



Bringing in the Students... Giving It the Old College Try

By Pete Schnatz

Blake Miles graduated from the University of Tennessee in 2002, remains a diehard fan of Volunteers sports, and—for the last eight years—has relied somewhat on his alma mater to make a living.

While he doesn't exactly bleed orange and white, Miles is true to his school. And he's more than happy to welcome his UT brethren when they come looking to rent storage space at either of Miles's two Twin Spires Self Storage locations in Knoxville, Tennessee. Students and faculty represent a reliable source of income for self storage facility owners in college towns across America, a fact that Miles can count on while other businesses around him struggle financially.

"The economy has affected my business overall, but it hasn't seemed to hurt the number of rentals that I get from college students," Miles said. "Of course, you may have to make some adjustments, some upgrades, to your

facility to make sure they keep coming back. And you have to market intelligently to let [the students] know where you are and what you have to offer."

Miles targets certain areas of the campus, posting flyers bearing his business's phone number and website where he knows the largest number of students will congregate.

"I used to advertise in the student newspaper, but it's gotten so expensive," Miles lamented. "I feel I do just as well, if not better, with the flyers. Plus I figure most [potential customers] are going to find me through a Google search anyway."

That sentiment is shared by Laura Greene, a regional manager who oversees three facilities in the Knoxville area—including Ebenezer Climate Storage, which serves the University of Tennessee community.

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“We definitely market [to college students] a little differently,” Greene said. “We distribute flyers on campus, and we’re starting to delve into more technology-based advertising. We also discussed an idea of reaching out to incoming freshmen at orientation, which is nice because it gets your name out there. But are they going to remember you next spring?”

“I don’t think students think about storage until they need it, so it might make more sense for us to spend money during times when they’re preparing to go on break or packing up to head home for the summer.”

A Focus on the Smaller Budgets

Mitchell Kalogridis knows a thing or two about folks migrating to and from the Sunshine State throughout the year, which is in part why he built a self storage facility in Davenport, Florida, a dozen years ago.

But in 2008 he took a look at economic trends and decided to totally renovate—essentially remake—his Orlando-area business, Harbor Lighthouse Storage, and create a more user-friendly environment for nearby students from the University of Central Florida and several smaller area colleges.

“Our general philosophy, as the economy has gotten tighter, was to focus on [customers’] smaller budgets,” Kalogridis said. “College students fit that target market perfectly.”

Kalogridis heads MK Developments, based in Austin, Texas, where he recently got the go-ahead to open a self



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Harbor Lighthouse Storage

storage facility that he hopes will be a major draw with University of Texas students.

“We’ve tried advertising on a local level, and it works, but honestly, word of mouth and networking works best,” Kalogridis said of his Orlando-area location.

Besides using such approaches as the Internet, Twitter and Facebook, Kalogridis believes in attracting collegiate customers by having his staff thinking fresh and looking youthful.

“As we saw the economy slide, we went into our self storage facility and *invested money*—while we watched our competitors try to save money,” Kalogridis said. “We re-landscaped the exterior of the facility to look as close to Cypress Gardens of Busch Gardens as possible, because we want our facility to have a very pleasing outward appearance.

“Then we went and re-evaluated our staff. When people were cutting back due to the recession, we raised salaries and added healthcare. We have young people managing our facility because we’re catering to young people.

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The lobby of Ebenezer Climate Storage. The facility is beautiful and well-lit—conveying “safety” to its customers.

They're doing business with their peers. We also put our staff through additional training, stressing that they should always be affirmative and develop a personal relationship with our clients. We're developing databases for our college folks in our computer system, making notes on how to better identify with them. When you can greet a customer by saying something like, 'You had your pet with you last time, how's she doing?' or 'You're going home for the summer, that's in Connecticut isn't it?' It's no different than going to your favorite restaurant where they know your favorite dish. Get to know your customer and you'll never lose them."



A Price That They Can Pay

Treating the customer well is only part of the equation, though. You still have to offer a product they can use—and at a price they'll pay.

"When we opened a facility near the UT campus [in 2009], one of the things we did to cater to the students was build 4' x 4' x 4' climate-controlled lockers," Miles said of his newest Twin Spires Self Storage location.

"The lockers went over really well with the younger students living in the dorms, because they were able to



"I think safety is a major selling point for students and their parents."

*~ Laura Greene
Ebenezer Climate Storage*

safely store a computer, a small refrigerator and other electronic stuff they weren't taking home with them," Miles said. "We started renting [the lockers] for \$10 per month, but there's been such a demand for them that we get \$25 [per month] now. It's still hard to find climate-controlled storage space for 25 bucks a month."

Miles also offers secure parking for a handful of international students, who leave their cars under 24-hour surveillance at Twin Spires for a lot less than it would cost in an airport parking lot.

Smaller units provide an important marketing tool at Harbor Lighthouse Storage as well.

"We're constantly adapting," Kalogridis said. "College students are very price-sensitive, and they want smaller, odd-shaped units that aren't the traditional 7' x 10' or 10' x 10' units. Our maintenance people are able to adjust walls within a 24-hour period. There's never a client who wants a size that we don't have. And, like the college student, even the broader market is looking to be able to store only their most valuable things. So [going with smaller units] has served both markets."

For Greene, there's no debate that price and convenience are important factors for college students contemplating self storage. But there is another attribute that she kept coming back to when discussing the Ebenezer Climate Storage facility in Knoxville.

"I think *safety* is a major selling point for students and their parents," Greene said. "Being a woman, most of the storage facilities I drive past are places I wouldn't want to go into by myself in the evening.

"If I had a son or a daughter, I know that I'd feel safe for him or her to go to [Ebenezer] any time of the day. The facility is beautiful, it's well-lit and the building is safe and secure. I'm pretty well-connected to the community and society in general, and my thoughts on self storage are based on common sense. To me, there's nothing more attractive to college kids than placing your valuables somewhere that you're confident will be safe—and that you'll be safe, too." ❖