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It's Carlton, Your Cyber Doorman

A startup has created a virtual doorman to replace the welcoming smile and cost of a person in the lobby

by [Catherine Holahan](#)

In Manhattan, the modern interpretation of "luxury building" probably just means there's enough living space for a couch and a dining room table. This is not to be confused with a "modern luxury building" like the one being developed by the architects at Flank in the ultra-exclusive Sutton Place neighborhood.

The plans call for a glistening glass tower composed of eight spacious townhomes—each with conveniences one might expect for a \$3 million price tag. Think a personal car and driver at your disposal.

Noticeably absent from the drawings, however, is a well-dressed man stationed in the lobby. Instead, the plans call for a cyber doorman—an interactive service programmed to handle everything from unlocking your apartment door for the dog walker to accepting packages and turning away solicitors. "It is the way new developments are going to be structured," says Jennifer Bell, Flank's director of global marketing. "The clientele tend to seek privacy and anonymity. They don't really like conversation when they come in the door....At the same time, they want the convenience and safety of knowing someone is there."

VIRTUAL SUBSTITUTES

Improbable as it seems, even the smiling doorman isn't immune to being replaced by technology. Rather than pay someone to stand there in uniform, dozens of small and midsize buildings in Manhattan already rely on a combination of video cameras, computers and remote watchmen that spring to action only when a resident has a request or the cameras alert them to trouble.

On June 11, a company named Virtual Service announced an upgrade to its "Virtual Doorman" that enables users to interact with these systems via the Web. A tenant could, for example, go online to accommodate a change in schedule for the dog walker, who usually shows up at 3 p.m., but needs the door opened half an hour earlier.

To ensure the visitor is the dog walker, the tenant can upload a photograph for the human on the other end of the camera or maybe require more exact identification like a fingerprint scan. A hidden camera in the home can then be activated when the dog walker arrives to ensure that the dog is, in fact, taken for a walk. If the dog walker does not return at the appointed time, the owner can be alerted.

FILLING A NICHE

The Web-based service is expected to launch later this year. Colin Foster, one of the co-founders of Virtual Service, says the technology has begun to take off as young, tech-savvy users enter New York's real-estate market. "Younger, hip Wall Streeters are buying luxury apartments and they want a small building with all the amenities," says Foster. By next spring, the company plans to introduce the virtual doorman in other cities such as Boston and Washington.

Small and midsize luxury buildings are considered a prime market, says Foster. One reason is privacy. The people who move into smaller buildings don't necessarily want to be on a first-name basis with the guy who monitors the door. "You don't have to deal with a doorman every day—I definitely think there is an appeal to that," says Ross Berman, a principal in NY Citiwise, a boutique real estate firm that's installing Virtual Doorman in a building in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood.

FINANCE ISSUES

A bigger reason for a virtual doorman is money. For smaller buildings with fewer owners to cover shared expenses, even a single doorman working a daytime shift can be cost-prohibitive. A \$30,000-plus salary in addition to health-care coverage and other benefits can add up to hundreds of dollars per month in maintenance fees for each apartment. "The doorman is really doing nothing for 80% of the day," says Foster.

Of course, doormen and the people they serve may disagree. After all, a human can be called upon to let the dog out in a pinch. Or, where a live doorman might recognize a regular delivery, a virtual attendant can become a chore.

"If someone is in the middle of a business meeting," says Michael Goldenberg, executive director of sales for [Halstead Property](#), a New York brokerage, "they do not want to have to stop what they are doing to decide whether they want to let someone in."

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