

What Meets the Eye ... And Then Some

Site aesthetics and safety seal the deal for potential storage customers

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By Amy Fuhlman

I recently went on a trip to London during which I had one sacred afternoon with no planned activities. No tourist lines, ancient rock formations or palaces were on my agenda. Instead, I indulged in my favorite pastime: shopping!

I chose Oxford Street, a central location with dozens of stores to explore. With time at a premium, I could only visit a few shops. I found I was selecting those with the most attractive storefronts and window displays. Yes, I was judging a book by its cover.

And so we do in the self-storage market as well. Pricing and service are extremely important attributes to consider when customers select a facility. And yet if the aesthetic packaging isn't pleasing, many people will head to the next site.

I recently spoke to one young woman who was starting her own online-auction business and needed a storage unit for her inventory. She passed up a facility with more affordable rental rates solely based on first impressions. Parking was difficult, the signage was unclear, and lighting was dim. Frankly, she wasn't enticed to explore further.

Make It Appealing

Michael Haugh of Absolute Storage Management Inc. in Louisiana believes curb appeal is the No. 1 item a storage owner should address, particularly with older facilities. "It can be easy to forget the importance of the first impression for the customer," he says.

Façade. Depending on your facility, a fresh coat of paint, particularly in a bright color, may do the trick to make the property stand out. Another alternative is to add composite panels for a more advanced facelift. These panels can resemble brick, stone or block, and offer a virtually maintenance-free façade. Regardless of the finish, it should be even and chip-free.

Landscaping. Landscaping is an easy enhancement to professionalize a facility. Well-maintained grounds send the message that the site is well cared for and implies a safe environment for one's belongings. Freshly mowed yards of a healthy green offer instant curb appeal for a minimal investment.

Pavement. Similarly, driveways and parking lots should be well-maintained, as potholes and cracked pavement scream neglect. Parking lots should be well-marked and amply spaced to allow for easier loading and unloading. Jim Labonte, owner of Tropical Self Storage in Miramar, Fla., has laid out his parking spaces in 10-foot increments instead of 9-foot to offer greater mobility for renters.



Signage. Signage is a key contributor to the overall look of a facility. A well-designed, easy-to-read sign says you care about the look of your site. Digital reader boards are becoming increasingly popular where allowed. “Everyone looks at the digital time and temperature boards when they drive by one. Add some good phrases that change frequently, and you can really draw attention to the site,” says Haugh.

LED signs use very little power and are almost maintenance-free. For all other signage, make sure the type style is easy to read and the sign is well-lit. A phone number and website should be prominently displayed for easy contact purposes.

Doors. Doors are another feature that can make or break a facility’s image. If you invested wisely from the onset, door maintenance should not be an issue. Choose a door with super-durable polyester paint, stainless-steel latches and Grade 80 steel to withstand the most wear and tear.



For older doors, it’s possible to improve operation with lubrication. First, wipe the guides or side rails clean and spray them with Armor All. Spray the exposed springs and axles at the door-support bracket with a heavy coating of white lithium grease. By repeating these procedures every time a unit is vacated, you add life to your doors and prevent heavy maintenance costs.

Worn parts on the doors will be a red flag to a renter. You can replace worn parts such as astragals, wear guards and side strips at little expense. If the door curtain itself needs a facelift, look for a replacement kit that allows you to add a new door to your existing guides and brackets, minimizing your costs and installation time.

Inside Counts Too

If you pass muster with the external look of your facility, internal appearances are important in the final rental decision. Safety moves to the front of the line, especially when considering the large number of female renters. Surveillance cameras, intercoms and keypad access should all be in clear sight and easy to use.

Labonte constructs all his door and hallway systems in white. They reflect better, which offers more light and a feeling of security inside the storage halls. For multistory facilities, elevators should be well-lit and move quickly between floors. Staircases should also be properly lighted and well-marked for easy access.

With the technological advances of today’s self-storage facilities, it’s easy to overlook the overall packaging. But it remains that we are a visual society, and the more professional and secure a facility looks, the better the odds are that a potential renter turns into a long-term tenant.

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