

Rising to the Challenge

Superior audiovisual and amenities packages help a Chicago condo developer appeal to high-end buyers.

By Don Kreski

Times are tough for every business these days, especially for A/V integrators trying to break into the MDU market. But there is hope: If custom installers can design a truly superior product, people will buy.

This is exactly how Chicago-based installation firm Integrisys has continued to thrive, despite the slump in the luxury home market. “We’ve worked very hard to provide products and services that our competitors can’t,” says Integrisys principal Eric Wolfram.

A case in point: The Residences at 900, a development of 47 luxury condominiums on Chicago’s North Michigan Avenue, otherwise known as the “Magnificent Mile.” Development Management Associates (DMA), also based in Chicago, converted eight floors of commercial space into residential condominiums; the two- and three-bedroom units are expected to sell from about \$2.5 to \$5 million.

“We got involved in this project through the architect’s [introduction] in 2006,” says Wolfram. “DMA was looking for a point of differentiation, so we suggested an electronic concierge system [that] offers easy access to the building and neighborhood amenities.”

While Wolfram and his partners, Brad Weintraub and George Velazquez, originally planned to offer what was, at the time, the leading amenities solution on the market, they realized the system’s initial high cost and maintenance requirements would be difficult to justify for a project of this size.



(The original amenities program was designed for developments with 100-plus units).

“We had our own system, InteliPlex, in beta testing at that time, and it seemed to be a much better fit for this project,” Velazquez says.

“There’s always a debate about how much to put into to a project like this,” says DMA development manager Jaimie Bulla. “We knew we wanted a very nice base package, and we knew we had to give future owners a lot of [room] for upgrades. But we also wanted something that would set [900 Michigan Avenue] apart from other developments.

“There were two major advantages that InteliPlex offered,” Bulla adds. “It gave homeowners fast, foolproof communications with staff without [having] to use the phone. [From any Internet-capable device] they could ask the valet to bring up their cars from the garage or send a note to the doorman to have a taxi ready. It also tied them into websites for restaurants, theaters and other neighborhood offerings, all from a single interface.”

BUILDING THE SYSTEM



After working together for several years at another Chicago installation firm, the partners launched Integrisys in 2004. “At the previous company, we all worked together on a Windows-based home-automation product because there was nothing out there at the time that could manage a large estate,” Wolfram says, adding that his background revolves around software development. “[So] we had that in our blood, so to speak, and we thought our point of differentiation might be meeting clients’ needs through application development.”

For the 900 North Michigan project, the partners felt their IntelliPlex system offered numerous advantages over the leading amenities package. For starters, it was browser-based, which allowed residents to access the system from any Internet-capable device. That was a big advantage over the other amenities system, which only could be accessed via touch panels (which means users were forced to buy a control system that they might not otherwise buy). “And we felt that once a buyer was sold on the amenities solution, it would be much easier to go back and talk about the advantages of home automation,” Wolfram adds.

Another advantage involved maintenance and server costs: The amenities package could be hosted from Integrisys’ own web servers, which saved the developers

money because they didn’t have to invest in on-site servers. In addition, the system could also be serviced off site—which meant Integrisys didn’t have to knock on homeowners’ doors—and property managers could update amenity offerings on their own instead of hiring Integrisys to do it.

Installing Crestron controllers, which use Windows XP Embedded, was crucial to the success of this project. “We wouldn’t have been able to make this work with any other control system,” Velazquez

says. “With another system, making [any] change would require us to update each touch panel individually. With [IntelliPlex], all changes are immediately reflected on each Crestron unit.”

Other advantages included increased accessibility and flexibility. While the IntelliPlex system can be accessed from a computer or a web-enabled cell phone, half of all owners choose to access the system from a Crestron TPMC-8X wireless panel because they can do so from any room. The system also provided DMA’s customers with a host of audiovisual options. Integrisys offered three different packages in each category: distributed audio, distributed video, home theater, lighting control, phone system communications, and automated window treatments.

“Nearly all [buyers] wanted some form of whole-house audio,” Bulla says. “And those with children often wanted whole-house video as well—the ability to play anything they wanted at any time and in any room they wanted.”

In the end, IntelliPlex was a much more flexible and cost-effective solution than the competing amenities systems.

FROM THE GROUND UP

Providing the right infrastructure for all 47 condo units was key in making it all



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work, which involved installing a central A/V enclosure as well as all networking, telephone and A/V cabling. “We put standard, structured cabling in each unit,” Velazquez says, “and predesigned the cabling system based on the floor plans before the units were sold to ensure flexibility in the future.”

Unlike most A/V contractors, Integrisys also offered computer-networking services, as well as A/V integration services. “Since IP has become a standard for so many A/V and home-automation systems, it’s typical for us to install the computer network...We are so dependent on the network that we need to have that level of control.”

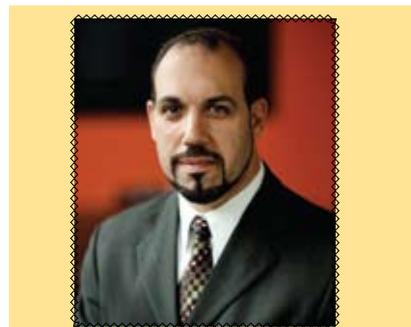
To minimize wiring and installation costs, Integrisys used category cabling for the A/V and networking needs—specifically Crestron QuickMedia cable and components. “There are times when we might run RGB or HDMI cabling, but an HDMI is always an HDMI, and if something should change in the future we’re not able to update it.”

GETTING OWNERS ON BOARD

Once a 900 North Michigan home-

owner purchased a unit, an Integrisys representative met with the owner to plan the A/V system. Velazquez says Crestron Adagio was the audio system of choice for nearly every unit, and Crestron PVID components were the components of choice for most of the video systems.

“Sometimes a homeowner [had or preferred] a Kaleidescape or ReQuest server, but we like to use Crestron equipment wherever we can,” he says. “Adagio works really well [because] we can combine audio



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distribution and control with one reliable device. And it offers more than enough audio zones for most condominiums. As a single system, it takes up less real estate, and there’s less likelihood of failure.”

The Crestron systems also work well with Integrisys’ IntegriNet system support portal, Velazquez adds. IntegriNet provides a simple interface for homeowners to log in a service request, check that request’s status and the unit’s service history. Designed as proactive system, the IntegriNet regularly pings the owner’s control system to check the status of each network device, and notify Integrisys about any detected problems.

A HAPPY DEVELOPER

Bulla is still was very happy with the firm’s systems and installation work. “Integrisys was fantastic through the entire sales and installation process,” he says. “They were very client-orientated and were able to service each customer separately.

“The Crestron systems allowed a lot of flexibility,” he adds. “Every buyer is different. Some didn’t want to purchase a complete package—they wanted a bit of this and a bit of that. Integrisys easily maneuvered through that without any difficulty. There were very, very few issues, and with a project this size, that says something.”

While the bulk of the 900 North Michigan units were sold in 2008, the recession that left many condominium projects unsold. But things are picking up. “They just sold two more units,” Bulla says. “That brings them to about 75 percent occupancy. In this market, that’s pretty good.”

For details about Integrisys and IntelliPlex, visit integrisys.com and intelleplex.com; for information about 900 North Michigan, visit theresidencesat900.com. •

Don Kreski has more than 25 years of experience in the A/V industry. As the owner of Kreski Marketing Consultants Inc., he provides marketing and public relations services to manufacturers and installers (kreski.com).

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