

Assisted Living

By Dennis Burger, December 6, 2010

RE-INVENTING CONCIERGE SERVICES IN A NYC LUXURY BUILDING

Imagine being able to give your clients their own personal assistant on the other end of the press of a button on their touchpanel remotes. They're instantly met with the smiling face of a live human being—no matter the time of day or day of the year—who greets them by name and offers any assistance they may require. They could arrange for restaurant reservations, for example, or tickets to the theater, but that seems so passé these days, doesn't it? Instead they ask for assistance planning a surprise birthday party the following Friday night, perhaps at a local indoor paintball facility, if one exists. No matter the request, the concierge on the other end of the screen is there to meet their needs 24/7/365. And it's all provided as a part of the common charges for their building.

If this sounds like the future, it is, but only by a couple of months for the lucky few new owners prepping to move into the luxury living spaces at 535 West End Avenue in Manhattan's Upper West Side.

When the developers of 535 West End began work on the project—which boasts 21st-century construction in Pre-War Style, with high-end wood flooring, lofty ceilings, and grand, oversized windows—they tapped Concierge Direct of New Rochelle, New York, to provide the control infrastructure and amenities service, as well as the fully integrated entertainment systems for the building's lobby, game room, and rec room.

Beyond the Touchscreen This isn't Concierge Direct's first experience with high-rise, multi-dwelling unit installations, though. Massive systems at the Plaza Hotel and 995 5th Avenue (both covered in past issues of Residential Systems) laid the groundwork. Those jobs were fraught with challenges, though, and convinced Concierge Direct owner Steve Babel and managing director Nicholas DeClemente that they needed to change their approach to systems integration.

"By the time we did 995 5th Avenue," DeClemente said, "I think the integration industry had been left in the dust. We as an industry were un-integrated, our touchscreens were kind of antiquated, and everything was very difficult. You could do intercom with a legacy control system, sure, and you could do call servers and IP telephony, so we were able to build an amenities service offering restaurant reservations, theater tickets—a very basic offering, because concierge services were just too expensive, and nobody was willing to pay enough, or charge a small enough amount, to make it work."

DeClemente believes that the biggest stumbling blocks were legacy control systems, which were limited in how they operated and what they could do. "If you do anything that's outside the box, it's like a science project, and it's really expensive, and you end up with a programmer who can't fix it when something goes wrong because he's not the programmer who wrote it," he said.

In a one-family home, that sort of thing can be frustrating. In an MDU, with affluent families living in close proximity and communicating every day, it can be disastrous. So when Savant pitched its Apple-based home automation and control system as a newer, easier way of doing things, Babel leapt at the chance to give it a try in the company's next big job: an immense residential installation in Dallas—1,500 miles away from the company's Long Island comfort zone.

DeClemente was understandably hesitant about implementing an unfamiliar new system so far from home. But Babel's passion and vision won out, and in the end, the system in Dallas worked "damn-near flawlessly," DeClemente said. "The rollout was incredible, Savant's support was incredible, the product blew us away. All of the sudden, we were doing cool technology. And it was reliable. It's like when you get an iPod, and an iPhone, and a Mac computer, and you plug it all in and it all just works."



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From the Big D to the Big Apple With that system under their belt, it was an easy decision for DeClemente and his team to make the switch to Savant at the 535 West End Avenue project, which was already in development. And in doing so, they opened up a new realm of possibilities for their amenities service. Not only has seamless iPod, iPhone, and iPad integration become a simple task, but the ease of programming and installing Savant has allowed Concierge Direct to focus its energies on being as much a service provider as a hardware provider.

“The Savant platform allows us to focus on the things we should have been focusing on all along,” DeClemente said. “We’re really big on customer experience, which isn’t just what happens when a customer hits a button on their big honking home theater and it all fires up. That’s great, but that’s easy to do. It’s about everything from the proposal process through coordinating with the architect and designer and electricians, whom we see as representatives of that homeowner.

“That experience has to be seamless and flawless all the way through,” he said, “and Savant enables us to focus on that experience, across the board, and then deliver what we sold—reliably, profitably, and with repeatable results. No two legacy touchpanel control systems operate the same with the same gear. They just don’t. There’s always something that’s different. Savant came to the conclusion, though, that not everyone really cares about whether a button is round or square. The GUI that they offer is still great, and there’s still tons of customizability. But the stock interface really gets you 90 percent there.”

The 535 West End Design In addition to the standard touchpanel in every kitchen in the development, Savant also forms the backbone of the entertainment systems in the common game room and rec room. Each of these public systems, which can be reserved by any of the building’s tenants at the press of a button through the amenities system, features a NuVision 65-inch TV and SoundAdvance 6.1 speakers system, along with a 12-inch Savant control panel, surround sound processing courtesy of a 7.1 card for Savant’s ROSIE System 12 AV controller, and Sherbourn amplification.

As owners renovate and move into their new apartments, Concierge Direct is also working with them to upgrade their personal systems—everything from adding additional touchpanels and integrating their iPads with the Savant system to creating full-blown multiroom entertainment systems and theaters and lighting and shade control. One apartment in the works features a Savant 11-button keypad for entry access and a full Meridian digital theater, for example. Another sports a video wall constructed of six LED TVs, which, under the control of the Savant system, can be operated seamlessly as one gigantic display, or independently as two, four, or six individual displays.

“We can even do things like Hulu on the TVs now, and sell them as pre-packaged services,” DeClemente said. “Maybe you sell it for \$1,000, and the first time you do something like that, it costs you some money to do. The second and third time? All of the sudden we have economy of scale, thanks to Savant. And really, how would you get Hulu on a legacy control system? It just doesn’t work very well. You have to have a computer plugged in, and it goes through the VGA, and it doesn’t work right, and it looks terrible.”

Because of the way Savant architecture works, DeClemente said, his clients can run it as an app, so on the onscreen display, where you see all sources available for viewing, Hulu can be just another seamless source, like DVD or Apple TV, right on your television.”

Obviously, DeClemente is incredibly excited to have been on the ground floor of taking Savant vertical. What’s next for Concierge Direct? It’s no surprise that the company is planning on developing its concierge service for use by other systems integrators. “Really, given the way systems integration is shifting—or has to shift—toward a more service-oriented industry, it’s the next logical step beyond just providing glorified universal remotes,” he said.



From left, Concierge Direct owner Steve Babel, programmer Matt Vivian, and managing director Nicholas DeClemente.



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