



Feature Sets that **\$ell**

What **features** help integrators really **sell** an **access control system** — and what they just find ‘cool’ — are **two different things**.

By **Karyn Hodgson**, Contributing Writer

Selling today’s feature-rich access control systems can become a guessing game for systems integrators. What will get the end user’s attention? What will make their eyes glaze over?

End user applications vary widely, and no two customers are exactly alike. However, there are some general features that many, if not most, are looking for today – from the biggest to smallest and the ever-important intangibles.

Almost everyone, from manufacturers to integrators to end users themselves, will agree that there are a few “must-haves” these days. Some features are less common or obvious, but no less interesting to the end user. Others are just plain cool. Finally,

there are the things that won’t help you directly make the sale, but factor heavily in the purchase decision nonetheless.

THE BIG 3: INTEGRATION, OPEN PLATFORM, EASY TO USE

When you ask just about anyone what access control system feature tops their wish list, you will get a nearly universal answer: *Integration*.

“What we have found to be successful is letting [customers] know about all the integrated features that come with the system,” says integrator Doug Taylor, sales engineer for ACCI, Pensacola, Fla. “Integration is the big thing that most end users are interested in. Ninety percent of all systems we sell are integrated.”

What is being integrated with access control? Video tops the list.

“Integration is the big buzzword, and DVR integration is absolutely huge,” says Richard Goldsobel, vice president of Continental Access, Amityville, N.Y. “Our product has some nice access things where we tag events in our system with video clip icons and customers can reply right from the software and view the video right next to it.”

Gary Staley, founding partner and national sales

Clients Say Their Access Control Systems Must Be:

- able to be integrated with other technologies such as video surveillance,
- built with an open platform so the customer can cross different operating environments, and
- easy to use and easy to train employees on.

director for RS2, Munster, Ind., agrees that video integration features present well. "It's the 'wow factor' when we do our presentations. When they can actually click on an event and see when someone is using a card to go through a door, this is what gets the 'oohs' and 'aahs.'"

Integration with video, or any other system, is a boon to customers in today's economy. "The way things have matured, CCTV, access and alarm management were traditionally separate systems," says Matt Barnette, vice president of sales and marketing, AMAG Technology, Torrence, Calif. "Today we are finding more customers trying to do more with less. They need systems that play into that. Having a guard or security manager sit in front of a computer work station and be able to see what is happening with alarms and access control, but also have video, all through one user interface and one product – that seems to be what is of high interest to a lot of end users right now."

Going along with integration is another of the top features: *Open platforms*.

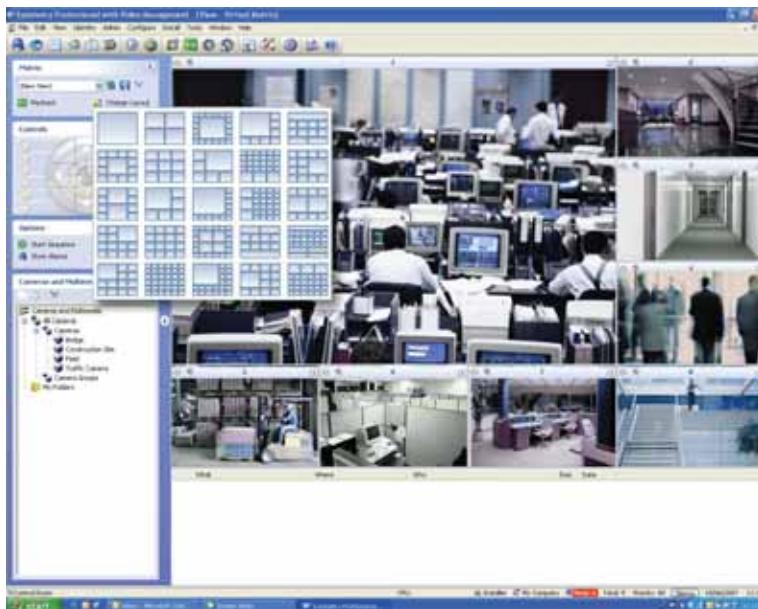
"We just launched a software development kit, which offers the integrator much greater flexibility going forward," says Peter Boriskin, vice president of access control for Tyco, Boca Raton, Fla. "Open systems are what people are looking for. When people ask for open systems, they don't necessarily want them just for openness' sake. They want to do the things they need to do. They want to integrate systems. They want to be able to cross different operating environments and development environments. Openness is a way to do that."

