Bringing in the Experts

Can outside help turn your sales, marketing and PR efforts golden?

By John Dunlap

As the world keeps spinning seemingly faster and faster and technology changes virtually daily, do you sometimes wonder just what the right formula is to market your facility (or facilities, as the case may be)? Are you using effective sales, marketing and public relations techniques? More importantly, can someone do the job better than you?

Self storage is making its move into the twenty-first century. In doing so, many self storage professionals are likely confused about the right way to sell themselves. They may be advertising, but the ads may be too simple and boring to be effective. They may be sending out press releases, but those releases might be poorly written and doing more harm than good. They may have a website that hasn’t changed in over a year.

If such is the case, then the time might be right to consider getting outside help. After all, someone who writes great press releases is more likely to get your releases picked up by the media. Someone who can make your website work for you is invaluable. Anyone who can help you come up with a good catch phrase that the public relates to is worth his or her weight in gold.

With a new year upon us, the SSA Globe went to three self storage marketing and PR professionals to get their take on the value of outside help: Mike Roberts (vice president of business development for XPS Solutions); Nathan Allen (business development and marketing coordinator for NetGain SEO); and Jim DiNardo (founder, J. DiNardo Consulting).

Is It for Everyone?

Obviously, when three professionals who specialize in offering advice and ideas to those in self storage address the subject, you would think they would be all in for the concept of outside help. But such is not always the case.

“I think the intuitive answer is ‘of course...you can always benefit from an outside perspective,’ especially with respect to Internet advertising, which has become the dominant way prospective customers search for self storage, but is really a specialized expertise,” DiNardo said. “It’s very affordable, for example, to work with an outfit that specializes in Web design and SEO services, which can otherwise be a risky thing to take on yourself, or, at a minimum, very time consuming.

“But like so many things,” DiNardo added, “I think the answer really depends upon the operator/facility. If your facility is maintaining market share and business is good, there’s certainly validity to the no-reason-to-reinvent-the-wheel approach. On the other hand, if you’re in a very competitive market and need to market your facility a little differently to stand out and/or attract a market segment that the competition might not be targeting, then some fresh, outside help is probably worthwhile, regardless of your market’s sophistication or size.”

Nathan Allen agrees. “A marketing and PR firm should not walk in and tell storage business and facility owners how to run their business,” he said. “However, working collaboratively with a business that has the expertise to promote your company’s brand and services in a manner that is effective should provide a return on your investment. This is made even more effective by a marketing and PR firm being educated about the storage industry, but, more importantly, through the information gained from learning about how your specific storage facility operates.”

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Where Is the Most Need?

Our three experts were asked where they felt the biggest need was for self storage owner/operators today in terms of marketing.

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“As the Internet emerged, larger operators used their buying power to win online, going straight to the top in the search engine results,” Roberts said. “And by adding interactive tools and payment processing to their websites, they made it easier for leads to become customers. Today’s self storage website needs to be able to answer questions, either live or by returned email that is processed quickly. The website should be able to sign up new tenants, take payments, and answer all the questions a visitor might have about the business.”

For DiNardo, the biggest need is for self storage professionals to become more creative.

“Thinking outside the box,” he said. “I think the time has come for operators to start taking a more proactive approach to marketing; not necessarily in what media they use, but what the message is. Even though there’s been a shift to the Internet and technology, are you still taking a ‘choose us if you need storage’ approach, or are you targeting potential renters via your marketing? For example, if there’s a lot of multi-unit housing near your facility, maybe you can do things to get those residents thinking storage as a lifestyle choice, instead of just being there when they finally run out of space or experience some circumstance that pushes them to look for storage.”

Allen thinks self storage needs to always be fresh.

“Brand consistency across advertising and marketing initiatives is where I see the biggest fall down,” he said. “You only have one opportunity to make a first impression, but it’s the subsequent views afterwards that will make customers truly remember your business. If you change your brand with every piece of advertising or marketing, you lose the ability for potential clients to remember your name and brand.

“The biggest area of neglect is the website. It is the only sales agent you have that works for you 365 days a year and twenty-four hours a day, but a large number of storage websites I’ve come across provide the wrong message, even if there is great content on the site. Everyone is taught to never judge a book by its cover, but we do it with every website that we visit. You only have a few seconds to engage a visitor and if the website looks messy, unorganized and visually unappealing, what message is that sending to a visitor about your business?”

So are you where you want to be? If not, then perhaps help from the outside could put you on the inside track to success.

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