

Look Who's Talking

Rodney Bolls – Founder of Boxwell

BY ERICA SHATZER

While there are indicators that the current development cycle is finally losing momentum, the effects of new supply can be far reaching and potentially long lasting. In fact, the increased competition has already left many self-storage owners and operators searching for ways to box out the opposition and land customers as rental rates begin to dip from surplus rental space.

Certainly, there are numerous strategies for strengthening operations and boosting your bottom line. From cutting expenses and focusing on curb appeal to creating new marketing campaigns and adding new services, experienced self-storage business owners know that it often takes a multi-faceted line of defense to beat the overdevelopment slump at the end of a growth cycle.

But one business owner, Rodney Bolls, founder of Boulder, Colo.-based Boxwell, a company that supplies custom portable storage containers, has come to find that putting principles over profits can lead to unrivaled growth as well as gains.

Culture Is The Core

When Bolls decided to start Boxwell in 2015, he knew one thing: A good work-life balance would produce the results he was seeking.

"It blows me away that more companies haven't recognized the importance of culture," says Bolls, adding that a good work-life balance enables him and his employees to "enjoy work more."

For Bolls, creating a culture with an emphasis on "quality over quantity" was paramount. He wanted to keep his family and spouse as his first priority, but he also wanted his employees to be able to do the same. To accomplish this, Bolls instated a flexible work schedule, one that doesn't keep track of daily hours worked. Though

that may seem counterproductive, and the company does tally paid time off, Bolls notes that the scheduling flexibility allows his employees to come to work when they are ready—energized and eager to put in quality hours. In other words, they get their work completed in less time because they are more motivated.

At Boxwell, Bolls reminds his employees that the reward to doing quality work is not just the paycheck. "It's time," he says, urging them to use their free time to impact their lives in positive ways. Bolls, who is an avid outdoorsman, also makes it a point to "challenge" his team. Leading by example, he makes time for his family and activities he enjoys, such as skiing and hiking. "Life is so busy," he says. "You have to make time; get out of the office." Bolls inspires his employees to do the same, encouraging them to find something they love to do and make time for it. In fact, though he flew over 280,000 miles last year for work, he still managed to find a balance in his life, sharing invigorating life experiences with his family and dates with his wife.

Bolls is adamant that the ability to adjust, pivot, or adapt during busy times is key to having a constant balance in this oftentimes hectic life. "Find ways to fit stuff in," he says.

Caring As A Foundation

Besides putting a work-life balance at the forefront of the company culture, Bolls made caring the foundation of his business and the customer service it provides. At the crux, he wanted to provide a better product, better service, and help customers grow their businesses. "We've become consultants in a way," he says, adding that he takes pride in partnering with others within the self-storage industry and being able to refer customers to those partners.



"We're not just focused on making money," says Bolls. "We're not just in it to get a sale. It starts with caring. We go out of our way to help customers, and that comes back tenfold."

This caring, customer-first way of doing business is essential for establishing an exceptional brand image and a good reputation for his company as well as the industry as a whole. "Your brand and reputation are everything," says Bolls. "You have one chance to make a first impression."

Though Boxwell doesn't deal with the end users—the tenants—he is optimistic that their model of caring will be adopted by others.

Indeed, given the nature of self-storage, and customers' frequently troubling reasons for needing storage, such as deaths, divorces, and natural disasters, it is so important to put compassion and understanding into customer service interactions and sales. Considering a 2019 court ruling in favor of tenants in California who were price gouged by a public self-storage company during a state of emergency from the destructive North Bay wildfires, it's vital to conduct business in a way

that doesn't sully the character of the entire industry.

"It's about upholding a level of service and integrity," says Bolls. "You don't want to overpromise and underdeliver."

Though he recognizes that maintaining high-quality service and respectability becomes more challenging as the company grows, it is the gold standard Boxwell strives to achieve on a daily basis. And, according to Bolls, the only way to accomplish that is by hiring employees with that same focus.

"Employees are a reflection of the company," says Bolls, "and that is critical to success."

He goes on to say that the right employees will promote and propel your brand. While finding high-caliber candidates can be a challenge, and sometimes a lengthy process, Bolls states that preventing turnover goes back to the company's culture. In addition to advising against making hasty hiring decisions to fill an opening, he recommends looking for like-minded folks who will be pleased to share your mission and support your vision.

Reaping Referrals

Besides finding employees that are a good fit for the company, Bolls notes that Boxwell has found success in being more selective about the customers it takes on. In order to provide the best customer service possible, he says it is sometimes necessary to turn away business.

More than a means for quality control, Bolls believes that customers should be in tune with a company's values in order to create win-win situations for everyone. "We look for customers who value our service and features," he says, adding that those items should outweigh price. "We don't want to race to the bottom by competing on price."

Obviously, that concept is one that should be resonating within the self-storage industry, especially with new competition upsetting the delicate balance of supply and demand in numerous markets across the country. The price wars that tend to ensue when supply exceeds demand do


more than lower the street rates. They damage the perceived value of self-storage and put all competing operators at risk for dramatic reductions in economic occupancy. In other words, profits plummet. Therefore, Bolls suggests focusing sales pitches on the features of the products/facility as well as the unmatched customer service skills of the business' staff.

While it may seem financially foolish to be choosy about which customers to service, Bolls says that sometimes you can tell from the get-go that a customer will require more resources and energy than the sale is worth. For instance, if a customer is on a fixed income and overly concerned with rates, it is possible that they may not be able to afford the fees and quickly slip into delinquency. In this situation, staff could suggest a more affordable option at a nearby self-storage facility to avoid taking on a troublesome tenant without coming off as inconsiderate. There is nothing wrong with retaining a space, service, or product for a customer who would be a better match for your business.

As Bolls sees it, passing on a substandard sale can actually save you money in the end. In fact, he points to potential litigation as a prime example—one that Boxwell unfortunately learned the hard way after dealing with a disgruntled customer.

On the other hand, being selective enables his team to provide stellar service to the customers who are a good match with the company. And their complete satisfaction tends to result in great referrals, reviews, and testimonials.

"Referrals from customers are the biggest compliment," says Bolls. "They prove that what we are doing is working!"

In the end, it seems that figuring out where to place your time, effort, and energy is key to success—both professional and personal! 

Erica Shatzer is the editor of Mini-Storage Messenger, Self-Storage Now!, and Self-Storage Canada.



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