

Digital Solutions to Practical Problems

BY CAROL J. OTT

You can host social events or organize Halloween door-knocking, but trying to make a community out of a disparate group of people is a lot of work. And then there's the problem of package deliveries. Without someone at the front door, this is a major headache for residents. Both of these deficits make the benefits of living in a building with the accoutrements of a village start to look ever more appealing.

Unless, of course, you start to think virtually, which several software developers have done. Cloud-based solutions can help connect your building's residents so that it begins to feel more like a village and can also solve the more practical package problem. There are a number of virtual solutions currently on the market in New York that address these challenges.

Before leaping into anything, realize that over time these virtual solutions will be tracking and storing a lot

of information. This can be very valuable to your building's operations, and it brings up a key consideration: who owns the virtual license? If the portal is licensed to your building, all the information will stay with you if you change management companies. If it's licensed to your current manager, you are at risk of losing your virtual history.

Most of these portals can integrate with or redirect to software that your management company may be using. Take, for instance, service requests or work orders. All the digital solutions discussed here have this feature, which allows residents to submit service requests to, say, a super. To really close the digital work order loop, though, you would want these requests to tie into some kind of billing function so that residents can be charged appropriately. Since this is handled differently in each digital portal, you should understand the process. »



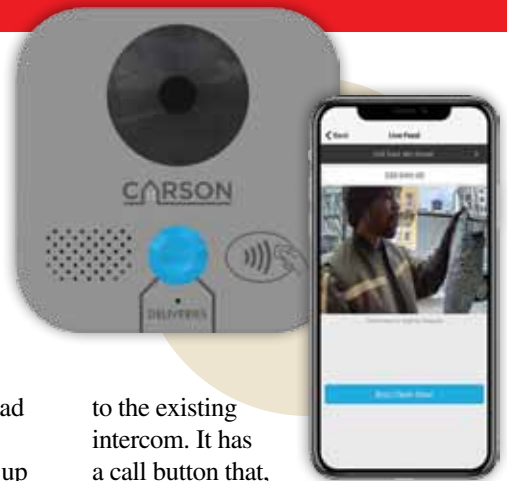
Another redirect which will make your virtual life easier is paying your monthly maintenance or common charge. Your building can own the license to the virtual platform but have the payment feature tie into your management company's solution and, ultimately, your building's bank account. This feature could encourage residents to use your digital portal as a kind of one-stop shop for all things building-related.

One concern is that some of your residents may not be digitally savvy. They might not have a mobile phone, or even a computer. Getting everyone on the new system – thus creating your virtual community – may be harder than first imagined. Most of the solutions discussed below deal with this challenge and present many different ways to interact. That said, you'll want to make sure your building's residents can access these digital solutions in whichever way they are most comfortable. Here's a look at four systems.

Carson

"People don't want to live in buildings that can't reliably accept packages," says Guy Blachman, who founded Carson in 2017. Having created, run, and then sold his two previous digital companies – MyBuilding (a portal for condo high-rises) and ActiveBuilding (a portal for rental buildings) – Blachman had a deep understanding of property management software. He teamed up with Jerry Kestenbaum, the founder of Buildinglink, and created a virtual solution that combines front-door access control, a virtual doorman, and the ability to communicate among the property manager, staff, and residents.

What differentiates Carson from others, though, is access control and package delivery – done through an app, email, or text. With the Carson app, residents can remotely open the front door, their apartment door, and even the door to the roof. Additionally, a building can install a Carson Panel next



to the existing intercom. It has a call button that, when pressed by a visitor or courier, sends a live video feed to a 24/7 central call station. There the request will be verified and the relevant resident notified.

Adam Vigh, a board member at a 27-unit condo in Long Island City, Queens, recently switched to Carson from a different virtual front-door service. "We were unhappy with the service we were using," Vigh says, "so we shopped around and found that Carson was about half the price. Plus, it comes with more modern amenities."



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One of the problems the condo board members were facing was that their building had a front door and another door to a package room. With their previous vendor, the courier had to ring the front door, wait for entry, and then ring again for entry to the package room.

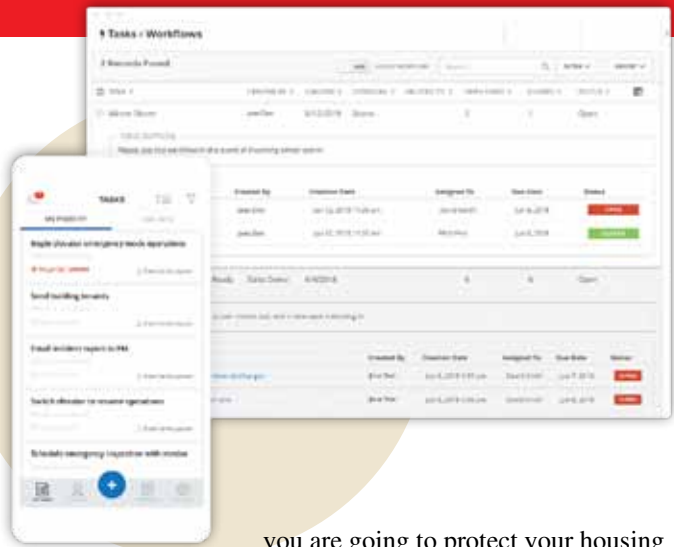
“It was a two-step process,” Vigh says. “They just wanted to drop the packages and then get out, and it was a constant struggle to get them to actually go to the package room instead of dropping the packages in the lobby.” Carson was able to program the call buttons so that the package room door automatically opened 30 seconds after the front door. “We have a lot fewer packages that are left in the lobby,” says Vigh.

