

4 Tips for Hiring Part Time Storage Managers For Increased Profits

By Aycha Williams, AC Commercial Property Management

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Some of the factors that determine a self-storage facility's profitability are location, curb appeal, price, unit mix and marketing. Of equal importance are customer service and manager sales skills. Managers who have a successful retail-sales background will generally be great at selling and will most likely have excellent service skills, too, as these go hand-in-hand.

Most successful self-storage owners hire experienced facility managers and put them through rigorous training. But what about the part-time help they employ to support those managers? Isn't it important that they share the same skills?

What qualifications do you look for when hiring part-time "relief" staff? Following are four tips to help you bring in the best support personnel for your team and ensure your own business profitability.

Tip 1: A Successful Retail-Sales Background Is A Must

Operators know to be diligent when hiring a self-storage manager and look for the right candidate with a proven track record in retail sales, service and operation. But when it comes to hiring a part-time manager, most tend to underestimate the skill set and experience they require.

Usually, when we hear the title "relief manager," we think of an employee who is only working a few hours a week and is mostly responsible for site maintenance, busy with fixing things or cleaning units. In reality, site maintenance is only a portion of the job.

A manager with successful retail-sales background will generally be great at selling and usually has excellent service skills.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

It's Fall Once Again

A very warm hello and welcome to my self storage colleagues. It's now fall when the days get shorter, the temperature cools down and the leaves change color then fall from the trees. I personally like the seasons of spring and fall best of all.

Fall is also a time that as property managers we begin planning for the winter season ahead. By now hopefully you have solicited proposals and made arrangements for snow removal and ice control plus the snow thrower has been serviced and is ready to go. Gutters and roofs checked, etc.

There are a number of products to help control ice including good old fashioned sand, rock salt, calcium chloride ("ice melt") and a newer product, Magic Salt (there may be other brands but this is the one I am aware of). While all of those products have their pros and cons Magic Salt does minimize any residue, does not rust steel buildings and there is no spring sweeping up like with sand. It is more expensive but not when you add the labor to remove sand in the spring. For those of you, who use sand, be sure to have your storm drains cleaned out every spring as the silt fills the bottom and can clog drainage pipes. Much less expensive to be proactive when it comes to maintenance.

In my organization fall is also when we develop the proposed budgets for the next year. I know that some operators may think "that's just too formal for my business" and "I will handle things as they come up, as I always do". Not a good strategy for success! It's an excellent practice to budget as it requires us to carefully review the entire property for physical needs, the income for opportunities and to analyze the expenses which can often creep upward little by little until it's a lot.

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INSIGHTS

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Every book on how to improve your business always reminds us of two things, 1st we must have goals or objectives that are realistic and a plan to achieve them, and 2nd we must continuously seek ways to generate more income and hold if not reduce expenses. Without a plan and periodic review we have no true sense of direction and miss out on the joy when we achieve our goals. As the business guru and author Steven Covey said so well, "Start with the end in mind"

Annual Education Conference

If you were unable to attend our annual fall education conference held on October 10th you missed a pretty good event. We had a good group of operators present including members and some folks who are considering building or buying a storage property. I've noticed at the industry events I have attended in the last year that interest is up and more people will be entering the business. Your CT Self Storage Association provides great opportunity for education, net working and keeping in the know in regard to industry trends. Why not have the best information possible available that will positively benefit you and your business? As they say knowledge is power.

Great Northeast Self Storage Tradeshow

Our friends over at MASSA are already planning the 2014 show which I hear may have some ideas and surprises in store for you. Mark your calendar to save the date, September 24-25, 2014 at Mohegan Sun, Uncasville, CT.

I enjoy talking shop and hearing from storage folks, so please feel free to contact me by phone, (716) 679-7377 or email, Charlie@simi.org

In closing I would like to wish everyone an early; Happy and Healthy Holidays!

Respectfully,

Charlie Fritts
CTSSA President

MEMBER NEWS

Storage Investment Management, Inc. (SIMI) held their annual Manager's Conference and Awards Recognition Dinner on September 19, 2013. The event was conducted at the Trumbull Marriott Merritt Parkway in Trumbull, CT — a central location for the more than 30 SIMI properties located throughout New England.

