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A Household Safety Net

Web-based monitoring systems are becoming standard in many new homes

By Jan Tyler

January 30, 2004

Despite the development of "smart" home technologies in recent years, most houses are still pretty dumb.

"Even our cars are smarter than our houses -- they tell us what's ailing them before the problem reaches critical mass," says Brian McAuliff, cofounder with John Thorsen of **Connected Hearth**, a 6-month-old home automation venture based in Bohemia. "But that's changing fast. We've come up with ways to put brains in people's houses."

Many homes in the New York region have been retrofitted with security and fire-alarm systems. Now, a small but growing number of homeowners are installing Internet-based monitoring systems, real estate agents say, taking homes from dumb and dumber to smart and smarter.

Connected Hearth is among a handful of local companies that design and install customized systems that enable a homeowner to monitor and control appliances, electronic components, lighting, heat and security by remote control over the Internet -- typically costing several thousand dollars plus monthly service fees.

"Our cars tell us when to check coolant, brakes, engines, oil. Some strap us into our seat belts automatically whether we like it or not," says McAuliff, who also runs Bri-Tech, a home automation systems company in Bohemia. "When's the last time your house warned you that your washer hose had sprung a slow leak before your basement was flooded? When did it set off an alarm that a degree or two of rising temperature of the big freezer in the garage indicated an emergency call to the repairman?"

While **Connected Hearth** is initially targeting the pricey Hamptons second-home market, many observers predict that such systems will become popular with homeowners who want to keep an eye on their residences when they go to the office or on business trips, as well as vacations or extended stays down

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There are no accurate statistics on the number of homes with Internet-based monitoring systems, but industry experts agree that such systems are becoming standard in most newly constructed midlevel to high-end homes in the New York area as well as nationwide. Network World Fusion, a trade newsletter (www.nwfusion.com), recently reported that "big players such as GE, IBM, Microsoft and Sears also are exploring home-control technologies."

One local example of a new development that includes Web monitoring systems is the Gracewood subdivision of 141 single-family homes in Manhasset, with prices starting at \$1 million. "The houses come with basic equipment that makes it possible for owners to enhance their systems to whatever extent they choose," says Cold Spring Harbor developer John Kean. "Many of our buyers spend six months in Florida, and they push one button that puts the house into its 'vacation mode'; the house will virtually run itself and they can keep an eye on it over the Internet."

Homeowners can tailor their installations to their lifestyles.

"A mature couple has very different requirements from a young couple with kids," says Jack Niewinski, an estate manager who monitors several multimillion-dollar properties with equipment designed and installed by Audio Command Systems of Westbury. "From my office or from anywhere, I can check if a gate is open or shut, even if the electric deer fence is on; cameras show cars that come and go."

Most monitoring systems include specialized sensors that check for smoke, fire, carbon monoxide, water leaks and unauthorized entry. They report unacceptably low interior temperatures that could lead to frozen pipes. Cameras can pan across the house checking on household help and baby-sitters; parents can keep tabs on their teenagers after school.

Ed Haugevik, a Sagaponack sculptor, recently installed one of his works in a client's house while the owner watched via camera and Internet from his office in Manhattan. "It was a little weird but very convenient for both of us," he says. "I placed the piece exactly where he wanted it."

Smart electronics also can handle some of the more routine tasks and pleasantries of daily life. After being away for some length of time, a returning homeowner can, with a click of a mouse, activate a "macro," a preset series of commands that puts the house in "arrival mode." The climate-control function revs up the heat or the AC to whatever level is desired, fires up the hot water heater and will even have the coffee ready.

Lights will be turned on not only at the driveway and entry portal but along a preprogrammed pathway from the door to, say, the kitchen. The garden waterfall can resume tumbling merrily over its rocks as if it had never been turned off, and the pool water can be boosted to just the right temperature for a quick dip.

A departure macro will do the same chores in reverse. There are even setups that let home owners thumb their noses at power outages by automatically activating a permanent gas-powered generator at the instant of the outage.