Integrator Brent Franklin, president of Unlimited Technology, Chester Springs, Pa., says that an open platform can help bring together disparate systems that are the result of company mergers.

"One of the things that has happened in these days of acquisitions and mergers is you have all these different platforms," Franklin says. "What you end up doing is looking for a command-and-control product that can bring those together so they look synonymous with each other, without having to replace the whole system."

Staley calls open systems absolutely key. "If I am a building owner looking to put in access control, knowing what I know about the industry I would only select a product that is open architecture – not lock into one supplier. Our systems code to a platform that 20 other U.S. companies use. If we were to go away tomorrow, 19 other companies could talk to our systems."

Tim Miller, vice president of government and



integrated solutions, sales and design for integrator ASG Security, Beltsville, Md., agrees. "Being able to integrate with other manufacturers without being locked into one entity is big. It is becoming rarer that a client starts from scratch. They have a legacy of particular readers, cameras, alarms, etc. A system that allows for integration with other platforms is a very attractive feature."

Rounding out the trio of top features is: *Ease of use*.

"One of the things we take for granted, but are always surprised by the positive feedback we get is the simplicity of our user interface," AMAG's Barnette says. "People using these systems don't always get a high level of education on the system. End users can't spend a lot of time and money training individuals. You can have the best system in the world, but if the person sitting in front of it doesn't know how to use it, it's basically useless."

This was certainly true for Duane Mackenzie, director of operations for Equinix, Foster City, Calif., a data center company. "Ease of use and simplicity are the most important. Make the operating system as simple as possible."

What kinds of things make systems easy to use?

"The integrators who are our customers love our product because it is easy to use, very user friendly and not an absolutely cluttered GUI," Continental's Goldsobel says. "They can get to anything they want quickly. For moderate to small customers without a lot of IT experience it is important to be able to automatically create primary and archived databases that are easy to manage."

When it comes to what end users want and need from their access control systems, integration is probably the top-requested feature across the board, with video integration the No. 1 option.

Another factor is the ability to automatically notify all systems when an employee is terminated.

“Companies of any size are very good about bringing new people on board and provisioning them with what they need, but no one is tremendously good at de-provisioning them,” Tyco’s Boriskin says. “By using the physical security management system as an authoritative source of that information, when security management says ‘this person is no longer valid,’ all systems can be shut off to that person.”

Reusable templates are another popular feature for ease-of-use, he adds. “If I have made a certain type of door or created a certain type of person, don’t make me create that over and over again. Let me create that one time and use it as a template. We try to use the same metaphors people are used to



PHOTO COURTESY OF RS2

Open systems such as this one from RS2 are another of the big three most-desired access control features.

Intangibles Matter

Beyond features that integrators can sell, there are a whole host of factors that can make or break an access control system purchase.

“It’s not always just price anymore,” says Doug Taylor, sales engineer for ACCI, Pensacola, Fla., a systems integrator. “Those days have changed. Now it is whoever feels most comfortable with you, in my opinion. If a customer feels confident with the presentation, equipment and your company, those are the keys right there.”

Alan Mather, chief of the protective services division, Johnson Space Center/NASA, Houston, Texas, describes the relationship of buyer and seller:

“Having access control is like a marriage,” he says. “Whoever your vendor or manufacturer is, you are going to be hooked up together for a long time. Make sure it is a solid company with a good reputation; that service and warranty will be there, that the software gets upgraded, and the hardware is reliable. All those things are part of it. Then you get into the actual systems, from software to hardware. Is it proprietary or open architecture? Cost is a factor, too. Once you decide upon the provider, then you want to make sure that you can expand it and grow the system. Can you do that easily?”

In the end, like anything, it comes down to good salesmanship.

“Certain access control products work better than others for the features that customers want,” says Brent Franklin, president of Unlimited Technology, an integrator based in Chester Springs, Pa. “A good salesperson will get a complete understanding of what a customer wants to do with that system, not just today but 10 years from now. Is it browser-based? Are they looking for true enterprise? There are probably 50 questions they need to ask to get a good direction on what the end user is looking for in an access control product.