At the conference SIMI recognized their "Top Performing Managers" by presenting a variety of awards. Awards range from Highest Volume of Merchandise Sales to Best Budget Income Variance to Most Improved Facility. All awards are based on criteria that are the critical elements to successful self storage operations. SIMI's "Best of the Best" for 2013 are:

MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Michele Johnson-Sealy, Manager of Planet Self Storage in Hyde Park, MA

#1 RANKED — POWER RATING: Ron Tortora, Manager of Storage America in Garden City Park, NY

The Pulse of Your Business

Scot Vayo, Casey Storage Solutions

In today's fast paced business environment, there are countless ways to monitor your self storage operation to ensure your business is operating as intended. Many self storage owners rely heavily on the manager of the facility to help maintain the expected standards on a daily basis. These standards could be occupancy, curb appeal, marketing, and more. The question is, how involved does the owner or supervising manager get with the day-to-day operations of the business and be on the front lines?

There are certainly many instances when we have the opportunity to see our team members in action on a daily basis. Time is taken to listen to customer interaction on the phone and in person. During this time, coaching and training flows freely as we get quality time spent one-on-one with the manager. You get a good feeling for what goes on in the office when you're not able to be there.

The purpose of this article is to recommend that you have your supervising manager, if one is available, or yourself if you own a smaller operation, take some time to staff the front desk of your operation periodically.

I personally am the type of manager that believes it is important to understand the daily trials and tribulations that our managers face on a day-to-day basis. In addition, I feel it is also important to stay in tune with your customers as well. This customer interaction will be one of the most valuable opportunities for you to gain perspective as to how your manager is running the business. As mentioned previously, one-on-one time is very important as well, but sometimes your customers will give you feedback for additional areas of coaching and training opportunities.

Hopefully you or your area manager will find everything

operating without issue, but what should you be really looking and listening for? The answer is, you'll know it when you see it! Here are a few red flags. You may rent a storage unit to a new tenant and hear, "the person I spoke with on the phone stated that if I paid cash, I wouldn't have to pay the set-up fee." Many owners now also require that tenants have insurance on their personal property in stores, but what if you heard a customer state "The manager I spoke with stated that insurance is required by state law"? You could potentially even make a collection call or two and learn from a customer that "I paid cash last week and I have my handwritten receipt"!

For those of you who have been in business for a while, you already know why some of these customer statements are concerning. The moral of the story is that while quality one-on-one time with your manager is invaluable. You may also find it equally as enlightening to spend time in the office without your manager. It will no doubt give you additional coaching and training topics to discuss.

Beyond the training opportunities, however, and on a brighter note, you will no doubt also hear many good things from customers. Perhaps it is how much they like the manager who runs your facility, how helpful the manager was during the rental process, or how well kept the property is. This also gives the owner or area manager the opportunity to recognize the manager for a job well done. The manager will no doubt appreciate the recognition, coaching, and training. As for the owner or area manager, you will have gained a different perspective on what happens in the office allowing you to keep in close touch with the pulse of your business.

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Competitive SEO for Storage Facilities: How to Check Out What Your Competitors are Doing Right Now

By Matt Schexnayder, SelfStorage.com

As more and more people get online, learn to use smartphones and otherwise become more connected to the Internet, Google will continue to dominate as a springboard where consumers start researching local businesses.

But SEO (search engine optimization), best described as a collection of techniques that help a website show up on Google and other search engines, is so open-ended that it's difficult to define a starting point. One of the best ways to do so is to assess the competitive landscape, check what your competitors are doing and emulate the things they are doing right.

We talked to Tony Emerson and Josh Waldrum, both members of our in-house SEO team, about what self-storage facilities can do to assess (and match) their competitors' online efforts in both local and organic search.

Identify Direct Competitors

The first step in conducting competitor research is to identify which sites are your direct rivals. To do this, you'll need a list of key terms that visitors are likely to use to find your site.

"Google has a ton of free tools out there to figure out what your keywords are, mainly Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics) and Google AdWords Keyword Tool. You can type in 'self-storage' and your city, and you'll get suggestions on what the highest-trafficked terms are," according to Waldrum.

