

The Art of Networking

U-Store-It relies on unique partner program, marketing strategies to capture new storage customers.

By Tom Comi

Ask any savvy marketing person what the #1 rule is for public relations and advertising, and they will tell you that there simply are no rules. What worked in the past doesn't necessarily work in the present, and what works in the present might very well be outdated in the future.

That's why U-Store-It executives are always looking to reinvent how they target and secure potential customers. And when you have 384 company-owned facilities in 27 states and approximately 1,000 employees, you can't afford to rely on the status quo.

Part of that strategy for U-Store-It CEO Dean Jernigan is to keep the marketing engine going full bore even when the economy is struggling.

"We are in very unique economic times right now, and you have the temptation as a public company to be penny wise and pound foolish," he said. "But we don't believe in that theory at all. Our marketing budget remained constant from '08 to '09, and all we've done is shift dollars within that budget to radio, TV and the Internet. In challenging times like this, it's more important to keep a good marketing program in place."

Part of that shift in marketing dollars, Jernigan says, is due to what he refers to as the demise of printed telephone listings. In previous years, that was the first place prospective storage customers went to find a storage facility. Today, he maintains, they rely more on the Web.

"The Yellow Pages books are basically going out of business, so capturing the customer going forward is becoming increasingly difficult," he said. "The Internet has given an opportunity to the larger and more sophisticated players who have multi-million dollar marketing budgets. Operators who have dedicated marketing staffs to keep their websites optimized will be better served."



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~ Dean Jernigan
CEO, U-Store-It

Forming "The Network"

Part of that leverage has been to partner with independent facilities that are located in places where U-Store-It is not. Network partners have access to U-Store-It's national brand awareness, marketing strategies, exclusive leads, and unique customer tracking systems, all through a pay-per-performance model.

"The Network was developed to support the customer leads that we capture through various marketing strategies that cannot be assisted with U-Store-It company-owned locations," explained Kristi Gubbels, U-Store-It's director of marketing. "Instead of losing a customer because we don't have a location to serve them, we inform them of our Network partners and give them the opportunity to reserve at a Network partner's location right on our website. As a result, we serve the customer and benefit our partner."

Jernigan said his company did TV commercials for the first time this year, and the overwhelming success of the advertising campaign provided the impetus and necessity for the Network.

"We developed a lot of leads that we couldn't accommodate," he said. "Rather than waste those leads, we thought it was in our best interest and the best interest of a lot of small operators to share those leads with them. The program has taken off in a dramatic fashion. Everybody sees the value in leveraging our marketing department and budget with their site. It's working extraordinarily well for us."



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And how is it working for the small operators? Considering that they enter the arrangement risk-free and only pay when they receive a lead from U-Store-It, it's pretty much a win-win. David Edward of Golden State Storage couldn't be happier with being part of the Network.

"Golden State Storage became a partner in the U-Store-It Network to broaden our advertising channels," he explained. "U-Store-It brings the strength of a national campaign, yet the cost-per-referral is very affordable to the smaller operator. We have conducted an extensive review of the customer leads that we receive, and they are of good quality."

Added Jernigan: "The greater advantage for the smaller player partnering with us is better occupancy and better rent, because we can deliver customers to them that they can't access now by themselves."

The Message and the Messenger

A successful marketing campaign is comprised of developing a concise message and finding the correct medium through which to deliver that message. Gubbels said that price, location and customer service are integral parts of U-Store-It's brand.

"Location is a very important factor, and customers often start their search by finding a location in their area," she said. "With the U-Store-It Network, we now have locations that can service and provide storage solutions nationwide. We strive to provide the highest level of customer service in the industry. Our onsite managers and sales center agents are trained to ensure that our customers have a stress-free self storage experience. In addition to promotions, we always offer our customers our low price guarantee where we will match competitor prices."

But forming the message is just a part of the battle. Gubbels said her company uses a mix of traditional media



Kristi Gubbels, director of marketing for U-Store-It, says her company has incorporated a social marketing strategy that includes Facebook (see image on page 17).

(radio, TV and print) and new media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) to reach the modern-day self storage customer.

"This spring we launched both national and targeted TV and radio campaigns," she said. "In addition, we have been actively adjusting our marketing strategy to align with technology advances and customer behavior. We have shifted our focus to concentrate on locally-targeted online marketing efforts, including display advertising, affiliate networks, online directories and e-mail campaigns.

"We are also testing a new social media strategy, by building a presence and following on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, where you can find our TV commercial. As these channels grow at a rapid pace, we continue to stay at the forefront of our competition." ❖

For more information on joining the U-Store-It Network, call 800-691-2003 or e-mail networksales@ustoreit.com.



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