

The Great Marriage: Software and Security

Integrated products protect, serve and sell

By Julia Shih

To maximize their assets and stay competitive, self-storage owners look for ways to incorporate the latest technology into their facilities while maintaining reasonable prices. They jump to embrace high-end, cost-effective solutions that simplify operations, make managers more efficient, and heighten security to maximum levels. To this end, the industry is seeing an emergence of tools that flawlessly integrate security functionality with day-to-day tasks.

Margaret Lee understands the quest for comprehensive security and property-management solutions. She manages Storage by George in Napa, Calif., a sprawling 650-unit storage center nestled in gorgeous wine country. To meet customer needs, the facility offers climate-controlled wine storage in addition to standard storage units. The entire site uses state-of-the-art security equipment, such as 24-hour video surveillance, alarms and motion detectors—staples that give operators and tenants peace of mind.

Where Storage by George goes beyond the norm is in its visitor tracking and integrated, coded keypad system. The facility takes advantage of access-control hardware and software that work seamlessly with property-management tools. The combination simplifies operations and creates tremendous security benefits.

“The management program allows the site to operate on a day-today basis,” explains Trent Sosnowski, a customer-support technician for Lakewood, Colo.-based Sentinel Systems Corp. “It handles tenant move-ins and move-outs, billing, the sending of late letters, lien completion, payments and merchandise sales. It also tracks tenants’ activities at the site.” On top of all this functionality are integrated hardware solutions for access control: keypads, door alarms, video cameras, and driver’s license scanners for tenant identification and records. The result is a multifaceted, comprehensive system that covers all the basics of running a storage operation.

Know What’s Up

“One of the things we wanted was to always know what’s going on at the site, using CCTV cameras with digital video recorders and software that tracks all activities,” says Lee. This desire is echoed throughout the industry, especially as trends for lightly staffed and even unmanned facilities develop.

Of the features Storage by George enjoys, visitor tracking and report generation have been among the most useful. “Our cameras are hooked up to the alarm system as well as the gate, so every time a door is open, a report is generated,” Lee explains. “We can assign a different password to each person who has access to a particular unit, so we can tell companies exactly who entered their space and when.” For Lee, this feature proved to be an effective selling point to prospective renters.

Know Who's Who

Stricter protocol for collecting tenant identification and maintaining customer records has become the norm for storage operations throughout the country. Lee takes advantage of driver's license scanning and database tools now on the market. "After the Oklahoma City Bombing of 1995 and the events of 9/11, we're all more aware of how important it is to get correct, detailed information from each and every tenant," she says. "One of the major concerns in self-storage is the possibility of illegal activities being associated with a tenant's unit."

While it's common to require proof of a tenant's identification during the rental process, advanced hardware that integrates with management software makes it easy to collect data. An ID scanner scans, verifies and catalogs information. A good one will recognize driver's licenses from all 50 states, as well as passports, military IDs and select international ID cards. By using a scanner, you get accurate and complete information in a snap, including a digital image of the card itself. Some scanners will even cross-reference a card's data with captured license-plate and Social Security numbers to create all-inclusive tenant files.

With so many new technologies available to self-storage owners, solutions are quickly becoming integrated and standardized. They provide more cost-efficient, comprehensive ways to manage facilities while providing the best security and customer service. State-of-the-art equipment is also an effective marketing tool. With the marriage of management and security hardware and software comes complete control and a competitive advantage.

Julia P. Shih is the marketing manager for Card-Scanning Solutions, a developer of card-reading systems. Based on OCR (optical character recognition) technology, its systems are designed to quickly and accurately read the information from driver's licenses, passports and other ID cards. The company's software provides extensive database capabilities for automatically processing, storing and manipulating acquired data. For more information, call 310.691.8920; e-mail julia@card-scan.com; visit www.card-scanner.com.