"Compile a set of five to ten keywords to check," suggests Emerson. "The ones that are popular from our research—and it varies on a market-to-market basis—are '(city) + self storage,' '(ZIP code) + self storage,' '(city) + storage' and related terms like 'storage in (city).'"

Pinpoint Facilities that Outrank You

The next step is to see who's outranking you for those terms by Googling them and identifying other similar facilities. Remember, when you conduct a search while logged into a Google account, you may receive customized results that don't reflect the reality of the ranking situation. This usually means you'll appear to rank higher than you actually do, because Google has seen you click on your own website before and assumes that this is what you want to see. Either log out of Google or open a "private browsing" (Firefox) or "incognito" (Google Chrome) window to conduct your research.

"Google these terms and look for sites that are in the same niche or industry as you. For instance, if a Craigslist or Wikipedia page ranks above you, that's obviously not your competitor. The fact that they may outrank you has an influence on your traffic, but you're not going to be able to go after the same kind of links," recommends Waldrum.

"The same is true for Yelp," says Emerson. "For instance, when I type in 'Seattle self storage,' I see Yelp ranking at number one. It's worth noting that you'll have to outrank them to get to number one, but researching their keyword usage and link profile isn't going to get you very far."

Learn About Local

Local SEO is all about getting citations, also known as NAP (name, address, phone number) blocks. Google looks at these as confirmation that your business is operating and that you're located where you say you are.

According to Emerson, "For local search, make sure you're out there everywhere you can be online with your name, address and phone number as one block. Take a look at your competitors' Google+ Local listings and make sure you have the same depth of information or more. For example, if they have a video, you may want to create one as well so that you're on the same baseline when it comes to on-listing optimization. Then take a look at their citations, which is that name-address-phone combination. Google their address and see what techniques they've used to get listed."

"A good tool for this is GetListed.org, which will show you the top citation sources for your area and will help point you in the right direction," says Waldrum. "Most of these are pretty basic, like YellowPages and Yelp. Although these sites offer premium services, signing up for free is enough to get the citation. Make sure your local footprint is out there everywhere it can be."

"If you're a storage facility and you're not on Yelp, you should take a step back and reconsider your marketing strategy as a whole," explains Emerson. "You need to be willing to put your business on Yelp, even though it opens you up to negative publicity, in order to dominate in search. You're not in direct control of your online reputation, and trying to control by not signing up for Yelp (<https://biz.yelp.com/>), Google and other user-generated review sites is just going to hurt you."

Get More Links

While the main factors for ranking higher in Google local search or Google Maps are shoring up your Google+ Local listing and getting more citations, the key to ranking in organic search is getting more links to your website.

"Putting content out there is the number one thing to do to improve your actual site. Adding a blog or just fresh content every once in awhile—that's the future of SEO. Once you're doing that, and you're sure you're not making any SEO mistakes, the next step is to get some links," according to Waldrum.

"They've also put out some press releases on free PR sites. These can be valuable, especially if you've got some truly exciting news that local media might pick up. If it's newsworthy enough, it may be worth paying the release fee to a paid site like PRWeb.com," adds Waldrum.

One thing to keep in mind for competitive SEO research is that not all links are valuable. Even if a competitor that ranks above you has a similar link, acquiring that same link actually might hurt you.

"If you do a backlink lookup on one of your competitors and you see things that are on the spammy-side, for instance, buying links is a huge red flag. That's not a green light to go get that same link, says Emerson. "There are a lot of other factors there that may cause them to not get penalized for a link that would penalize you—

they might have a more trusted domain, so they can escape that penalty, whereas you may not. They also may have already been hurt by that link getting devalued, but they made it up elsewhere, so they're still outranking you."

Take Advantage of SEO Tools

Aside from ones mentioned previously, tools that can help with competitive link research include ahrefs.com, majesticseo.com and raven tools.com.

According to Emerson, "RavenTools is one that we would heartily recommend for a mom-and-pop facility. It's a fully functioning tool that helps guide your SEO process. The only component that it doesn't currently offer is rank tracking, which we recommend supplementing, but this can be conducted by hand as well. If you do this, try to look at rankings at least once per week, and keep track of everything in a spreadsheet so you can easily see when movement occurs."

