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Owners have more options than ever before for solar energy - Five guidelines to make the best choice - by Craig Huntley

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The good news for property owners and real estate developers is that when it comes to solar energy, there are now more options and incentives than ever before. The challenge is that assessing these options and finding a solar partner who fits your unique requirements can be a bit daunting. To help you think about how to best approach your solar energy strategy we have outlined five simple guidelines to help you through the process.

Consider the Goldilocks Factor: Essentially there are three size groups for solar energy systems, with some overlap. The smallest is residential and is typically less than 10kW, but often gets categorized under 25kW; next is commercial scale, that is typically within the 25-500kW range (but can be as large as 1000-2000kW), and is usually installed on the roof (or as a solar canopy) for commercial and industrial buildings; and lastly, utility scale projects are usually counted in several megawatts (MW) and are generally ground mount installations. Each category requires a different set of skills, knowledge and experience from your provider, so it is a good idea to look for a company that specializes in your type of project. For the vast majority of commercial real estate owners that would be a commercial scale provider.

Find the Best Financing Model for your Specific Business: There are now a myriad of ways to finance and operate a solar energy system. They can range from a behind-the-meter system that is owned by the customer and provides on-site power which lowers or eliminates energy bills, to simply leasing your unused roof-space to a solar developer who will finance, build and operate the system and sell the power to the local utility. Amongst these options, there are certain advantages and disadvantages depending on the specifics of the site, the building, the on-site energy load and the nature of the business. A good solar partner will work with you to analyze your unique circumstances and business needs, and present all the different investment options so that you can make the best choice for your specific goals.

Look for More than Just Electricity: A good solar energy system delivers more than just electrons, it can also tell you a lot about your energy load; i.e., how much power you use, and when and where you are using it. Today many solar energy systems are paired with remote sensing monitors that

can gather data and assemble it into a user friendly dashboard. This gives energy consumers transparency into how much their system produces, how much they are buying from the utility and where the major load centers are located. In turn, this gives building and/or business owners the insights required to identify utility billing discrepancies, energy efficiency investment opportunities and even the ability to bill tenants individually. Look for a provider who has experience with different energy monitoring data systems and who can also provide solutions to improve your overall energy profile.

Don't Forget about O&M: Although solar energy systems are very reliable, a good operations and maintenance (O&M) program will more than pay for itself by proactively monitoring the system and making sure it is continually operating at peak efficiency and maximizing your ROI. In addition, a good service provider will ensure that if issues arise, the system is fixed quickly with minimal disruption. Obviously for O&M, you want a local provider who has a track record in your community and can show you examples of other customers in your area where they are providing O&M services. Many solar providers only offer installation services, however if you have a system without an O&M plan, it's advisable to look for a local solar company that can offer full O&M capabilities.

Think about Augmenting or Expanding your Existing System: If you already have a solar energy system, you may still want to consider some other options that could further reduce costs, build resiliency and provide additional financial benefits. Energy storage is becoming an increasingly popular option for building owners as it can reduce expensive demand charges and also provide emergency power during power outages. There are many new incentives that make energy storage a very attractive investment option. You may also look to increase the value of your system by expanding it. An experienced commercial solar partner can help you look at your options for rooftop expansion, adding a ground mount system or even a solar canopy. Canopies are great options that provide additional benefits by offering protected parking and also receive added incentives in some states.

Whether you are just considering solar or looking for ways to enhance your existing system, there are many compelling opportunities. A qualified, reputable solar partner will work with you to understand your business needs, develop a set of options and help you decide the best course of action. Make sure they have experience in the areas that are relevant to you, and feel free to check their references with existing customers. If you follow these guidelines, you should feel confident that you are making the best long-term decision for your business.

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