These examples just scratch the surface as to the common tasks that sophisticated home-monitoring systems are programmed to perform -- as well as the problems they can avoid. And some insurance companies are taking notice. AIG Private Client Group, for example, is offering up to 18 percent discounts on homeowner policies, according to the Cook, Hall and Hines Agency in East Hampton.

Connected Hearth's Thorsen knows about the anxieties of second-home owners, worrying about the condition of their house while they're away. Now a full-time resident of East Hampton, he recalls that three years ago, "I dreaded that moment when I drove up to my house wondering if it was OK, if it had been broken into or if a pipe had burst. I'm convinced that home monitoring is a must if for nothing more than peace of mind."

The sentiment is echoed by one **Connected Hearth** client who, like most of the company's well-to-do owners, is reluctant to be identified because of privacy concerns. "We activate a macro when we leave the city and we come into a well-lit, toasty-warm house," says the East Hampton resident. "There aren't any streetlights out here, and it's a relief not to have to stumble around in the dark shivering."

Internet access is at the core of all Web-enabled home-monitoring providers; but, says Thorsen, **Connected Hearth** "has an edge because, unlike most other companies, we do it without a dedicated computer."

A dedicated computer, which can cost up to \$1,000, integrates the array of specialized devices built into the home, and must always be on in order to do its job. That can be an Achilles heel for monitoring systems, because computers frequently crash, and when they do the home is no longer connected to the Net until someone physically resets the PC. (Some companies, including **Connected Hearth**, provide a battery-operated universal power source, or UPS, for short-time backup.)

Thorsen, a software designer, invented a "gateway" -- a device about the size of a videocassette -- that can be installed with other Internet equipment in a convenient location, such as a cabinet in the basement. Every 60 seconds the equipment checks the home's vital stats. Emergency events are immediately reported via e-mail to the homeowner and two other parties, such as neighbors who could check out the problems.

Other companies that design and install home-monitoring systems, such as Audio Video Systems in Mineola, dispute Thorsen's assertion that **Connected Hearth's** gateway is better equipped to protect homes from computer crashes. Audio Video Systems uses Creston Electronic Products, says company owner Bob Bourdeau. Such equipment is more reliable and "made just for the purpose of controlling the home, not a typical computer-based system," Bourdeau says. "It has only the one function and virtually never crashes."

The basic **Connected Hearth** home monitoring package costs \$6,000, plus a monthly subscriber fee of \$59.95 for monitoring services. "That's more affordable than an in-ground pool," McAuliff says.

Southampton architect Mark Matthews says it's not uncommon for affluent homeowners to spend \$100,000 on home networking technology and monitoring systems. But the most popular is an off-line installation costing \$2,000 to \$3,000 that leaves the monitoring to the provider.

"Any computer-savvy homeowner could set up pretty much the same resources through their IP [Internet Protocol] control on their home computer server and achieve the same results. Of course, they'd still need central state monitoring for redundancy," said Mickey Silverman of Visual Environments in Jamaica.

Matthews uses Peconic Security Alarm in Southampton, whose monthly charges start at about \$25. "One of the neat features is the code system," says Matthews' client Denise Johnston. "I give each of my friends and household help their own code, which is different from mine." When Johnston is away, the system identifies who enters the house by their particular code, she says, "and I always have a record of who's been here and for how long. I can cancel a code anytime."

Connected Hearth's founders say it is poised to take its company, which has 45 employees, national. (They declined to disclose the company's revenues.) "There are many pockets of high-end second-home communities across the country, places like Vail and Palm Beach where we're about to roll out our services," says Thorsen. "It's like having a live-in caretaker, only better, because this equipment does exactly what you ask of it and it never sleeps."

Jan Tyler is a freelance writer.

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Local Area Home-Networking Installers

Staff Writer
January 30, 2004

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Audio Command Systems Inc.

Westbury
516-997-5800
www.audiocommand.com

Audio Video Systems Inc.

Mineola
516-739-1010
www.audiovideosystems.com

Connected Hearth

Bohemia
800-575-3479
www.connectedhearth.com

Harvey Electronics

Greenvale
516-625-4468
www.harveyonline.com

Peconic Security Alarm

Southampton
631-283-1414

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