You also can use these tools to check out the distribution of anchor text, which is the text used for the links themselves. Unnatural anchor-text distribution is one of the signals that Google's team uses to identify spam links.

"MajesticSEO also has a cool functionality that shows your anchor-text distribution. Especially after Google's Penguin and Panda updates, you don't want to have keyword-specific anchor text that isn't distributed naturally. For instance, most of nickersonstreetstorage.com's links just say 'Nickerson Street Storage,' which is good. It would open them up for penalization if

the majority of their links just used 'Seattle storage' for their anchor text," says Waldrum.

A good starting point for backlink research is mapping out the backlink profile of your competitors. Seeing a graph of link quality of your sites versus your competitors' sites can help you visualize what you're lacking. This can help you figure out whether you need to focus on quality or quantity of links. There's a chance you have more links than your competitors, but they have higher-quality link distribution.

Updates of Google PageRank – which analyzes and grades your website's links – occur about once every three months. So if your facility has been doing things to get links, you'll want to use a tool with up-to-date reporting like MozCheck.com to monitor your progress.

Whether you're trying to optimize for local or organic SEO, and whether you're doing that by shoring up your listing/website or by improving your citations/links, looking at what your competition is doing is a good strategy. But keep in mind that it's just a starting point. Following the footsteps of the competition may get you closer to their level, but you'll need something unique to push your website or local listing over the edge and begin outranking the competition.

Matt Schexnayder is an SEO specialist at SelfStorage.com. He can be reached at matt@sparefoot.com. This article originally appeared on The Storage Facilitator (www.thestoragefacilitator.com) and is reprinted with permission from Sparefoot.

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If yours is a larger facility with a lot of customer traffic, the part-time manager ends up being in contact with your prospects at least half the time. Your phones are ringing and you have walk-in customers. Your full-timer is either selling on the phone or in person, and your part-time help may be the only sales back-up. For example, at one of the properties my company manages, the part-timers work five days per week to keep up with the traffic and workload.

It doesn't make much difference if yours is a smaller facility with less traffic. The relief manager may only be working two or three days per week, but the whole point of hiring the additional help is to rent more units. If you hire someone with no skills, you can bet that he won't close any sales. The customer, with multiple other storage options and little time to spare, will not wait to be convinced. When hiring part-time managers, consider including retail-sales experience as a requirement in your job posting.

TIP 2: Look for Motivation, Ambition and the Ability to Work With Others

All jobs, no matter how big or small, require a certain level of diligence and a sense of ownership to be done well. While you may think that motivation and determination are not critical attributes to have in your part-timer, full-time managers who have to work with them disagree. I asked a few site managers what traits they look for when they interview candidates for a part-time position. Here's what they wanted in support staff:

- Can take initiative and run the facility in the absence of the site manager with minimal supervision
- Can multi-task
- Has a genuine interest in the business
- Is a team player
- Has great customer-service skills

Setting your part-time manager requirements at a higher level may make it harder to find the right employee. However, it will benefit your business in the long run by helping you create the right team for your facility that will work toward a common goal.

TIP 3: Clearly Identify Responsibilities and Offer the Right Training

You're spending thousands of marketing dollars to get that phone to ring or get that customer to walk in the door. How would you like to listen to a phone call on which your relief manager denies a prospect the existing special offer because he is unaware of it? Or takes too long to find the availability and price for a certain unit size because he doesn't know how to use your system? Or is just plain rude and uninterested in renting units because he doesn't think sales is part of his job?

The part-timer may very well be your future site manager in training. You may argue that the average relief manager spends the larger part of his working hours simply maintaining the property, but does he ever answer the phone? Does he interact with prospects or customers? If so, then he has to go through the same operations and sales training as your full-time managers.

Relief managers are mostly offered minimal training (if any) that has to be completed in a very short time before they start

When hiring part-time managers, consider including retail-sales experience as a requirement in your job posting.

working, sometimes single-handedly. For your self-storage investment to be a success, carefully evaluate the responsibilities of your part-time employee and offer the right training program to help him help your business.

