

Savant Hosts First Development Conference

Company previews Linux-based Rosie control system and invites feedback from dealers. by Jason Knott



Rosie, the brain inside Savant System's new modular control system, features an open-architecture platform.

Savant Systems, the new Osterville, Mass.-based control and display manufacturer, recently held its first development conference in Amelia Island, Fla., where it bared its engineering, marketing, product development and distribution plans to a group of about 40 key integrators.

While some industry manufacturers seem to develop products in a vacuum with little input from integrators — at least until the products appear at a trade show or on distributors' shelves — Savant unveiled its yet-to-be-finished goods fairly early in the development process. The pre-beta display offered integrators a chance to alter its design, capabilities and even pricing.

What those attending the conference (including *CE Pro* exclusively) discovered was that Savant is on its way to creating a Linux-based whole-house control system that is not only completely different in its physical form, but is also expected to be programmable in a fraction of the time needed to program other systems on

the market.

Indeed, one integrator in attendance said he configured a mock whole-house control and multiroom audio system in “One one-hundredth of the time” it would have taken him to configure a traditional programmable system. When completely released, the modular system will include a whole-house controller, media server and client, touchpanels and a plasma TV. The system will be linked with Apple's iTunes and a private Savant concierge Web service that will offer integrators a recurring revenue stream from downloads and other services.

All of this will be based on an open-architecture platform that will not require code to be written in order to integrate with devices from other manufacturers, according to Savant. “It's a whole different way of doing things,” said Bob Madonna, CEO.

The company, which burst onto the scene at CEDIA Expo 2006 (hosting a private concert by the Black Crowes), is expected to launch its product this fall.

Unique Product Design

One glimpse of the onscreen display, remote control and plasma and you know you are looking at a unique product — like works of art, a comparison that inspired the alpha and beta product releases to be called DaVinci (control products and touchpanels) and Beethoven (music server and media content).

The 2.4-GHz remote control design is not finalized. The plan, however, is for the shape to be unique — round, about the size of a baseball cut in half. In iPod-like fashion, users will drag their thumbs around the face of the remote to move the icon on the screen. Hardkeys will also

Continued on page 42

Continued from page 40

be on its face. A recharging station is in the works, but right now it requires two AAA batteries.

The onscreen interface looks like something from a Hollywood studio, with large icons that float on the display in a 3-D, circular pattern. The floating icons can be semi-transparent and accessed while the homeowner is viewing live programming.

The plasma displays will have all the standard bells and whistles (1080p, HDMI, etc.) but also come with specially designed “artwork” that fills the screen when not in use.

“Why should you have a blank piece of glass in your home when you are not watching TV?” asks Madonna. “We want the TV to be a work of art when it’s not in use.” The plasma will also have a built-in CCTV camera for use with future teleconferencing applications, including telemedicine.

The brains of the modular system is called the Rosie. The system is expected to be sold separately or in combination with other products, in various hardware configurations.

The Rosie Server has two major functions: to control up to eight touchpanels, and to serve as an iTunes media server up to 2.5 TB.

Four “Little Rosie” offerings are in the works: an intelligent 8 x 8 video switch, a controller with various serial and other control ports, a surround-sound processor and a combination piece that serves as a controller, A/V processor/switcher and media server.

Programming and Recurring Revenue

Beyond the look and feel of the products, the simplified programming is another selling point of the system.

“It is a high-reliability system architecture. This is absolutely critical,” says Madonna, who previously owned a telecom switching company that he sold for more than \$1 billion. “Homeowners will depend on this system, expect it to work.

An integrator should not have to take down the entire house so he can work on the DVD player in one room. With other systems, the minute you have to write one line of code, you have a potential problem with quality.”

For programming, integrators will purchase a fully licensed Apple computer fully loaded with the necessary design software, called Blueprint.

To date, 500 products are profiled in the system, including products from Lutron, Vantage/LeGrand, Aprilaire, Honeywell and more. An outreach program is also being created. The program, Excellence in A/V, is aimed at attracting other manufacturers and encouraging them to submit products for drivers.

The Apple platform was raised as a concern by several integrators in attendance, namely because most are PC users. “There will be IT challenges and we can help you with those,” says Jim Carroll, president. “But you will not need to change your corporate environment surrounding this product to Apple.” He added that there is plenty of interoperability between Apple’s OS X and PCs these days.

Savant execs say that integrators will save money on the back end through dramatically reduced programming burdens, but also make money on the front end through various recurring revenue schemes. Integrators can receive a percentage of every music or video download from iTunes. Likewise, they will earn income from VOD, movie rentals, movie tickets and other services ordered through the Savant Concierge.

Concluding the event, Madonna said, “We are a privately-owned company and well funded. We are putting tens of millions of dollars into development. This is a partnership. We are an open company. We wanted to show you our beta product and allow you to talk directly with our engineers.” ■

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More details and images, visit
www.cepro.com/savant-conference

Philips Buys Health Watch

Royal Philips Electronics NV is continuing its buying spree in the medical alert monitoring space with the acquisition of Health Watch Holdings Inc., a U.S. provider of personal emergency response systems (PERS) with 100,000 subscribers.

Philips paid about \$130 million for the Cherry Hills, N.J.-based company, which employs about 325 people. Some 1,200 distributors and wholesalers offer the Health Watch service in their local communities. These resellers market to and build awareness with approximately 9,000 “healthcare referral sources,” including discharge planners, social workers and private-duty nurses.

The acquisition follows the 2006 buy-out of Lifeline Systems, in which Philips paid \$750 million for 500,000 subscribers.

Lifeline and Health Watch offer 24-hour two-way service for independent seniors, allowing them to alert a monitoring center with the push of button.

According to Philips, PERS is already the largest category of home healthcare solutions purchased out-of-pocket by older adults and their caregivers. Still, penetration in the age group 65 years and older is just 2 to 3 percent, allowing for significant future growth.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people over the age of 65 in the United States is set to jump from approximately 34 million today to 74 million in 2025.

In 2004, research firm Forrester estimated the PERS market in the United States would grow at double-digit rates, from approximately \$350 million in 2004 to \$2 billion in 2012.

Today, the large majority of customers pay out-of-pocket, with government reimbursement for PERS varying from country to country. In 2004, 25 percent of PERS sales in the United States were government reimbursed, versus close to 100 percent in the United Kingdom. ■ —Julie Jacobson