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THE LATEST IN SELF-STORAGE SOFTWARE AND TECHNOLOGY



Management Software for Multiple Sites

Choosing the enterprise solution for you

By Kat Shenoy

The self-storage industry has experienced brisk growth, and many companies operate multiple facilities. Having more than one site involves unique challenges, such as how to generate new business, reduce labor costs, impose better operational controls, manage technology across multiple locations, improve customer service and stay ahead in highly competitive markets.

Multifacility owners rely on several managers to handle day-to-day operations. For that reason, operational controls and standardization across all sites is of utmost importance, and management software is critical in that regard. Not all software packages are designed to meet the complex needs of multisite companies. Important issues such as technical support, product enhancements, controls, updates, downtimes and reporting have created a need for dedicated programs.

Finding the right software for your business can be a demanding, time-consuming process. It calls for due diligence and a thorough evaluation of each vendor's product, services and support. A good multisite solution will include on-site installation, set up and training, customizable options and 24/7 technical support. It should be reliable, scalable, easy to use and cost-effective. It should also make the best use of technology, such as website integration and online credit-card processing.

Web Answers

If you have multiple self-storage locations, consider web-based software with a central database that allows all sites to connect remotely and perform transactions via the Internet. You'll have access to your data from any facility and be able to easily reconcile and consolidate information for management reporting. You'll also be able to react quickly to market conditions and maintain a higher level of occupancy at all sites. Moreover, a web application provides the integration necessary to offer online rental and payment options to customers and real-time data for call-center use.

While "enterprise" management software will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your operation, it requires a financial investment and the appropriate infrastructure. You'll also want to evaluate the pros and cons of hosting your data with a third party. While using an ASP (application service provider) cuts down on your initial hardware investment, it raises concerns regarding data security and what happens if the ASP goes out of business or changes hands. If your company has a good IT infrastructure, consider hosting the database in-house on your own server.

To avoid problems when Internet service is interrupted at any one of your sites, choose a software solution that will allow continued operation via a local copy of the database. With this option, the data will automatically synchronize with the central database when the Internet connection is restored.

It's also important to make sure your software has built-in security that provides various levels of access based on the status of the user. For example, the president of



the company should have access to all data for every facility, while the Texas district manager only needs access to information for the facilities he oversees. Lower-level staff will have access based on their specific tasks.

Once you decide on the best software solution for your operation, set up an implementation team including members of the vendor's staff as well as key members of your company. The conversion from the old software to the new requires adequate planning so day-to-day operations are not affected and tenants are not inconvenienced.

ezStorage: A Case Study

ezStorage Corp. owns and operates 35 storage facilities in Maryland and Virginia. The company is expanding rapidly, adding four to five sites to its portfolio each year. It recently replaced the management software at each of its locations, converting to an enterprise solution. In a private interview, Todd Manganaro, vice president of operations, shared the company's experience, explaining the selection process he and his management team went through. He discussed the issues they encountered during the conversion and offered advice for large companies looking to make a similar transition. An excerpt from the dialogue follows.

What constitutes good management software? A product that is user-friendly at the facility level but dynamic and flexible at the home-office level.

What were the general issues that caused you to look for new software? Basically, standardization of management software was lacking across all our facilities, as we had deployed two different versions. Getting consolidated reporting was complex—we had to run different consolidation programs to compare figures for all sites. The numbers on the reports weren't accurate either, defeating the very purpose of consolidation. We came to the conclusion that we needed to replace our legacy software with a more reliable, stable and user-friendly product that would provide accurate reporting; quick consolidation of data from all sites; customization to meet our unique needs; better interface capabilities; and standardization across all facilities.

How long did the software evaluation take? We performed due diligence for about 12 months before deciding which management software to go with.

What factors did you consider when evalu-

ating vendors? Customer service, customization services, ability to incorporate modern technology and centralized reporting capabilities.

Did you consider third-party hosting (ASP model)? Yes, we did; and we ruled out ASP, since we didn't feel comfortable having all our data hosted on a third party's server. Another concern was if the connection to the ASP was lost for some reason, individual facilities would not be able to perform rentals.

How important is it to use a vendor that provides a turnkey solution? It's an essential factor in the decision-making process. We're operating a large number of storage facilities. We have in excess of 30,000 tenants, and our rental offices are open seven days a week. We want to be sure there's no downtime and that software support is available whenever we need it so we can provide tenants excellent customer service and a professional storage experience.

Is it important to use a vendor that will customize its product to meet your needs? Everyone views information differently. The ability to customize the management reports to meet our unique requirements has led to a more comprehensive analysis of our storage sites.

How important is it for the software to integrate with your website and add-on modules? It's important that your vendor see the big picture. Self-storage is notorious for being behind the times in technology. It's refreshing to find a system that will integrate with the web, accounting software, management consoles, etc.

How did you arrive at your final decision? After meeting face-to-face with the vendor and its top management, and evaluating it as an organization and its vision to provide a superior product using the latest technology, I knew it was the right technology partner to do business with.

How long did the conversion process last? The conversion of all our sites took about four months.

Did you run into any problems? There are always unforeseeable issues—what matters is how you react to them. Our vendor attended to all the challenges we encountered and addressed them promptly.

How would you rate the support you received? Excellent. The vendor provided an onsite project manager as well as a remote support team to ensure smooth implementation.

Did you have to deal with any third parties during the conversion? We had to

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contact security-software vendors, online credit-card verification services, hardware vendors and merchant banks. We received very good cooperation from most.

What would be your advice to multifacility companies planning to replace their software? Study each vendor. Meet them face-to-face. If you can meet their top executives, that's even better. Make sure your vision of the software and the way it will actually operate in the future are in line, i.e., does the vendor plan on adopting newer technology as it becomes available? Is it willing to work with you in operating your company in the most efficient way?

Can you offer any checklists or pointers? The goal is to come up with a comprehensive list of features you need from the management software and test the software thoroughly to ensure all your requirements are met. Many vendors give descriptions of capabilities that aren't correct or don't quite work the way they are presented.

Finally, how do you leverage information technology to grow your business? Technology has helped us operate more efficiently and effectively with fewer employees in less time. It's the key to providing quality service across a large geographical area. 📍

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