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Be the Doorman

Managed access control for multi-unit dwellings takes hold

By L. Samuel Pfeifle -

While managed access control may be one of the fastest growing pieces of the security industry, there are (as for managed video) many different definitions of that term. Are you doing all of your client's badging and card issuance? Is the head-end at your location or theirs?

Some companies have gone a different route, however, choosing to productize and brand their particular style of managed access so they can both sell it more effectively and allow dealers to resell it.

Perhaps the hottest form of this is the Virtual Doorman, which is actually a brand created by New York City integrator Virtual Services. Fellow New Yorkers American Security Systems also are offering a virtual doorman, branded as Video Doorman.

Both companies launched dealer programs in the last two months.

Larry Dolin, head of American Security, called Video Doorman "the most exciting RMR opportunity I've seen in my 30 years in the industry."

Why? Because, he argues, it solves a very real problem: "For non-doorman buildings, which are 90 percent of multi-tenant buildings in the country, they can't get deliveries."

And Dolin's not shy about offering up attractive numbers. "If what we've done with American Security holds true," he said, "if a dealer sells 275 buildings over the course of five years ... they'll do \$11 million in install revenues, and, even better, \$330,000 in recurring revenue a month."

Colin Foster, VP of sales and marketing at Virtual Doorman, said his company was offering Virtual Doorman services as far back as 2000, but only now has productized it to the point where the company is comfortable soliciting a dealer network. "It's not just the service," he said, "but the hardware, too. We used to cobble together a bunch of different pieces of equipment, and it took three days to train people on ... But now we're on Generation 3 and it's a box manufactured by us, assembled here, that's got one cable and a couple of color-coded wires, and you plug it in to Internet connectivity and you're done. That's the catalyst to be able to roll this out regionally and nationally."

In both solutions, the essential components are the same: A delivery person or unscheduled guest approaches the front door and presses a button. The camera and intercom are activated, send video and audio back to the central station, and the operator then approves access or connects the visitor with the resident if he or she is home. In the case of a delivery, the delivery person is guided through a surveilled space to a package room, where he or she is observed delivering the package and, more importantly, not leaving with anything else.

"Then we escort him out," said Dolin. "They go the wrong way, we tell them to stop. If they don't listen, we say, 'We're recording and we're going to dispatch.'"

“We then email the tenant and tell them they have a package.”

Of course, there's a good deal of automation and software in the middle that has to be put in place.

“The magic of our system is not just the box,” said Foster, though through a partnership with Aiphone Foster said the box's proprietary nature is important. “It's the money we spent on the back end, too, which is how we manage the visitors and delivery people at the building. We spent \$3.5 million to develop both the hardware and software: Every resident has a web portal and they can customize based on preferences, and that's served right to our operator. That's why we're unique and we're the leaders in the field. It's that ability to serve each resident and communicate with that resident in real time.”

Foster said the Virtual Doorman is just the start, too. He even feels there's a place for this in the single-family residential market.

Starting in October, for example, Virtual Doorman will begin offering a concierge service, with partnerships that include a national dry-cleaning company. Customers will be able to leave dry cleaning right inside the door, have someone pick it up, and have it dropped back off, all under the supervision of Virtual Doorman.

“Right now,” Foster said, “we feel our minimum client is a four-apartment building. It doesn't make sense in our model to have a single-family unit (though, if they're willing to pay for it, then fine, have them pay for it).” However, he said, “we think eventually we'll be able to bring it right down to the individual home, and that's about a year and a half away.” He said pricing will have to be under \$50 monthly, with a deluxe offering around \$100 per month.

And for potential dealers, now is the time to get in, both companies said.

“We have our first dealer in New Jersey, SRI Security,” said Dolin, “and our intention is to roll to DC, Baltimore, Philly, and Boston, and then roll it out across the country. We do have dealers calling us from outside of that perimeter and we'll go as fast as we can go.”

“We think it's the IP/Internet-savvy security dealer that will be a good match for this,” said Foster. “But we also think other low-voltage contractors will be a good match, and, in some instances, it's the home automation company that's doing some security as well.”