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Will G! whiz app sell houses?

Article by JIM BUCHTA, Star Tribune Updated: February 12, 2011 - 9:57 PM

Forget to turn down the water heater before leaving on vacation? This home builder hopes that being able to do it from the airport on your iPhone will help sell houses.

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An iPhone and a garage door don't seem to have much in common, but Rocky DiGiacomo hopes a pairing of the two might translate into cash. Or at least a home sale.

The Twin Cities-based builder says that every house he builds now is going to have, or be ready for, the technology that will allow its owners to use an iPhone app to literally operate the house. That means opening the garage door when you pull in the drive to turning up the heat when you leave the office, all on the tiny screen of an iPhone, or any handheld device.

"We're trying to piggyback on the hoopla over iPhones," DiGiacomo said while standing in the dining room of a \$1.3 million house he's trying to sell in Golden Valley. On his iPhone, he tapped into the home's surveillance system to see who's at the front door. He can also control the home's heat, electricity and audio system using the G! app, even if he's not home.

Hardwiring the house in preparation for installation of such a system costs \$3,000 to \$5,000, not including any equipment. In this case, the entire system cost upward of \$20,000, and that doesn't include the full range of home automation equipment that's available. DiGiacomo didn't include controls for the heating and cooling system, and for the lights, among many others that are readily available.

Such upgrades can be a tough sell for many of today's penny-pinching home buyers. Many home builders near and far are taking the opposite approach — cutting costs wherever possible as they keep costs to a minimum.

DiGiacomo says his approach is worth the risk because he needs his houses to stand out in a crowded market. "This is the time you have to innovate," he said.

On the surface, the houses that DiGiacomo builds seem capable of attracting enough attention on their own. The one in Golden Valley has its own mobile phone docking station for every member of the family, a sleek stainless steel Italian range and thick sheets of milky Carrara marble throughout the kitchen.

Though the iPhone app is relatively new, DiGiacomo started thinking of ways to make his houses "smarter" at least three years ago. That's when he started thinking seriously about televisions and how to incorporate them into a living space in a more elegant way. TVs have been a central part of our lives, but not every family wants to acknowledge that, so DiGiacomo started looking at ways of putting the TV in central locations, but hiding them behind sliding doors, panels and in other clever spaces.

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Rocky DiGiacomo
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At the front door
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"TVs are a portal to the world," DiGiacomo said.

The gentlemanly app that unlocks doors

And so are other forms of technology, including many readily available home automation systems.

Smart-house technology isn't new, but it hasn't always been easy to operate. Some had universal remote controls, while others had complicated control pads or computer interfaces. The joke in the business, DiGiacomo said, was that such systems were so difficult you couldn't teach the babysitter to turn on the TV.

That's why when a Kentucky company called Eian started selling the app, DiGiacomo decided to use it and a number of energy-efficient features to help sell his houses.

He believes home buyers are willing to invest in technology that makes life easier and will help conserve energy both because it saves money and is better for the environment.

Like other iPhone apps, G1 is intuitive and knows when you're pulling into the driveway, so can automatically open the garage door. Same thing when you walk up to the house and it automatically unlocks the front door. Or when you enter a room and it turns on the lights and your favorite evening music.

He hired JJ Vandermyde, a company in Blaine, to install the system, which consists of a number components manufactured by other companies.

"I think there might be a certain pent-up demand for that sort of thing that hasn't been met yet," he said. "But we'll find out shortly."

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