“The most important thing is to listen to the customer. Don’t go in with your mind made up as to what product you are going to sell. If you don’t have exactly what they need, then find one. Look for what best serves them, not what serves the integrator best. If you sell that way, you will always come in on the upside of it.”

when they use e-mail. For someone who has never trained on this system before, they can come in and intuitively start to know where to go for things. Those are the delighters that we see.”

Franklin adds that most users are not looking for the moon. “They want user-friendly functionality. They want complete functionality and levels of user access. They want point-and-click, and maybe one or two features. That is really what access control systems are selling on, having a bundled system for the pricing.”

THE ‘COOL’ FACTOR

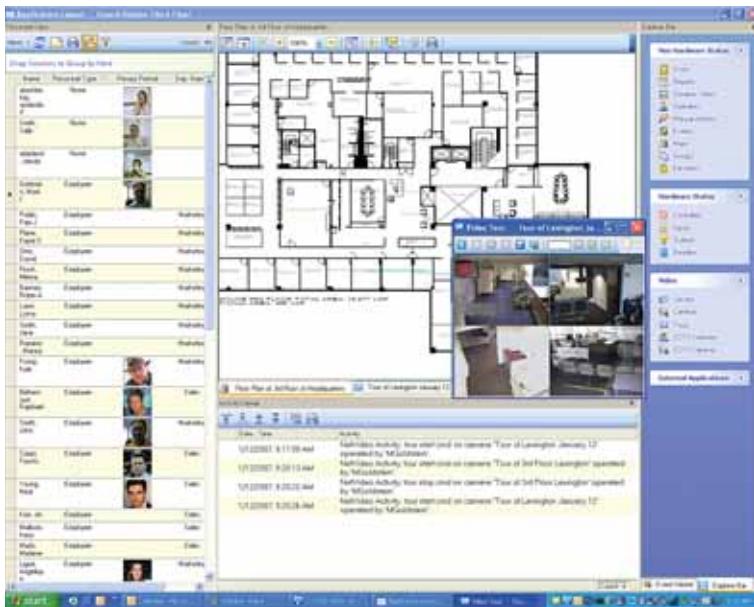
Not all features are sweeping; sometimes the smaller bells and whistles may be what get a customer motivated about a particular access control system. Whether they are enterprise-level or much smaller systems, end users like their systems to at least have the option to include the hottest new technologies such as smart cards, biometrics, converged solutions, and IP-based technology.

In some cases, these features are not as exotic as they seem. “Manufacturers have done a good job of building in a lot of the standard bells and whistles,” Miller says. “The ability to accept biometrics is exciting, for example. But in reality biometrics products allow themselves to work with even the most elementary access systems.”

Biometrics are important in the aviation industry, says Brian Rumble, deputy director of operations and security administration, Tampa International Airport, Tampa, Fla. “While not currently mandated, they are on the horizon. We know it will be required at some point in the future.”

Multi-technology readers are another sought-after feature, Barnette says. “As the industry moves

PHOTO COURTESY OF TYCO



Easy-to-navigate, intuitive software is a big plus for users.

from the old proximity to smart cards, Government FIPS 201 and PIV II cards, that is a feature people are looking for,” he says.

For Viscount, Burnaby, British Columbia, some of the newest features are stock-in-trade. IP-based systems that do not require proprietary panels, Web-based GUIs, and the elimination of control panels are just a few of the features Viscount cites as popular, says Steve Pineau, CEO.

Sometimes just having some future-proofing features available is enough to drive a sale.

“There are a couple of features that get a huge amount of requests and seem to drive purchase of our systems, yet without actually purchasing the feature they are asking about,” Goldsobel says. “Time-and-attendance and visitor management sell a fair amount of systems for us. But often customers buy the base system with the intent of bringing these in later. Customers take comfort in just knowing we support it.”

Rumble at Tampa International Airport agrees. “We’re always looking for proven technology. While we like new technology, we don’t want to be on the bleeding edge. We are looking for products that are expandable. We want to incorporate new technologies and expand our system as our budgets and needs permit.”

Other buyers don’t want fancy, but they still want nice features.

