



Always Smile

Deanna Brown paints a successful canvas both in self storage and life.

By John Dunlap

For Deanna Brown, manager for Extra Space Storage at its San Francisco store located on Cesar Chavez, her favorite song easily could be *The 5th Dimension* singing, “Up, up and away in my beautiful, my beautiful balloon.” As deep as her love of hot air ballooning may be, she brings an equal amount of enthusiasm to her work in self storage. Thus, she is considered one of the top facility managers in the Extra Space Storage organization, as evidenced by her selection as a 2006 CEO Award of Excellence winner.

The numbers don’t lie, as Brown has steered the San Francisco facility to great success. She took over at the facility six months after it opened a few years ago and in the first two years steered her store to new rental records for a new property. On the store’s second anniversary it hit 80 percent occupancy, and by that summer was at 95 percent. Even through the recent tough economy Brown has kept occupancy rates at 2008’s 95 percent rate. In short, she knows what she’s doing. But how does she do it?

It starts with a smile.

“I’ve always been told that the secret to my success is my personality and smile,” Brown says. “I always have a smile no matter how my day is going. When I answer the phone, the customer hears that smile and I’m happy that they called us. They don’t know that I’m having a bad day or just had to deal with a problem at the facility 30 seconds ago. When a customer walks in the door they are greeted with a smile and a genuine ‘How are you today?’ when they come in.”

She comes by her smile naturally. Originally from the little Colorado town of Berthoud, where there was only one light and you had to walk downtown to get your mail, she has always had a love of nature and people. She also has been happily married for 31 years to Peter Brown and has two grown-up kids who are now having their own

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kids. After spending the majority of their years raising their children in Provo, Utah, she and Peter spoke about what they would do when he was done with engineering and they retired.

Even then they had planned on building their own storage property, so when she was laid off and Peter's company transferred him out to San Jose, California, she thought she would find out if she even liked working in the storage industry. She found a job with Storage USA (soon to be a part of Extra Space Storage) and started out as a part-time employee, working two days a week. Within six months she was promoted to manager of her own property.

Besides her ever-present smile, she also carries in her heart the ability to try to understand and sympathize with her customers, many of whom she knows are coming to her facility in a time of upheaval.

"Like any job, you have your good days and bad days, but in storage you are dealing with people's lives, property and personal information," Brown says. "They are not just moving, they are STRESSED and tired. In some cases, their lives have fallen apart and it's the worst day of their life. Someone may have died, they are a victim of a fire, or a woman has been abused and is escaping after nearly being beaten to death. You will hear their heartbreaking stories,

handle confidential information, deal with hostile tenants and have to make tough decisions."

"(To be a good facility manager) you need to be honest, dependable and conscientious. You also need a good sense of humor, a thick skin and the ability to juggle a million tasks at once—or you will go insane some days. You are the shrink, bartender, marriage counselor, lost-and-found department and parking attendant—all before lunch."

Brown also says that you need to be dependable, honest and pay attention to details.

"If you are not honest and dependable the company is going to have a problem," she adds. "If you are not conscientious your job is going to be harder than it needs to be. You need to be detail oriented or the paperwork will kill you. You need to know your local laws regarding the storage industry, especially when it comes to the auction process. A lawsuit can cost a company millions these days and we have to be very careful to make sure we follow all of the company policies and procedures so that we can guard against these lawsuits and make our lives easier and the customers happier."

When asked to list her most important managing techniques (besides smiling), she advises: (1) Stay in control. "When I'm dealing with a tenant with an unpleasant issue or emergency, I try to stay calm." (2) Put yourself in the

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tenant's place. "They are moving for a reason and that reason is not usually a fun one." (3) Pay attention to your property. "Our tenants see us all over the property and know that we are watching over them and their storage." (4) Keep the facility as clean as possible. (5) Work as a team. "With so many facilities in the Bay Area, we are able to help each other when vacations or illnesses come up."

And then there's that matter of hot air ballooning. She got hooked on it when she was 13 years old, but did not start ballooning until she was in her early 20s while her kids were very young. Once she started, her family went out almost every weekend until she and Pete moved to California six years ago. She's flown over mountains, in the snow up to her knees, over lakes, landed on train tracks with a train coming and even flown in the Albuquerque Balloon Rally.

Oh, besides that, she also designs custom wedding and formal gowns, quilts, sews and does needlework of all types. She loves to read, work on cars and watch old movies from the 1930s and 40s. In short, she is a woman of many talents and likes to quote the actor Danny Kaye when summing up her love of life and her work in self storage: "Life is a great big canvas, and you should throw all the paint on it you can."

Somehow, one can never imagine Deanna Brown without enough paint. ❖

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