

The Integrator's Voice

California firm picks up where former manufacturer left off

By Leslie Stevens

Ninety-nine times out of 100, it's a bad thing for integrators when a manufacturer closes its doors. But for The HomeWorks Group, a negative was turned into a positive.

Upon manufacturer Unity Systems' exit from the marketplace in 1999, The HomeWorks Group assumed many systems contractors and homeowners would be left in a lurch. Equipped with that belief in mind, the company set out to be a support system for inconvenienced customers.

Q How did The HomeWorks Group start in the industry?

A During the early 1980s, we started our company with a focus to offer security systems to upscale residential clients. That was about the extent of available technology for the home then, and we operated as Advanced Security Engineering. As technology developed, our company began installing more sophisticated control systems for the home. One such product that we became enamored with, and eventually fully embraced, was The Home Manager, which was probably the first viable home automation product offered to our industry. In a single product, it incorporated security, lighting control and a zoned temperature control module that rivals the capability of systems available even today.

The Home Manager was introduced by Unity Systems in 1985, which actively sold the product through about 125 dealers across the country until 1999. During its 14-year production run, close to 6,000 systems were installed into large residences. In 1999, Unity Systems closed its doors and ceased to operate as a company.

Q Who typically purchased The Home Manager?

A In the 1980s and 1990s, the impending energy crisis was on everyone's mind, and people building large homes were hungry for anything that would make their homes more efficient—and justifiably so. The Home Manager's ability to control temperatures on a room-by-room basis helped make the home more comfortable and energy efficient.

Q What was your mindset for becoming a support system for these customers?

A When Unity Systems went out of business, we had installed several

hundred systems into homes where the technology was extremely appreciated. This was a big percentage of our customer base. We were compelled to support these clients, and we knew the systems require some maintenance and would occasionally need repair. We believe The Home Manager continues to be cherished by most of its owners, and some attributes of the system cannot be effectively replaced with newer control systems. Clients want to maintain the capabilities of the original system and, in fact, many want to take advantage of improvements we have created and made available.

After Unity Systems closed its doors, we engaged with some of their vendors in order to obtain key parts for the system. Since it was clear this was only a short-term solution, we also embarked on the effort to create an upgrade path that would allow Home Manager owners to continue to benefit from the system using standard, reliable hardware and color touchscreens.

To help our Home Manager clients, we developed a Web site, www.unitysystemshomemanager.com, which answers common questions, including operational instructions, troubleshooting advice and system upgrades.

Q How does The HomeWorks Group support the program?

A The Home Manager System upgrade is designed to update security and lighting control functionality, which certainly has improved since the original Home Manager design. At the same time, the upgrades preserve all the cherished tempera-



ture control aspects of The Home Manager. The new system leverages all existing wiring, and the unique temperature sensors and dampers. We also replace the original, out-of-date and vulnerable CRT touchscreens with new, color LCD touchscreens.

Q Do you support the homeowner, the original installing dealer or both?

A If a previous Home Manager dealer is interested in participating in the system upgrade effort, then we fully embrace the opportunity to help them take care of their Home Manager client in any way we can. Interestingly though, the vast majority of calls are directly from homeowners who have lost contact with their original dealer and are unable to find local resources to support their Home Manager system.

Though our original intention was to support our local market, we realized that there was a large number of Home Manager own-

ers without local support, and so we created a task force to provide direct support to these clients, regardless of location. This has turned out to be quite successful, primarily because most of The Home Manager systems are brutally similar, so it is very predictable to provide the upgraded system.

Q How has this expanded your business?

A It has certainly become a larger percentage of our business than we had originally anticipated. The mainstay of our company continues to be in providing high-quality, whole-house control systems in new and existing homes. But with an increasing number of Home Manager owners choosing to proactively upgrade their systems, this aspect of our business is indeed growing faster than others. Many choose to take advantage of the new capabilities available in lighting control these days, and the ability to fully schedule and control any light from any location in the home. The remote access capabilities that allow homeowners to control their systems while away are attractive, as well.



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