constant concern for Ruble.

"There can be an extreme difference in one day to the next in this business, so we start each day prepared for whatever that day may hand us," Ruble says. "Our business seems to wax and wane at the hand of how the military deployments are moving at Ft. Carson, which regularly sends battalions to Iraq and Afghanistan. So when we have a deployment getting ready to leave or a deployment returning, our 564-unit property gears up to be real busy with such tasks as getting all those troops moved in and settled, marketing to those prospects, paperwork involved in renting units, checking our moving truck in and out daily, as well as handling the normal activity of customers paying rent, making sure we have all the necessary supplies, dealing with everyday customer service business, etc."

And Ruble also has to deal with the fact that as Ft. Carson has grown, so, too, has competition, with more self storage facilities moving into the Colorado Springs area.

"Some time ago at our Colorado State Self Storage Association meeting our speaker shared a recent survey of the per capita self storage units in Colorado Springs compared to the Denver metro area," Ruble adds. "At that time there were almost twice as many self storage units in Colorado Springs per capita as in Denver. So that speaks to the

competition we face every day regardless of the current national economic problems.

"It seems the national news media's focus on the build up of Ft. Carson, with additional battalions being transferred to our post permanently as other posts are closed down, has created a rush to build new facilities to cash in on the opportunity. As it turned out there was a slowdown in the number of troops that were arriving, as well as an increase

in the number of troops being sent to the war zone, leaving many unfilled units over the past few years."

The end result? Those properties closest to Ft. Carson stay fairly full. Also, the newer north side of Colorado Springs with its more recent building of homes and newer self storage facilities, enjoys a higher rent base than Circle Drive has in its location in the south-east portion of the city.

"We struggle every day to do what we can to keep our occupancy numbers up,"

Ruble says. "The economy has forced many commercial customers as well as many regular customers to make arrangements for their storage where they don't have an outlay of cash each month. Having said that, our delinquencies have not gone up, nor have the units we have been forced to auction during this recession, so we are holding our own."

A Natural Progression

Having worked in property management for about 30 years, it was a natural progression into self storage for Ruble. Originally from Iowa, her husband and she returned to that area from the West Coast in 1999 and she became the city clerk in the small community where her husband grew up. After a few years of small town politics, the Rubles opted to make a change, as they weren't quite ready to retire. They had lived in Colorado Springs when their youngest daughter was a baby and always yearned



Fort Jackson is a solid provider of customers for Sharon Ruble and Circle Drive Self Storage.

to return for more than just a vacation. So, they made their way back and the self storage opportunity made itself available five years ago.

And one aspect of her work that has continually grown is her knowledge of the industry, gained through membership with both the Colorado Self Storage Association and the national Self Storage Association. In fact, one of her greatest educational tools has been attending the SSA's annual conference and trade show in Las Vegas. This coming April, she won't have far to go as the SSA brings its Spring Conference & Trade Show to Colorado Springs.

"Thankfully, our small family-owned company, through the guidance of property consultant Hank Saipe (acting president of the Colorado Self Storage Association), has encouraged our participation in all the educational opportunities available to us to become more informed and better prepared managers," Ruble says. "Membership in the Colorado Self Storage Association as well as participation in the national self storage certification training programs that are held in Las Vegas twice a year has vastly improved my comfort in my work. I've been able to complete all four segments of the certification program at the national level as well as participate in a couple duplicate certification classes when they were held in conjunction with our state association meetings."

Given the dealings at Ft. Carson and the increased competition, it is a good thing that one of Ruble's strongest assets is her expertise in marketing.

"Without giving away my specific strategies, I will say I have developed the brochure we use on our property, of which we have several styles depending on who we are marketing to," she says. "We print them ourselves, which is our biggest budget expense in our marketing, but that allows us to edit our details easily if we have modifications in our programs that warrant a brochure change.

"I use 'Guerilla Marketing' as my textbook and try very hard to do marketing in a cost-effective manner while still getting the results I envision. Our occupancy numbers run at the top of our competition while still maintaining a competitive pricing structure that leaves our rental prices higher than many of our competitors. I relate that to our marketing success. Many managers feel this is a negative obligation that goes with the job, but I see it as an opportunity to build relationships. Throwing money at telephone ads and mass mailings is very expensive and often not very cost effective in bringing in new customers. Being creative is the key for us."

That, and keeping up with the news. ❖

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