“As far as access control, all systems out there pretty much do the same thing,” says Taylor of the integrator firm ACCI. “One of the key smaller things are the reporting features of the system – systems with easy-to-obtain reports that look

presentable when you print a report out and send it electronically. Color graphics are another neat feature that comes with many systems.”

Software nuances can make or break the deal, Miller adds. “There are some software features that surprisingly some systems don’t possess, for instance, the ability to independently control the locking schedule of a particular door outside of its normal schedule. Another is simple alarm-point status monitoring. You have this elaborate system of control and capabilities, but some manufacturers seem to forget that it is really the central hub of the client’s building. To simply see alarm information when it occurs is very important.”

Bob Holland, marketing manager of Secura Key, Chatsworth, Calif., finds that size versus cost is a “cool” feature for their system.

“Honestly, a lot of stuff we have is pretty much stock-in-trade access control stuff. But a lot of people would not assume a lower-end system like ours can actually be set up for operations that span a wide geographical area. We can handle 65,000 cards on the panel. We have, for a low-end system, a lot of different features on there. We can have multiple locations, put all panels on a network or dial-up system. We have enterprise-level connectivity.”

Of course, cost is always a factor, no matter the size of the system.

End users such as this airport want expandable products that fit both their needs and their budget.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TAMPA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

“Customers want the biggest bang for their buck,” Franklin says. “Because there are so many access platforms, customers are looking at these options and what they get for their dollar. Only a small percentage of customers are looking for all the bells and whistles that access control systems bring. They are generally looking for a couple of things an access control system can do, but they are not going to use all the things it can do.

“They are looking for a reasonably priced access control product that will operate on a mission-critical basis. Some of our industrial customers want muster and accountability. Corporate customers want more badging. These are the majority of users. It’s not the huge enterprise systems. It’s the 5-reader through 50-reader systems that are the majority of systems being sold today.” ☒

What Customers Want

SDM asked two clients what matters to them in selecting an access control system.

When purchasing a new system for access control at your facility, what features are important to you? (For example, the ability for the system to operate on a data network; the ability for the system to be integrated with your video surveillance system; able to be integrated with the network so that one credential allows employees access to both doors and the network; ability to use existing cards or readers.)

Intuitive software is vital for me. All my users need to be able to easily make changes to door schedules, time zones, card holders, etc. If I am not able to figure out how to do something easily without training, then no one else at my company will be able to either, and we will be forced to rely on the dealer for all changes.

— **Nathan Adams**, director of Security Operations, Richmond Communications Group

Everything listed above is something I would be looking for in a system. I am over a health-care setting, as security coordinator, and have also considered the following as needed features: First, the use of card and PIN as a safety guard if a card is lost/stolen so that no one can use just a PIN to gain access to restricted areas. Second, I would want the system to record who, what door, and the time someone used a card to access a door. Next, the system would be able to lock or unlock doors at specific times. Last, I would want to be able to lock the doors so that only the person monitoring the system could open or unlock a door. This would be in case there was a pandemic or crises that I would need to keep people out of the building. (In case there was an emergency and evacuation was needed, the life safety protocols would override the locks.)

— **Jason Acreman**, security coordinator, River Region Medical Center

What are your chief security concerns that influence your selection of a new or upgraded access control system for your business?

I prefer fail-safe systems where local city ordinances will allow for them. That way I do not have to worry about power outages or system glitches unlocking my facility.

— **Nathan Adams**, director of Security Operations, Richmond Communications Group

First, I want to know about the installer; I want to be sure they are professional installers and not here one day and gone the next. (How long has this company been doing this kind of work, and references to back up the quality of their work.) Second, I would want to know if there are any issues with the system that are still being worked out. Next, is the system able to upgrade without having to change all other components? Last, the age of the system plays a part, as well; if it was an older system I would be concerned about it being out of date or obsolete not long after the installation.

— **Jason Acreman**, security coordinator, River Region Medical Center

How important to you is the capability of the systems integrator to be able to manage your access control system for you, taking care of cardholder changes; remote door openings; report generation, etc.

I would prefer to never see my integrator again after the initial installation. I have enough customers, vendors, and other business contacts to juggle so I don’t need one more that will monopolize my time. If the person I put in charge of security cannot handle minor access control software administration, then either I picked the wrong security manager or I picked the wrong access control system.

— **Nathan Adams**, director of Security Operations, Richmond Communications Group