Knock-Knock, Who's There?

Pros and Cons of Smartphone-Enabled Home Entry Systems

BY GORDON VAN ZUIDEN

For under $200, DoorBot, an app-enabled front door station will replace a client's existing front door bell—utilizing the existing low voltage wires—and give the front door station the intelligence to send a live video to any Apple or Android based smartphone device.
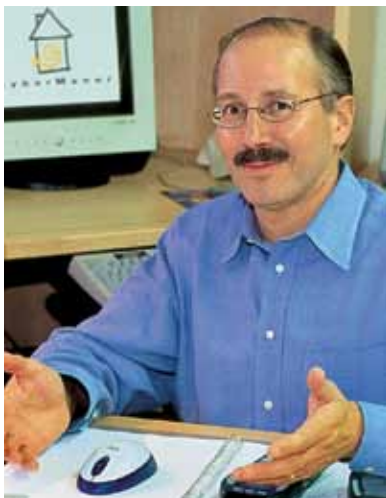
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Every one of our clients has a smartphone today. And every one of our clients has a front door and/or gate entry. And almost every one of them would like to see who is at the gate or the front door from their phone, talk to them, and let them in via their smartphone application.

In the past this control was completed by a land-based phone system, but these are now being replaced by smartphones that are owned by each family member, so the need for a home entry control system from a smartphone becomes increasingly important.

Traditional Total Home Control Solutions

Control4, Crestron, AMX, and Savant all offer gate and front door stations that include all the feature sets needed by our clients: an attractive hardware choice of front door and gate stations and colors (very important since this is part of the entry look our clients want to impart on guests arriving at their home); an app that lets our client see and talk to the guest; and the ability to open and close a door or gate from a smartphone application. The primary downside of these solutions is that if the client only wants a smartphone-enabled door or gate solution, they may not want to pay for the overhead of a Control4, Crestron, AMX, or Savant central processor and the associated custom programming.

German-Made Solutions

Mobotix and Seidel have been leaders in Germany in the production of high-resolution IP cameras and very attractive front door stations. They have brought those skills together with the release of the app-controlled Mobotix T25 front door station and the Visiomatic app-controlled Seidel front door stations—both high-end products that serve the affluent homeowner's needs for front and gate entry control. Their app-based software allows the homeowner to see who is at the front door or gate, talk to them, and open it if necessary, and because their software is supported by cloud-based services, they can do all this from anywhere in the world where they have cell or Wi-Fi connections. This is the complete solution that most of our clients have requested—there is no need for a central total home control processor (this processing is done at the front

door station) and very little programming is required. The challenge for the U.S. integrator is that these companies have a U.S. distribution and technical support infrastructure that is still weaker than the U.S.-based total home control competitors.

Kickstarter-Grown Solutions

The desire to develop an affordable, easy to install, Wi-Fi-based front door entry station for the connected home has not eluded the interest of the bright engineers that start companies incubated by crowd-funding sites such as Kickstarter and IndieGoGo. These sites are fertile ground for many of the next generation app-based connected home products, such as app-based sprinkler systems, light switches, and even automatic dog feeding products. Some of these projects never reach their funding goals, some do reach these goals but release products that are bug ridden, and a few get funding and release a product that works very well and meets the expectations the founder's set for their product launch.

One of those companies is Southern California-based DoorBot (www. getdoorbot.com). I first met the engineers at DoorBot when they were showing a prototype of their product at last year's Consumer Electronics Show. In late November, we were rewarded as an early backer to receive one of their first Doorbot stations. For under $200, this app-enabled front door station will replace a client's existing front door bell—utilizing the existing low voltage wires—and give the front door station the intelligence to send a live video to any Apple or Android smartphone device. And when paired with the Wi-Fi door lock system from Lockitron (www.lockitron. com), one can even open and close the door via the app, from anywhere in the world with a web or cell connection. This is exactly the feature set that all of our clients want at their front door and gate.

The downside of this solution is that the camera quality is a medium resolution 640x480, 30fps, the audio is asynchronous (more of a walkie-talkie mode—but according to the engineer I spoke with at Doorbot, synchronous voice will be a software feature they will automatically download early next year), and it only comes in one color and shape. The aesthetics of the product may not meet the front door station requirements of some of our high-end client base, but smart phone-connected home platforms allow us to integrate many more easy-to-use products into our customers' hands, and companies like DoorBot are opening those doors for all of us.

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