InCheck

Where Carson has conquered door access, InCheck has tackled work orders and resident requests, with the aim of triaging requests before they escalate into compliance issues.

Tied into SiteCompli, an online solution used by many property management companies, InCheck is designed to be a place that can organize and store items that require action. If your management company already uses SiteCompli, your building can implement InCheck at no extra charge (if you’re in New York City), or it can license its own stand-alone version for a monthly fee.

One of the unique features of InCheck is its vendor insurance and contract database. Keeping track of vendor insurance is a major undertaking but an extremely important one if



you are going to protect your housing corporation from lawsuits. InCheck’s database lets you see, at a glance, the name of the vendor, the insurance policy number, the insurance company, policy type, expiration, and the names of the insured.

Residents who want to submit work orders can do that either through a dedicated web portal or by making a phone call. InCheck doesn’t have an app for residents, but its website is mobile-compatible.



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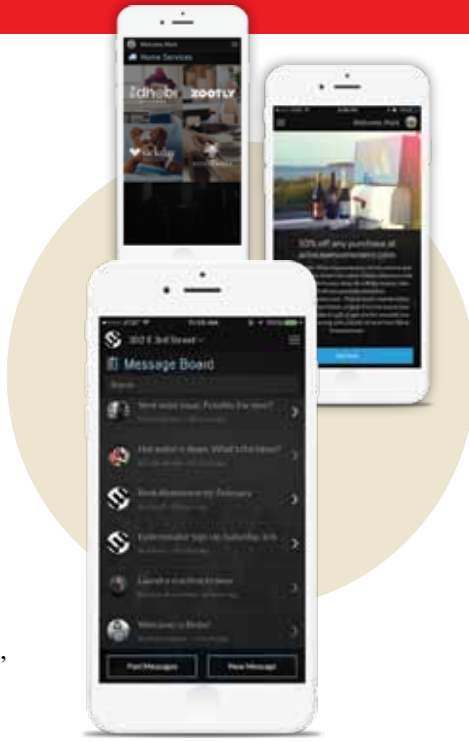
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Bixby

Describing itself as a building amenity platform, Bixby has a relationship with vendors that distinguishes this app. It has created partnerships with companies offering services in a building's ZIP code area, such as tailors, storage, pharmacies, interior designers, handymen, and others. It also offers Bixby Perks, which are products that are discounted if purchased through Bixby.

This type of amenity was exactly what Neil Bhay, former board president of 87 Smith Condos in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, was looking for. "We had been using Ning, an online community building platform, as a basic discussion board for residents," Bhay says. The building had a doorman to log in packages, and, as a condo, it didn't have many service requests. What was needed, says Bhay, was a way to engage the community, and Bixby fit the bill. The condo, like many venturing into the app world, is spending several



months testing Bixby before making a commitment. The flexibility of the app allows this testing period, and it's something communities should consider, advises Bhay.

Not only are the amenities offered through Bixby interesting, they provide a reason for residents to return to the app to see what's new. And usage is a major issue if you are interested in fostering a sense of community. Once in the app, a resident can view who's saying what on the message board, make service requests, and also pay maintenance or common charges. For non-dorman buildings, Bixby is testing a "Ship to Bixby" option in which residents can ship a package to Bixby and then choose a time for the package to be dropped off. Bixby is also working on integrating with several smart locker providers to trigger a notification when a package is put into a locker.

The company was founded two and half years ago by Mark Smulker, a software developer. He had a friend who was taking over management of his family's 60 rental buildings, and the friend wanted a tool to modernize and digitize operations. Bixby makes most of its money through affiliate

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commissions from its marketplace of service providers, says Smulker, allowing users to buy services with the same bank account registered to pay maintenance or common charges. “We have a team that conducts background checks and identifies which are the best companies in that area,” he says.

MGCOne

Developed by Ranjan Sivan in 2011, MGCOne can best be described as a surround-sound digital solution. If all the functionality is used, MGCOne can be the repository for all facets of your operations.

“I was a board member in my condo association,” Sivan says, “and also working on Wall Street.” He saw a problem in the world of condo associations: when management or professional changes occurred, the condo lost access to information and records. MGCOne was created as a solution.

For HOAs or large co-op or condo complexes – particularly those employing their own on-site managers



– MGCOne offers digital solutions for management, the board, residents, and the association’s accountant and attorney. It ties into accounting systems, deals with packages, can take surveys or polls, stages discussion forums, creates and tracks work requests, and much more. The system is designed to stay with the association, so that those no longer affiliated, such as a former manager, lose access privileges.

Tejas Kadia, president of Reliance Property Management in New Jersey, uses MGCOne. “Our main competitive management edge is technology,” he notes. Outside of New York City,

management fees are much lower, and taking advantage of the operational savings inherent in technology is key.

In the end, the apartment marketplace is full of new condos with lots of glitzy amenities, making it hard to compete if your building is in the “plain Jane” category. Adding a digital amenity can give your building the feel of a community, while at the same time solving very practical problems. It also puts your building on the cutting edge of real estate technology, and for forward-thinking boards and management companies, that’s a good place to be. ■

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