

In A Class Of Their Own

Presenting The 2004 Manager Of The Year Winners
Sponsored By The Self-Storage Association

By Erin Henley and Jennifer Hollingsworth

Following 17 years of contest success, this year the *Mini-Storage Messenger* proudly passed the Manager of the Year competition to its sister magazine, *Self-Storage Now!* After careful scrutiny of what resulted in one of the largest entry pools of qualified, outstanding managers in the history of the contest, *Self-Storage Now!* presents Nicole Gray as the 2004 Manager of the Year. Both Gray and Runner-Up Jennifer Curtis have gone above and beyond in the world of self-storage management, proving that success greatly depends not only upon contribution, but also on attitude.



Nicole Gray, Manager Of the Year Winner, Storage Express, Lancaster, California

2004 Manager of the Year

Nicole Gray

Storage Express
Lancaster, California

A winning formula of hard work, determination, and enthusiasm has equaled success for Nicole Gray, manager of Storage Express in Lancaster, Calif.

"She serves as an example of what a great manager should be," says Rob Martin, managing member of Martin Properties, Inc., owners of Storage Express. The statistics alone demonstrate his point: during Gray's first year as manager, the facility's income rose 66 percent while delinquencies fell by nearly 50 percent, despite new competition.

As Patricia Ponds, Gray's assistant manager, puts it, "The current success of Storage Express is due to Nicole." With income rising by 10 percent monthly, and occupancy up from 74 percent to 96 percent, Gray has excelled in her position, earning the 2004 Manager of the Year award.

A Facility In Trouble

Gray's career in self-storage began after she graduated from high school in 1998, when she went to work for a local storage facility. Ultimately, she was promoted to resident manager, a position she held until she left Lancaster in 2001. Upon her return in the spring of 2002, Gray started working at Storage Express and was promoted to resident manager by the end of that same year. "I knew the job would be challenging," she recalls, "but I had found my career."

Indeed, Storage Express was facing major challenges when Gray assumed the management role, according to Gregory A. Call, president of the Management Division of Self Storage Works, an Irvine,

Calif.-based consulting, development, and management company that has worked closely with Gray and Martin. “She accepted her role with enthusiasm and set goals to bring the site under control,” says Call. Martin notes that Gray “provided a fresh perspective and embraced the style of sales and marketing that the prior manager was reluctant to embrace.”

At the time Gray took over Storage Express, income was down, as was occupancy; additionally, delinquencies were soaring. To make matters worse, customer service, though highly valued by Martin and his team, wasn’t being communicated to employees, who were frustrated by the lack of direction. “Morale was down, and no one enjoyed being at work,” Gray recalls.

Now, however, the situation at Storage Express is vastly different. Occupancy has reached 96 percent in the 545-unit site, and delinquencies have dropped to just four percent. With an emphasis on customer service, employee training, and goal-setting, Gray has transformed the facility.

The Road To Success

How did Gray set about achieving this transformation? First, she recalls, “We sharpened our sales and customer service skills. I started learning everything I could about selling units, ancillary items, and truck rentals. I attended storage conferences, customer service classes, and management seminars every chance I got—anything I could think of to increase income and reduce delinquencies.”

Gray set goals for herself and the facility, and worked out plans to achieve each goal. For example, to reduce delinquencies, she developed a specific collection process that starts at the time of rental, with each customer receiving a booklet that contains payment information and pre-addressed mailing labels. “We have a tenant information form that asks for an emergency contact not residing with the customer, which helps us find out right away if we have a good address or not,” she explains. “Keeping in contact with the customer is everything,” she continues. “Five days after the customer’s due date (the grace period is 10 days), we call to remind them to pay their rent to avoid late fees. I have been thanked so many times for this courtesy.”

Gray has increased Storage Express’ presence in the local business community by attending all events held by the local chamber of commerce and joining the National Business Association. She also implemented weekly visits to local businesses, delivering gift and fliers. These efforts have paid off, with commercial customers now comprising 40 percent of the facility’s tenant base.

Recognizing the importance of residential customers, Gray stepped up the facility’s marketing efforts to this group. Storage Express now sponsors news, weather, and traffic updates on local radio stations. Gray placed an ad at the chamber of commerce’s office to target people relocating to the area and also delivers high-quality laminated door hangers to a different neighborhood each week.

