

The Value of Web-Based Management Software in a Challenging and Changing Self-Storage Market

New applications integrate with other platforms to improve revenue

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After replacing DOS systems in the late 1990s with a Windows platform, more self-storage operators are looking to newer software applications, including Web-based ones, to fill gaps in their aging Windows systems. As with most upgrades, storage operators evaluate the payoff from new software. What makes the new product an investment, not an expense? What is the value, the return on the investment?

Newer Web software applications reduce the cost of ownership and bring in rentals. How so? Web systems share information with other users and facilitate rentals. Unlike Windows programs, Web systems connect to other platforms in real time—platforms such as your website, call centers, kiosks and off-site users, which now offer services around the clock that were previously reserved to managers and limited to business hours.

A User-Friendly Package

Today, most self-storage facilities have a website. That's a good start because tenants increasingly rely on the Internet to find products and services and make purchases. Websites offer more information than phonebooks—they tell a facility's story and engage customers by offering rates, specials, unit sizes and more. Google maps let clients visualize their way to your store and picture where they will be storing. Attractive websites grab customers' attention; displaying pricing and specials in a smart way draws customers in so they reserve units online or by phone.

To get the most out of your online presence, your management software has to feed its rates, specials, availability and more automatically, without anyone's action, and all in real time. The right software will offer tenants the same information and service via your website as your managers do in person or via phone, all in a user-friendly, inviting package.

With your management software connecting with your website, securely and in real time, prospective or existing tenants can:

- View prices or price ranges, including specials
- Use coupons and view promotions
- Select from a list showing availability of unit sizes and types
- Reserve units and complete the move-in process
- View their balance and payment history
- Make payments by ACH/bank draft or credit card
- Track inventory stored in their unit

Your management software can link to and exchange those and other items with your website, usually at no charge. Growing your online presence by combining your website with the right management software is easy and almost free and instant.

Sharing Information Reaps Rewards

Self-storage management software can securely share information with other platforms such as kiosks to ensure the growing success of your company. “Information is a valuable asset,” says Robert Chiti, president and CEO of Opentech Alliance Inc., maker of the INSOMNIAC kiosk. “Owners should demand their management software securely share pricing, including variable rates, marketing questions, specials, and availability to gain a clear business advantage.”

To rent more units, more owners give tenants convenient access via websites, call centers and kiosks. In the past, rentals only took place at the counter. Older programs had to merely ensure managers could easily access unit inventory and pricing. Newer programs integrate and securely share data with these platforms to allow more consumer touch points and the information to reserve or rent units. Kiosks are only effective when interfaced directly to the property-management software to share information in real time.

Access to information in your management software is just as critical for call-center agents. When trained, focused agents share management software with managers, websites and kiosks, they not only serve existing clients but reserve, rent and accept payments in real time. Whenever there’s a change, expect your software to update all users and platforms. Property-management software giving secure data access to all users helps to rent more units.

Many owners and operators enjoy having better access to software data anywhere, any time. Viewing reports on PDAs and smart phones leads to faster, timely decisions. Implementing smart revenue management is fast and easy, but often handled outside storage offices.

New programs let every facility, large or small, implement revenue management, including raising rent in a gradual, carefully targeted and deliberate manner, not

sweeping, large jumps that could sending your customers packing. A software's revenue management must offer you smart settings to filter out customers based on criteria such as length of stay, occupancy, months without rent change, etc.

Sell What You Have, Measure What You Sell

As owners look beyond the counter for generating leads and rentals, management software offers compelling, user-friendly tools to measure leads and present solid metrics about conversion rates. Software can track who generates the lead, how long it took to convert it to a paying rental, and connect with prospects via powerful e-mail campaigns. Newer software delivers sharper tools to evaluate sales efforts and adjust them as needed.

As leads come in, record who your clients are including:

- Type of customer (student, military, senior citizen, etc.)
- Use of specials or coupons
- What they're storing
- Age range

Look for powerful, adaptable and easy data mining in newer programs to help you target your marketing efforts, craft e-mail campaigns, and stay in front of current customers. An e-mail reminder to tenants listing specials for additional or bigger units can yield results. Or remind students at the local university before the end of the school year that you're still accepting rentals. Connecting with clients and broadcasting your message can be done with the click of a button using today's management software.

Expand With Confidence

Just as you expect software to always integrate reliably with various other platforms, you can also expect to off-load costly, time-consuming tasks such as sending First Class and Certified Mail. Newer management programs can outsource mail and eliminate postage meters, wear and tear on your printer, ink and paper, labor to fold and stuff envelopes, and visits to the post office.

Because newer systems can share data, such as letters, reliably with other providers, you not only save by outsourcing mail, but ensure you reach more tenants. "Except for First Class letters and Certified Mail, we compare every address with the National Change of Address directory," says Charles Crutchfield, president and CEO of Accountable Documents Solutions, a Web-based mailing provider. "Before, it took days for the stores to receive a notice of Change of Address and make appropriate changes. Now, owners don't lose precious days and are able to maintain their past dues, invoicing and lien procedures."

Eliminate Problems

New, better-designed tools allow today's software to lower your cost of ownership. Smart software design eliminates the need for backups, and even lowers your credit card rates every time your software exchanges information about a credit card holder. You might be able to eliminate credit card fees altogether when ACH (bank draft) draws rent right from a tenant's checking account. When you offer ACH to your tenants as the reliable tool it is, you also eliminate credit card fraud and prevent late payments.

Web software systems giving full access to data, reports and electronic billing eliminate trips to the office and reduce labor. Live updates (common with Windows operating systems, Adobe and other programs) reduce costly problems such as time-consuming upgrades via CDs or manual downloads and version conflicts. Restoring your management software when your system crashes becomes instant with Web systems and removes the time and cost of laboriously re-loading system disks and backups—preventing your from losing potential customers who walk out and rent elsewhere.

More owners focus on operation and growing rentals in a challenging market. Newer software programs offer the tools to get the most out of your website and generate leads, reservations and even move-ins.

Using Web systems, self-storage facilities can share powerful information, previously limited to managers behind counters, with websites, call centers, kiosks, and off-site users such as accountants and investors. More storage operators are discovering these and other methods to maintain growth in a changing market. Now is the time to discuss the next step as companies large and small upgrade their software systems.

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