



Customer Care and Retention

By Gary Camp

The importance of caring for and maintaining your current customer base is not a new concept. Self storage is an event-driven business, and while you certainly can't control the external factors that cause a customer to sign a new lease, or move out, you do have the ability to control their experience once they are on-site at your facility.

Some of these concepts are not new, but worthy of repeating. Smart, basic, and proactive business practices can make the difference between retaining or losing a tenant.



"There is enough anxiety associated with move-in, so we try make their storage experience less stressful."

~ Rick Yonis
Sentry Self Storage Management

Reduce Stress

"We realize that the majority of our move-ins are experiencing a certain level of stress, as moving is often stressful or the result of a life change that acts as a major stressor, such as marriage and divorce, births and deaths, and moving and renovations," said Frank DeFazio, director of marketing for Guardian Storage Property Management. Guardian manages 15 properties in Pennsylvania and Colorado.

"Our property managers do what they can to alleviate the stress by making the move-in process fast and easy. We've streamlined the move-in process through redesigned forms that are easy to read, have large print and are as condensed as possible," he continued. "We offer free bottled water, coffee and tea and other healthy refreshments. During the busy season, we've hired a masseuse to give free 15-minute neck rubs to both tenants and prospects visiting our stores. In a number of our sites, we play classical music to add yet another calming element to the environment."

Your Website As an Introduction

All businesses realize the value of having a presence on the Internet, and droves of potential self storage customers turn to the web for information. Many customers visit your website before they even set foot in the door.

Rick Yonis, the president of Sentry Self Storage Management in Coral Springs, Florida, says 35 to 40 percent of his customers reserve their space online. Sentry manages 43 properties with locations in Florida, Georgia, Texas, Nevada and Indiana.

Yonis offers comprehensive virtual tours of their properties online, giving customers a comfort level and set of expectations before they walk in the door.

"We see a lot of business come through the Internet," he said. "There is enough anxiety associated with move-in, so we try make their storage experience less stressful. We like giving them the ability to do their research online before they get to us."

People that reserve online must still come to the site to see the unit and sign the necessary legal forms, but allowing them to get many of their questions answered before they arrive helps expedite the process.

Staying in touch with your current customers is crucial to maintaining their business. Never underestimate the value of a personal touch. Everything, from thank you cards to

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let them know you appreciate their business to annual birthday cards and e-mails, goes a long way in maintaining a positive relationship. In most cases, they could choose a variety of alternate self storage properties. Thanking them for choosing you helps you build ongoing rapport.

“As is the case with many things in life, it’s often the little things that we do that make the greatest impact,” said DeFazio. “We capture the birth date of each new tenant at move-in, and therefore, we’re able to know in advance of their birthday. Four days before a birthday of our tenant our property managers send a very nice birthday card to each tenant with a handwritten note. I can’t tell you how many times I hear comments about how nice it is that we remembered a birthday.”

After a new tenant signs a lease, both Guardian and Sentry customers receive customized thank you notes.



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Guardian Storage Property Management

“Immediately following each new move-in, we send a handwritten thank you card to each new tenant,” said DeFazio. “They highlight something memorable from the move-in experience as a means of building a stronger relationship with the tenant, and makes sure to note that they are always available to help in any way to make their stay enjoyable.”

Yonis explains that the letters allow them to also verify the information they have on file from new customers.

“The thank you letter is clearly focused on customer service, but it also helps us identify erroneous addresses,” he said. “If the letter comes back—and I would estimate 10 to 15 percent do—it allows our staff to follow up to update their records.”

Customer comment cards, regular e-mails with different call-to-action incentives and promotions, monthly e-newsletters, and even move-out surveys are all invaluable (and relatively inexpensive) ways to help stay in touch with your customers.

Everyone knows that acquiring a new customer is far more costly than maintaining current ones. What you do to keep your customers happy can make all the difference in your bottom line. ❖