

Technology takes the 'man' out of doorman



Colin Foster from Virtual Doorman says the technology offers concierge service at a fraction of the cost. (Photo by Jefferson Siegel / August 22, 2007)

By Andrew Lisa, *amNewYork* Business Editor | alisa@am-ny.com

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Colin Foster doesn't envision a New York without doormen, he just pictures a new kind of concierge manning the lobbies of buildings that otherwise wouldn't have one.

The buildings he's targeting are smaller structures with just a handful of units, and the person he wants to service the entrance isn't really a person at all.

Foster is the vice president of sales and marketing for Virtual Doorman, the top product of a security firm called Virtual Service, which promises to offer residents and managers of small buildings the services of a professional doorman at a fraction of the cost -- without skimping on security or convenience.

"It used to be that small walkups were second-class buildings," Foster said. "They did not fetch the same pricing as a doorman building. Now, small buildings can offer those same amenities."

A new kind of doorman

Virtual Doorman is a standalone, computerized system that integrates with a building's own computers while linking its high-end color video monitors with the building's existing intercoms, Foster said.

The electronic system is manned remotely 24 hours a day by a third-party agency that is linked directly to the building's local fire department, police and medical services.

The system is monitored constantly, and can perform all the tasks of an old-fashioned, human doorman, Foster said, including screening guests, accepting deliveries and laundry, and unlocking doors for tenants who lost their keys.

What about real doormen?

Foster insists man and machine can co-exist. It is written into their policy that Virtual Doorman will not replace any members of 32BJ, the union that represents workers including New York doormen.

Most times, Foster said, they would simply never encounter a competitive situation because the buildings they target are small walkups with a few units that could never otherwise afford traditional doorman service.

"[Buildings with] 40 to 60 units are our sweet spot," Foster said. "We stay in that space."

And the rare occasions when Virtual Doorman is in a building with a traditional concierge, the service steps in only during off-peak hours. "In those buildings," Foster said, "We take the after-hour shifts where the building doesn't need to pay a doorman."

Still, the union thinks there's no substitution for old-fashioned manpower. "The experience and training of doormen, combined with their familiarity of residents cannot be replaced by electronic services that control building access from remote locations," according to a 32BJ statement.

"The safety of New Yorkers living in condominiums and apartments belongs in the real-life hands of diligent doormen who can maintain on-site control of their buildings."

According to union figures, Manhattan buildings spend an average of \$80,000 per year per doorman in wages, overtime and benefits. Virtual Service says a typical building employs four to six doormen, working three daily shifts on weekends and weekdays. That's \$275,000 to \$400,000 per year. Virtual Doorman insists their service costs only 15-20 percent of that.

A growing trend?

Foster says nearly all of the building managers and owners who have tried Virtual Doorman renew their contracts and even expand it to other buildings they own. "Ninety-three buildings are [currently] online," Foster said. "For the new generation, Gen 2, we have 14 buildings. A third generation will launch in September."

The older generations can easily upgrade, Foster said.

Virtual Doorman "has given us an edge over other buildings," said Ross Berman, a partner with real estate developer Citiwise LLC. "We no longer have to pass the extra hundreds or thousand-plus dollars to our tenants to maintain a doorman, and can still offer them the same -- if not better -- level of security and attention. Our tenants love it."

Jeff Bennett, who owns buildings in Manhattan, said he can seek higher rents in his two Virtual Doorman buildings, and that tenants are happy. "It's a big amenity," Bennett said.