TIP 4: There Is a Way to Reverse the High Turnover Rate for Employees

It's not a secret that there's a high turnover rate for employees in the self-storage industry. Could this be partially attributed to a lack of investment in employee development? With average pay starting at minimum wage, the positions attract candidates who may be more transitory. This puts the owner in a position where he's not eager to invest in part-time staff, especially if they think the employee may not be around two months later.

You may not be able offer a higher wage. But by hiring the right candidate, clearly defining responsibilities and offering growth opportunities via training, your part-timers may not be as eager to move on to a different job. Add to this mix a performance-based bonus program and you can sit back and watch while your managers and property thrive.

Small to mid-size self-storage operators work around the clock to improve facility profitability and cash flow. We come up with new techniques and strategies to advance the areas that need work. The hiring and training of part-time employees is an area that should not be overlooked. It will bring you one step closer to the objective of streamlined operations and increased profits.

Aycha Williams is responsible from marketing and employee training programs at AC Commercial Property Management. AC Commercial's motto is delivering increased cash flows and profitability to commercial property owners while providing industry's best customer service to their customers.

AC Commercial specializes in property management and investment of self-storage properties, office buildings, industrial parks, retail centers and rv/mobile home parks in Florida and in TX. The founders of AC Commercial have been operators of commercial real estate portfolios in the US for over 15 years. AC Commercial was founded in Orlando, FL and is privately held.

For property management and investment inquiries please contact Rory Williams at 407-865-3007, rwilliams@acommercial.net, or visit our website: www.accommercial.net

Self-Storage Proving Resistant to Credit Card Skimming

By John Donegan, *SelfStorage.com*

Last year, infamous international criminals Antonio Gabor and Simion Tudor Pintille used a self-storage facility in Queens, NY, as the headquarters for a credit card skimming scheme.

Inside their storage locker, federal agents discovered hard drives with 6,100 stolen bank account numbers and hundreds of hours of ATM video footage, as well as more than 1,000 plastic cards encoded with stolen bank account information.

Pintillie, a Romanian citizen, and Gabor, an expat from Denmark, “skimmed” 50 Chase and Capital One ATMs throughout Manhattan, NY; Milwaukee; and Chicago.

By surreptitiously placing wafer-sized “skimmers” inside ATM card readers and “pinhole” cameras near the keypads, Gabor and Pintille were able to access \$3 million from more than 6,000 individual accounts. The two criminals are behind bars, but authorities think they had at least nine accomplices.

Although skimmers have historically targeted ATMs and gas stations, any machine with a card reader is at risk, particularly outdoor kiosks that lack surveillance by humans.

Self-Storage Kiosks

Considering OpenTech Alliance’s Insomniac kiosks racked up more than \$24 million in self-storage transactions last year, storage kiosks could become a target for skimmers. So far, they’ve gone unnoticed by criminals.

OpenTech Alliance President and CEO Robert Chiti explained why skimmers haven’t targeted storage. “The kiosks are generally not in very busy areas. I would guess criminals are looking for higher transaction volume,” he said.

Also, the Insomniacs’ cameras probably act as a deterrent, Chiti said.

“I imagine video has kept us out of harm’s way,” he said. “All of our machines all have cameras on them. We have two-way video; we can see them, they can see us.”

Additionally, OpenTech has teamed up with Magtek to build card readers equipped with sophisticated encryption. If you use credit card readers or kiosks at your facilities, you can take some simple steps to ensure your tenants’ data is kept safe.

Security Stickers

Generally, these stickers are placed over a credit card machine’s seams or screw holes, as they’re designed to indicate a machine hasn’t been tampered with. It’s relatively easy for a sophisticated crook to place a new sticker on a terminal, so if there’s been a security breach, be sure to check the security stickers.

Other Tips

- Be wary of unannounced visits from kiosk maintenance folks. Historically, skimmers have gained access to card readers at gas stations by pretending to make service visits.
- Keep a surveillance camera on your kiosk at all times. If you discover that a camera has been moved or damaged, be sure to check the kiosk for tampering.
- Ensure that your kiosks are well-lit at night.

*John Donegan can be reached at jdonegan@sparefoot.com. This article originally appeared on *The Storage Facilitator* (www.thestoragefacilitator.com) and is reprinted with permission from Sparefoot.*

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