One of Gray’s most successful marketing initiatives has been a free truck and driver program, which offers customers the use of a 15-foot van and driver to move their items into the facility. The truck’s driver distributes door hangers throughout the neighborhood while the customer loads items. The truck itself serves as a mobile billboard advertising Storage Express.

Customer Service Is The Key

Gray has worked hard to make Storage Express inviting once the customers step into the facility. The facility offers free coffee and bottled water, and employees personally deliver water to customers accessing their units in hot weather. Gray also provides activities to keep children occupied while their parents are going through the rental process. Seasonal flowers and weekly landscaping have enhanced the facility’s curb appeal.

“An expert at merchandise display” is how Martin describes Gray, adding, “Sales of boxes and moving supplies have increased dramatically as a result.” For example, Gray transformed the virtually empty model units located in the office by using them to display ancillary products, which allows customers to view and touch products while seeing just how much each unit can contain.

Gray also works hard to make the facility secure, using features like daily lock checks, constant video surveillance, individual door alarms, and computerized gate access that logs entries and exits. “I per-

sonally walk the facility once a day, and a full unit audit is done bi-weekly,” she says. “This has helped us hold onto our record of no security issues at all since we opened.”

Perhaps the biggest difference Gray has made has been in customer service. “All employees stand when customers enter the office, walk around the counter, introduce themselves, and shake the customer’s hand. I tell my employees to treat customers as you would want people to treat your mother or father, always with the utmost respect,” she says. “I know 98 percent of my tenants by name and unit number. When a customer walks in and you address them by name, it makes a difference to them. They feel as acknowledged and appreciated as they are.”

Gray understands that employees who feel respected and appreciated are integral to great customer service. “When goals are reached, employees are re-warded with special gifts—flowers, dinner for two, and perfume,” she says. “This has boosted employee morale and helped with teamwork.”

Ponds agrees, saying, “Nicole is great to work with. She believes that if we have a good relationship with each other, things will run more efficiently and it will show to our customers.” Moreover, Gray recognizes the value of giving back to the community. When tenants leave items behind, she donates them to Grace Resources, a local food bank and shelter. She is currently working on finding a children’s charity or youth sports team with which the facility can be involved.

A Bright Future

What’s next for this talented young woman? As Martin states, “Her future in the industry looks as bright as can be.” Gray’s next move will be to District Manager as Storage Express prepares to open its second facility in nearby Palmdale, Calif. “I’m excited for the new challenge,” she says, and she anticipates eventually having even more facilities under her supervision. She also plans to earn an associate degree in Business Management.

“Enjoy the work,” is Gray’s advice to other managers. “We have a unique and rewarding job, which I think is one of the best. I wouldn’t want to be doing anything else.”



Jennifer Curtis, Manager Of the Year Runner-Up, StorQuest Self Storage, Parker, Colorado

2004 Manager of the Year Runner-Up

Jennifer Curtis

StorQuest Self Storage
Parker, Colorado

Packing several years of commercial property management experience in the office and retail sectors under her belt, Jennifer Curtis set out on her first venture into the self-storage industry determined to make her mark. And make her mark she did.

At the time of winning the runner-up position in the Manager of the Year competition, Curtis had been in the self-storage industry for exactly as long as StorQuest Self-Storage had been open—seven months. The remarkable part is that in these times of slower lease-ups due to increased competition, she managed to push the facility from zero to 60 percent occupancy in that time span of just seven months. According to Christen Gibson, operations coordinator for the Santa Monica, Calif.-based William Warren Group, which is the management company for StorQuest, “Jennifer has not only met our expectations, but exceeded them ten-fold.”

A Recipe For Success

Just as her peers compliment her, Curtis credits the people behind the manager.

“I have a wonderful support team, from co-workers to the president of William Warren Group. Truly they make my job easy. I know I work for a company full of energetic, hard working, dedicated individuals who really want to make the self-storage industry a class act in the world of commercial property management.”

