



Hunt Corp. Q & A: Caring for a vacant building - by David Hunt

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Q: We are moving to a new location, and are vacating an industrial building that is currently on the market for sale. It is not practical for us to have an employee stay on site, or regularly travel to the building. Do you have any recommendations?

A: In a sense, a building is a living, breathing organism. Systems go on and off, regular maintenance is required, and security and protection are a must. It would not be wise to completely abandon the building, if for no other reason than creating a good impression with potential buyers. The “care and feeding” of your property is essential, whether by a member of your staff (preferably the person who handled the maintenance while you occupied the building) or a professional manager, who will be using extensive checklists.

What would be the tasks of a professional property management firm? It should start with the exterior, and probably a once a week inspection. What is the status of the landscaping and irrigation system? Is there illegally dumped debris, or paper litter? Any problems like pest control, graffiti, potholes and unauthorized trucks? In the winter, I recommend at least minimum snow plowing to allow full access to the building by fire trucks. In the spring and summer, grass needs to be cut and flower beds cleaned.

In general, you want to make the building look as occupied as possible. I highly recommend motion-detecting exterior lighting, as well as internet cameras (which are very reasonably priced today), both of which will discourage illegal dumping and abandoned vehicles, a very major headache for property managers today! If feasible, chains or fences at ingress and egress points of the property will also discourage this activity.

Moving to the interior, a professional manager will be inspecting for secure doors and windows, working burglar alarm keypads, compliant fire sprinkler requirements, and HVAC equipment that is maintained. He or she will also be checking for miscellaneous repairs that might be needed, such as interior lights, time-clock settings, and plumbing problems. In addition, the property manager will make sure that there are no roof leaks, stained ceiling tiles, or birds or animals in the building. I do not recommend “winterizing” a building and turning off the heat (especially with a sprinklered building, which is probably illegal anyway.) Building systems and construction are not designed for temperatures below freezing, so plan on maintaining at least minimum heat. We also suggest leaving a row of lights on in the warehouse, and some lights in the office area, once again to discourage break-ins or other illegal activity.

Some of the other functions of a professional manager are to act as a 24/7 response (often behind security company separately hired) for any emergencies at the building, and to provide regular written reports on the property and actions taken. If you need additional work, I recommend that three bids from reputable contractors be obtained by your manager. A written work-order from you should be obtained before proceeding with any work at the property, except in cases of time-of-the-essence emergency.

In summary, you must protect this very valuable asset. The cost of protection will be miniscule compared to the potential cost of neglect.

Do you have a question regarding commercial real estate? Email your question to commercial real estate Q & A, at email@huntcorp.com for possible inclusion in a future column.

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