



ISS BLOG



Engage Self-Storage Customers as an Empathetic Marketer During the COVID-19 Crisis

Though self-storage operators may be tempted to retreat from marketing efforts during the COVID-19 crisis, now's a good time to ramp up audience engagement by showing empathy and displaying company values.

Tony Jones | Apr 10, 2020

It's been a long month hasn't it? Adjusting to stay-in-place orders, procedural changes at your self-storage facilities, social distancing, and fruitless hunts for basic household provisions, like toilet paper, is enough to make the most mentally strong

among us buckle. Though it may occasionally feel like a daily rinse and repeat of futility, we must press on because there's no other option. We must take comfort that we're all in this together, working to flatten the curve, keep our communities healthy, and return life to something resembling normal as quickly as possible.

With the threat of recession or a prolonged economic downturn a distinct possibility, you might be tempted to retreat from marketing efforts, but remaining visible is not only an important cog in how self-storage operators navigate the COVID-19 crisis, it will help lay the blueprint for steering your business forward once this existential threat is over. Like many of you, I've spent a lot of time on my personal social media feeds and watching television with the family. I've found myself paying close attention to commercials, posts from businesses I follow, as well as suggested sponsor posts that pop into my timeline.

Empathetic Messaging

While it's interesting to see how messaging has changed since the novel coronavirus has disrupted daily routines, the important takeaway is that brands continue to engage their audiences. All the feelings of uncertainty you have are also writhing in the bellies of your tenants and prospective customers. Though marketing experts recommend pulling back from hard sells, most agree that now is the time to express empathy and demonstrate company values.

One way to do that is transparency in how you've taken care of staff (social distancing, working from home accommodations, paid leave, etc.) as well as steps you've implemented to work with customers who face financial hardship. In the last few weeks, we've posted numerous stories to our coronavirus topic page that illustrate how operators are adjusting. Examples of how to alleviate some pressure off customers include placing a freeze on rate increases, waiving late fees, offering payment plans for those who fall into delinquency, and either lengthening the lien process or temporarily suspending it.

Anything that shows how you're trying to be helpful and making decisions that may be contrary to the bottom line may resonate with prospective customers and reinforce loyalty with existing tenants. The same goes for operational adjustments that promote safety and slowing the spread of the virus, such as minimizing onsite staff, increased cleaning regimens, and contact-free programs like online rentals and payments, and hassle-free move-in experiences that eliminate the need for face-to-face interaction.

Displaying your emotional intelligence and values as a company when your community and customers are suffering creates brand value and promotes good will. Another way to do this is by showing support for ethical causes. For example, you could run a promotion in which you divert a portion of new rentals toward a reputable charity, including local emergency services fighting on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Make 'Em Laugh

There's some truth to the cliché that laughter is the best medicine. Humor can be therapeutic and cleansing when we need a distraction from the solemnness and seriousness around us. This can be difficult to pull off, as there is always the risk someone may be offended by the approach, but when it works, people will remember you for the right reasons.

You've likely seen recent media pictures of normally busy streets or venues empty while we all shelter in place. As someone who grew up in Los Angeles, seeing a desolate Interstate 405 is as surreal as it gets. With self-storage being a low-traffic-volume business model by nature, serenity on the property isn't unusual. A clever caption commenting on an image of an empty drive aisle or hallway—perhaps illustrating the scene as before and after social distancing—might elicit a welcomed chuckle.

Another way to tastefully show your sense of humor is to share some of the challenges you've had to overcome with remote working, staff scheduling and other

operational changes. Instead of spending hours fluttering through Netflix, perhaps you're binge watching the live feeds of your security cameras from the sofa. Anything relatable to what customers are experiencing in their own lives is game. For example, just about everyone I know has experienced the trials of grocery shopping and the inexplicable run on paper goods. Some non-grocery businesses with an excess of toilet paper have gotten creative by including a roll with a food purchase or what have you. If you've got a stockpile and your restroom is going unused, perhaps you can provide a value-add with new rentals or for tenants who opt in to signing up for autopay.

Start a Conversation

Prolonged sheltering in place, particularly cases of quarantine or self-isolation, can bring about feelings of detachment and disconnection. Take it from someone who has telecommuted full time for more than 15 years, connecting with others—even virtually—can lift one's spirits. Engage in conversations with your prospects and tenants. Ask them how they're doing and carefully listen to or read they're answers. Respond thoughtfully and with meaning. It doesn't have to be a serious, in-depth discussion. It just needs to be friendly and genuine to have a lasting, positive impact.

Look outside the self-storage industry for inspiration. Watch how your favorite brands engage their audience members and look for instances that you can adapt or emulate. Some of the most creative and effective marketers are often local, specialty or niche-service providers like craft breweries, boutique shops and restaurateurs.

Be active and convey your messaging using a multi-channel approach, including your business website, e-newsletters, social media and other platforms. Make use of pictures and video. This crisis presents an opportunity to introduce your self-storage business to customers who may not be familiar with you as well as strengthen the relationships you already have with existing tenants. Both can help build loyalty, brand ambassadors and referrals now as well as once the crisis comes to its conclusion.

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