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Keeping an Eye on Your House

By Mary Cummings



Monitoring system lets owner control key functions through the internet.

Houses in the Hamptons, as everyone knows, are getting bigger and bigger.

But are they getting any smarter?

Some are, says the man who has made it his business—literally—to bring many more up to speed with a system designed to enable unoccupied homes to send distress signals to absent owners at the first sign of trouble. It's called Connected Hearth, and the man who invented it, sells it, installs it, and sings its praises to anyone who will listen is John Thorsen Jr.

“We were the very first to introduce a system that would allow internet monitoring and control of the home without a dedicated computer in the house,” Mr. Thorsen explained in a recent phone interview.

Granted, most households have a computer, he said, but all it takes is a power failure—not exactly unknown in the Hamptons—and you've lost your link to the homefront. In view of that reality, “the requirement of having a dedicated, always-on computer in the house is untenable,” he said.

Before he was a year-round resident, running his own Wainscott-based business, Mr. Thorsen had a full-time job in the city, where his field of expertise was software automation.

“I was a Hamptons second-home owner, a year-round weekender, and in the winter I would come out to a house that was freezing,” he said. Moreover, as he pulled up to his house on a Friday evening, “there was always that moment of anxiety,” he said. “Is the house all right? Did the pipes freeze? Did it get broken into?”

He was convinced that there had to be a way to remotely control a thermostat—and he was right. As he discovered in the course of his research, there was, in fact, a whole home-automation industry out there. The

problem, as he saw it, was that instead of exploiting the full potential of the internet, the options relied on dedicated computers and dial-ups.

“Naturally, I wanted to be able to use my computer via the internet to monitor my home,” said Mr. Thorsen.

The entrepreneur in him recognized a business opportunity. “If I had that need, I realized that probably quite a few had it,” he said. The IT expert saw a system that was just waiting to be created. “I set out to build it,” he said, “and I did.”

In July 2003, having quit his day job and perfected his system, Mr. Thorsen launched Connected Hearth, announcing to the world—and notably to the many owners of second homes in the Hamptons—that, with his solid state Connected Hearth Gateway device installed in their homes, they would be able to log on to the website, ConnectedHearth.com, and micromanage their homes from anywhere in the world. The range of options is wide, according to Mr. Thorsen, but for a basic starter package, the initial cost is \$2,500, with a monthly subscription payment of \$39.95. “You can go from there on up,” he said. “The sky’s the limit.”

Walter Thomas, a Bridgehampton weekender and an early convert, went for what he termed “a fairly basic system.” He says he was most interested in being able to adjust the temperature of his house, check the water flow, and monitor the alarm system. That any intelligent second-home owner would pass on a system that would allow him to do all that, and more, clearly mystifies him.

“I proselytize this system to anyone,” he laughed. “I think it is insane for anyone to have a second home anywhere in the country without this system.”

Mr. Thomas takes the view that \$2,500 is “a reasonable number” for a smart homeowner to buy himself a smart house. It is not just the luxury of the toasty-warm home that awaits him on frigid Friday nights in the middle of winter, he said. Nor is it the convenience of being able to deactivate the alarm whenever the UPS man arrives at his unoccupied home in the Hamptons and then reactivate it when the truck pulls out of the driveway—though that is a maneuver that clearly delights him.

“Probably for me the most important thing is the ability to turn the water main off,” he confided.

It is every weekender’s worst nightmare: There is a cold snap that lasts far too long; it causes pipes to freeze and ultimately to burst, with ruinous results that are not discovered until the absentee owner arrives days, or even weeks, later.

It is a domestic disaster that Ed Krug, a part-time resident of East Hampton, believes he would surely have faced last winter had it not been for his smart, Connected Hearth home.

“The system saved me from a catastrophe last winter when the oil company missed a delivery and I ran out of fuel,” he wrote in an e-mail. When the temperature inside his home reached an alarming 45 degrees during a prolonged cold spell, he was warned of the danger by an SOS that went out from the house.

“The system alerted me via cell, and I was able to dispatch someone to check it out and get more fuel,” he recalled. “This was a long cold snap, so I am sure I would have had burst pipes.” Had he not shut down the water main himself, the system is designed to kick in and shut it down automatically before things get out of hand.

Joe Larsen, another former weekender and now a full-time builder in the Hamptons, calls the water shutoff feature the “biggest benefit” of the system, which he has installed in his own home and recommends to his customers. He remembers with horror the midnight drives out to the Hamptons when he was a weekender and

his night's sleep would occasionally be shattered by a call from his alarm company with bad news. After four hours on the road, he would get back to his apartment in the wee hours and be back in the office at eight.

"Maybe some of it is a little gimmicky," he said of the system, "kind of showy. It's a great piece of technology," he said, but the real appeal, he asserted is in the peace of mind (and peaceful night's rest) it affords, particularly to the second-home owner.

As Mr. Thorsen is only too happy to explain, houses with a Connected Hearth system are much too smart to let water get the upper hand. "Every 60 seconds, the server checks in with the house and takes its vital statistics," he said.

"I've been doing this for three and a half years now," he added, "and it still blows my mind. I still think it is incredibly cool."

In fact, though he knows it is the peace of mind that comes with being connected to a distant home "in real time" that prompts most of his customers to spring for the system, Mr. Thorsen does not underestimate its appeal as a really cool toy.

"If guests have been in their house," he observed, homeowners "can check and make sure they didn't leave all the lights on." They can put a camera over their pool and see if the neighbors are using it, and they can check in to see what their children are up to, he added.

The thrill of being there when you're not "doesn't seem to wear off," he said. "When I travel, I like to log in to the cameras and see what the weather is like."



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