

Improving Resilience

The Power Of Automated Technology

BY SETH BENT

Our nation has demonstrated our resolve to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles through tireless innovation and hard work. Over the last several months, our economy, way of life, and industry have experienced seismic pressure as a result of COVID-19. While the economic and civilian carnage resulting from this pandemic are hard to comprehend, there is an ever so slight silver lining beginning to emerge within the self-storage industry. It seems the natural response to retrench and simply weather the storm has been overpowered by creative thinking, problem solving, and innovation.

As a part of this effort, automation technology is quickly being pushed to the forefront as the most viable path to building a more dynamic and resilient storage business, which is a great change for owners and managers, as well as the communities and customers we serve.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, numerous articles and automation related opinion pieces have been circulated throughout the industry. Most of these articles have described the various solutions that are available to owners to facilitate touchless rentals or unmanned management. While covering these products and services is helpful, owners need to better understand the process of transitioning from traditional on-site management to an automated business model. Hopefully, the following can serve as a basic roadmap to owners and operators who are contemplating a transition to partially or fully automated management.

Start With Software

Cloud-based management software serves as the backbone for any automated self-storage operating platform. Remote access capabilities give managers all the tools necessary to monitor and control their business, while API (Application Programming Interface) integration allows for seamless connectivity to the various customer touchpoints such as a

website or kiosk. There are a variety of cloud-based self-storage management software options; investing the necessary time to understand the various features of each program to select the one that feels intuitive, while supporting your specific operational needs, is extremely important. Since management software plays such a critical role in automated operations, it is a good idea to familiarize yourself with a new software well in advance of making significant changes to your operating model. Though innovation is healthy, innovation overload can lead to chaos.

Build The Interface

Successfully automating self-storage operations requires an owner to seamlessly integrate the multiple touchpoints of the customer interface, which typically consists of a website, call center, and kiosk. While it may seem arbitrary, there is a logical sequence to follow when building this new environment.

1. Website – A website site is a critical part of any self-storage business regardless of automation, which makes it a logical starting point. Working with an experienced developer helps ensure a logical format and intuitive user experience. Incorporating features such as online rentals/reservations, online payments, and live chat will increase overall website utility and enhance the customer experience.

Lastly, given the widespread adoption of mobile devices, investing in a mobile optimized website will create a seamless experience for customers who prefer to use their smartphones.

2. Call Center – A third-party call center can easily be woven into a facility with on-site management to provide coverage for rollover calls, after hours, and weekends. Furthermore, utilizing a call center is a cost-effective way to capture additional inbound inquiries while simultaneously expanding support for existing customers. Through API integration, a third-party call center has access to real-time data regarding rates, unit availability, and account balances, which creates a seamless customer experience.

3. Kiosk – Installing a kiosk at a facility is the last step in assembling a completely automated customer interface. The kiosk creates a touchpoint at the property, which allows customers to rent a unit, make payments, update account information, or purchase a lock. Additionally, a kiosk can be integrated with a call center to add an additional layer of human support should a customer need it. If an owner is committed to retaining on-site management, a kiosk is a great way to expand manager bandwidth without increasing employee headcount.



4. Mobile App – Integrating mobile apps into the customer interface can be an effective way to streamline the customer experience in two capacities. First, much like the website and kiosk, a mobile app can be a useful portal for customers to rent units, manage their existing accounts, or connect with customer service. Second, mobile apps have emerged as a way for customers to seamlessly access a facility through touchless and keyless gates/doors. While not a mandatory part of automated operations, the benefits of mobile app technology should be considered as a worthwhile supplement to automated operations.

An important concept worth highlighting is the ability to mix and match these solutions in a way that creates maximum efficiency and resilience for your specific needs. While these products and services are integrated to create a fully automated

customer interface, they can also be used to supplement on-site management. The decision to implement automation is not binary, so anyone considering automation should not feel pressure of an all or nothing commitment.

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Facility Modifications

Once the various components of the customer interface have been successfully integrated to create an automated customer management platform, owners should focus on facility modifications that will further streamline their operation,

enhance customer experience, and create a resilient business. Similar to building an automated customer interface, owners can pick and choose facility improvements based on their specific operating objectives and goals. Some items worth considering include the following:

- **Surveillance** – If less human presence at a facility raises security concerns, then an owner should consider adding additional cameras or upgrading to a smart camera system, which allows for full remote monitoring capabilities.
- **Access Controls** – Cloud-based systems provide extensive remote management capabilities and offer owners enhanced insights through robust reporting and site data analytics.
- **Smart Locks** – New smart lock systems provide owners with the ability to remotely control door locks while giving tenants keyless unit access and unit monitoring capabilities.

Plan Tomorrow, Today

The wave of technology that is proliferating across the storage industry has been building for many years. Some owners have been slow to adopt new technology into their platform, however, the emergence of COVID-19 has forced every self-storage owner to rethink their operations. By leveraging the power of automated technology, self-storage owners can create a safer environment for employees and customers today while building a more resilient and sustainable business for tomorrow. The decision to incorporate automation into your self-storage business may seem daunting, but the myriad of solutions now available to owners can be layered sequentially as to not completely disrupt or overwhelm business operations.

Seth Bent is the founder and former CEO of Red Dot Storage. He remains an active board member of Red Dot. In addition, Bent is the founder and CEO of Storage Exchange, an operator-centric transaction platform, and StoreLine, a technology and automation enabled self-storage management platform.

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