As her first marketing maneuver, the grand opening started with a boom. Wise in the ways of spreading the word, she contacted the local paper and had them write an article about the grand opening, introducing StorQuest as the newest, premier self-storage facility in town. She also joined the Parker Chamber of Commerce and contacted all of the town’s doctors and dentists to propose the need for storage of their documents. All of the realtors heard from her as well.

An exhibition at the Parker Business Expo topped off her marketing efforts, exposing an estimated 5,000 attendees to the facility.

Contending with six competitors within a five-mile radius, she then hit the pavement. “Within the first few months, I canvassed the town, dropping off flyers and coupons to dozens of businesses, and had apartment complex managers enclose our brochure in their move-in packets.”

In addition, Curtis sent her team to post marketing material at high-traffic stores, such as Wal-Mart®, King Soopers, and Home Depot®, while hitting residential neighborhoods with fliers. An exhibition at the Parker Business Expo topped off her marketing efforts, exposing an estimated 5,000 attendees to the facility.

The Hurdles Of A New Facility

While Curtis’ marketing efforts and winning style have hit the mark in terms of renting units, she is quick to give credit to the facility itself. “The Parker facility is one of the nicest storage facilities I have ever seen. In this case, the lease-up period has been quite a pleasure because the property sells itself in most situations. Tenants are constantly commenting on the upscale feeling they get when they walk through our doors.”

Before the doors opened, however, much work had to be done. As with the majority of construction projects, the path to opening was rife with issues, including securing vendor maintenance contracts, and dealing with warranty issues involving roof work, sealing, landscaping, wiring and security. Curtis jumped into the situation headlong, making constant property inspections and seamlessly dealing with all of these matters. “My job was to keep the general contractor, the subcontractors, and the key members from the William Warren Group on the same page,” she adds. “I had to follow-up with work that still needed to be done and make sure that all loose ends were tied.” The result is a fantastic-looking property that still shines seven months down the road.

Regarding her quick education on self-storage, Curtis views her situation as unique. “I feel lucky to have been placed into a new facility. My goal was to learn about the self-storage industry as fast as possible, and what better way than with a ground-up situation,” she says. “Having to deal with construction issues helped me learn about the differences in how storage facilities are built, powered and secured—the very basics of self-storage management.”

Ahead Of The Game

Camaraderie between facilities assists her in staying ahead of the game. Curtis realizes that while a little friendly competition never hurt anybody, competition should remain just that—friendly. Moreover, her firm belief in maintaining a good working relationship with competitors has benefited facility occupancy. She says, “I’ve met with all of my competitors. When they refer business to me I personally call them or send gift baskets in appreciation.”

StorQuest Self Storage also stays a step ahead in the delinquency department. Sporting a delinquency rate of only 1.6 percent in a 721-unit facility, Curtis has her team take turns handling receivables reports so that late tenants receive plenty of friendly reminders. “Our program for maintaining a low delinquency level is to call, call and keep calling.”

It’s About The Customer

Curtis prides herself on customer service, and her experience in commercial property management has aided her in being able to make the right decisions, ask the right questions, and maintain operations at a very professional level. “Tenant relations are key to happy, satisfied customers who want to spread the word—if you’re keeping them smiling,” she says, adding that excellent customer service is absolutely imperative. “I expect myself and my team to give 100 percent to each customer. This is how you stay on the forefront of people’s minds.”

If customer service and first impressions are everything, then Curtis is right on track. Offering the supreme compliment, Pam Leelayuwapan, marketing director of the William Warren Group says, “Jennifer’s professional demeanor and warm and friendly personality enhance the appearance of the facility by giving all customers an exceptional first impression of the staff and our product.”

Looking Ahead

While Curtis has unmistakably excelled in her short tenure with StorQuest Self Storage, she has her eye firmly on the future. Knowing that constantly keeping the facility in the public eye is a must, she already has marketing activities lined up at the starting line. She has a number of projects ready for the upcoming holidays, including being a collection center for the Toys for Tots and Coats for Colorado programs, and sponsoring the Colorado School of Dance Nutcracker Production. She also plans to contact local schools and churches to donate units, thus getting the name of the facility out into the community.

How do all of these activities fit into her exact game plan? With assurance Curtis says, “My occupancy goal is to have 80 percent of the facility full by the end of the year. With our current marketing strategies, we believe we can achieve this mark.”

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