



Building in High-Tech Features: A Case Study on Implementation and Benefits for Self-Storage

When developing a new self-storage facility, adding technology to the design can be critical to providing a superior customer experience. One owner shares the high-tech features he incorporated to improve site operation and security.

Matt Clark | Jan 31, 2020

I founded Pack, Stack & Store Inc. in January 2015 with my business partner, Brian Harrington. Our plan was to create a better storage experience by leaning on our combined strengths in general contracting and facility operation.

We selected Huntley, Ill., for our first project due to the recent population surge in the market and lack of competitors in the area. We decided to go with a simple, proven design for the ground-up development: a single-story, fortress-style masonry building with a tower above the retail area and a strong focus on technology, convenience and security. It was based on Brian's previous ownership of another storage operation as well as customer and manager feedback.

Top Features

Once construction started, we began the work of choosing the most important technology features to integrate into the construction and operations setup. Some we looked at were so new they'd never been used at any other storage site. For example, some of the surveillance technology hadn't been available in self-storage previously but was being previewed at industry tradeshow.

The challenge was to prepare and set up these unknown systems before the grand opening of our facility in July 2019. After careful research and planning, we decided to incorporate the following into our design:

- A smart surveillance system
- Motion-activated camera recording with large-screen monitors displaying activity in the office
- Artificial-intelligence security software originally designed for security-guard services to detect people, vehicles and potential threats
- A special license-plate camera that automatically reads and stores short video clips of each vehicle that enters the property
- Remote offsite monitoring with threat-detection alerts sent 24/7 to connected mobile devices
- Adjustable security settings for creating restricted areas and time zones as well as monitoring the loitering of people and vehicles
- 12 TBs of hard-drive storage on the digital video recorder for longer access to video playback

- Cylinder-lock-only latches for extra theft protection
- Online payments, reservations and rentals via an optimized, user-friendly website integrated to the management software and access-control system
- A mobile app that allows staff to take payments and process move-ins, transfers and retail sales from anywhere
- Smart climate-control monitoring
- WiFi thermostats that are centrally monitored and adjusted through a Web-based system
- Remote access to the climate-control system with alert notifications via a smart thermostat app
- Internet music, WiFi, intercom call buttons and a PA system throughout the buildings

In addition, we included a smart gate that allows for hands-free access with Bluetooth beacons. Customers can use an app to retrieve access codes or view previous entry logs. The system also allows users to communicate with the manager via a one-touch to phone call or discreet e-mail messaging. The cloud-based system requires only an Internet-connected device. Updates are performed automatically through the Web, and an emergency battery backup will automatically open the gates during a power failure.

Implementation Challenges

We faced a few challenges during implementation, especially as some of these systems had never been used in the storage industry before. Luckily, we were able to beta-test a version of our surveillance-monitoring software at a nearby laundromat we owned, which allowed us to work out some of the bugs and determine what was needed to install it at the storage facility.

It also gave us some time to train ourselves on how to use the software effectively and prepare for training staff at the store. We didn't have a manual yet for how to use these new systems because we had just learned how to use them ourselves! So, we sat down to work with the site managers in person and taught them one-on-one.

Looking back, we probably would've set up the smart surveillance system a little differently. However, we still feel it makes the manager's job much easier and more efficient.

Customer Response

Smart cameras have been a big selling point for our customers. People like knowing the cameras are always watching their stuff, even when the manager is unavailable. They also love the gate-access app, which allows them to manage their account. With the use of the company website and app, they can rent their own unit and access the facility with very little help from management.

There's a bit of a learning curve, but our staff enjoys the time they get to spend teaching customers what's available and how easy it is to use. We also offer key-fob access for customers who aren't tech-savvy but still want hands-free gate access over a memorized code. We've found it's good to offer backup options, including a traditional keypad.

The Next Project

In planning our next site, we'll use the same smart systems. They've made everyone's jobs easier and allowed us to promote and rent up the facility faster.

For example, in the past, if there was a security incident, we had to dig through hours of footage to find out what happened after the fact. Now, our cameras they're being watched for us and we're alerted when there's something we need to see, even if we aren't on site. We used to have to walk around the facility with a stepladder, unlocking thermostat lockboxes to check on the climate systems and make setting changes. Now, it's all done through our centralized access-control system from anywhere with Web access!

Having the latest cloud-based systems gives us freedom to focus on more important things—and we don't need a desktop computer in the office to use them! This allows

our employees to work from a cellphone or a tablet, and customers don't need to be in the office to do business with us.

My advice for operators who are interested in new technology is to attend industry tradeshows and educational seminars. High-tech features is what will set you apart from your competitors. Customers readily embrace them, as they all use smartphones and most are already enthusiastically using smart technology at home.

Matt Clark is president of Pack, Stack & Store Inc. He started his career in the industry as a store manager for Public Storage in 1999 and has been involved in the setup and operation of more than 50 facilities for operators big and small. His business partner is Brian Harrington, a general contractor who's helped develop more than 100 storage projects including ground-up construction and conversions. For more information, call 847.659.9006; e-mail matt@packstackstore.com ; visit www.packstackstore.com .

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