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THE GARAGE DOOR:

The New Front Door to the American Home

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THE PRIMARY POINT OF ENTRY
INTO THE AMERICAN HOME.



THE GARAGE DOOR: The New Front Door to the American Home

By Carla Rautenberg, Special DAS Correspondent



The front door isn't the front door anymore. When Americans come home from work or school, the front door now takes a back seat to the garage door. This trend can be great news for our industry.

In fact, 89 percent of homeowners with remote-controlled access to their garages say they rely on their garages to enter their homes on a regular basis. And 71 percent indicate they use their garage door openers (GDOs) to enter their homes "daily." The figure comes from a recent nationwide telephone survey.*

A separate nationwide survey indicates that the garage door is now the door used most often to enter U.S. homes. In this survey, 45 percent of homeowners who have a garage say *the garage door is the primary point of entry into their home*. The actual front door came in a distant second (35 percent), followed by the back door (15 percent) and other doors (6 percent).**

This transformation of the American garage door calls to mind Hans Christian Anderson's classic tale of the ugly duckling that became a swan. Such a significant shift in American behavior holds challenges and opportunities for the door and access systems industry.

What's Driving This Trend?

Industry insiders attribute the growing status of the garage door to several factors, including convenience, safety, and security.

"I think it's primarily because of house architecture," says Richard Brenner, CEO of Amarr Garage Doors. "There are more zero lot-line or low lot-line, front-facing garage doors ... the garage is simply the best access point to the house."

Like many others, Brenner believes the trend will only increase, and he sees great potential for sales of higher-end, more fashionable doors as a result.

Simple convenience is likely why many people routinely use their garage doors to enter their homes. But this convenience reveals itself in many ways. These may include:

- Proximity of the garage to the kitchen, for ease of unloading purchases
- Ability to shed outerwear in the garage or adjoining mud room, rather than cluttering up the front foyer
- Not having to fiddle with, or even carry, a key

Consequences for Keypads

Some garage door accessories provide both convenience and security. "One of the big accessories we see is the keyless entry for latch-key kids who then don't have to carry a key," Brenner says. "I would guess that's the best-selling accessory."

Dan Nixa, director of residential marketing for The Chamberlain Group, concurs. "There's a lot more to a GDO than there used to be 25 years ago. The [latch-key children] issue brings in the added safety and security that Chamberlain strives to install in all of our products."

He notes that keypads were somewhat slow to catch on. Educating consumers about their advantages has been an ongoing task for dealers and manufacturers. But it has paid off.

"Once you have a keypad, not having one is like not wearing a seatbelt when you're driving your car. You just feel that something vital is missing," says Nixa.

Among the growing throng of those who access their homes from the garage, it seems

that few bother to carry the key to their house anymore. Since garage door access is now so critical, the reliability of the GDO is of paramount importance.

A Port in a Storm

Thunderstorms are one of the threats to the reliability of remote-controlled access. In addition, an overloaded power grid has made sudden power outages a fact of life for more Americans.

Lacking access to one's garage is certainly inconvenient. But what about large numbers of people who suddenly cannot get into their homes?

The big blackout of August 2003 dramatically drove this point home.

But the problem is a continuing one. According to one study cited by Chamberlain, 100,000 homeowners lose power every month.

Outages tend to vary in frequency and length by region.

Areas of the South and West experience somewhat less reliable electric power than other parts of the country.



Boom for Back-ups

GDO manufacturers have responded by producing and distributing battery back-up systems, and they are hot items.

Chamberlain's Nixa says the company's EverCharge Battery Back-up System is a case in point. "We introduced it a year ago, and it's been our best introduction by far. It provides extra peace of mind for homeowners."

Other battery back-up systems include On/Kor, sold by Re-Source Industries and others, and Marantec America's new Energie-Pac.

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A FULL ARRAY OF GDO ACCESSORIES IS PROVIDING ABUNDANT NEW SELLING OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEALERS.



Accessorizing Access

As the GDO becomes more important, a full array of GDO accessories is providing abundant new selling opportunities for dealers. In addition to keyless systems and battery back-ups, accessories that are growing in popularity include safety and convenience items such as:

- Plug-in controls that operate lights in the house from the remote in the car
- Open-door monitors to alert the homeowner if the garage door has been left open
- Motion-detector panels that turn on the GDO light for limited amounts of time
- Surge protectors

And remote-control units can connote status or personal style:

- Designer remotes customized to match automobile interiors
- Mini-pocket remotes with attractive designs

Garages, too, are becoming a major focus of the American home. Garage accessories that enhance the garage include:

- Garage organizers and storage units
- Rubberized flooring
- Appliances designed for garage use

As the garage door's reputation as "the new front door" grows, all these accessory items are likely to become even more popular.

Heavy-Duty Reliability

For the same reason, Americans are pouring more money and heft into the garage door. Thus, Nixa also expects increased demand for the 3/4-HP opener. It is built to handle heavier loads, such as wood carriage-house doors and hefty doors engineered to withstand hurricane-force winds.

"Even if your door isn't as heavy, a larger motor operates with less strain and will probably last even longer," he points out.

First Impressions

A key implication of "the new front door" concept is that Americans are increasingly willing to buy upscale and expensive garage doors. When the real front door was the focal point of the front of the home, homeowners

gladly spent big bucks for an extravagant entry port. It added style and value to the home.

That principle can now be successfully applied to garage doors. A recent online survey sponsored by Amarr Garage Doors found that, among homeowners who have replaced their garage doors within the last five years, 71 percent believe it has increased the value of their home.**

"We estimate that Americans replace their garage doors roughly every 10 years," says Amarr's Brenner, "and we've definitely noticed people becoming more style-conscious when making replacements."

A "Fashion Item"

Brenner sees more demand for decorative hardware and windows on garage doors. Responding to this growing "garage-door fashion market," Amarr now offers more than a thousand different looks in carriage-house doors.

"I'd like the industry to focus on getting people to replace their garage doors before the doors become damaged. We need to see the garage door as a fashion item," declares Brenner.

Let's sum up. Nationwide surveys and industry experts agree: the garage door is the new front door of the American home. This emerging concept can now be a significant weapon in your sales arsenal.

For safety, security, convenience, and curb appeal, consumers looking to upgrade their homes can start with their new front door: the garage door. ■

To respond to this story, send an E-mail to daseditor@dasma.com.

* Telephone survey of 1,065 American adults living in homes with remote-controlled garage doors, conducted Nov. 22-23, 2004, by StrategyOne for the Safe and Secure Access Coalition. The margin of error is +/- 3.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

** Online survey of 2,360 U.S. adults, of whom 1,136 owned a home with a garage, conducted Nov. 10-12, 2004, by Harris Interactive for Amarr Garage Doors. The total sample has a statistical precision of +/- 3.0 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, and +/- 5.0 percentage points for results of homeowners with a garage.

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"I think Energie-Pac is an easy sell for the dealer and distributor because they should be able to sell it as a value-added," says George Annino, Marantec's director of marketing. "If the customer's like me, I don't have a key to my house, so if the power's out and nobody's home, I'm locked out."

Nixa and Annino agree that the idea of children being locked out in a storm provides one of the most compelling arguments for purchasing a battery back-up. Both the EverCharge and Energie-Pac units will operate a GDO for a minimum of 20 complete cycles on a single charge. This makes them adequate to deal with extended outages.

Avoiding Interference

GDO manufacturers and dealers are now facing a potentially major annoyance: interference from the U.S. military's new Land Mobile Radio (LMR) system (see story on pp. 62-63). Many GDOs operate at 390 megahertz, the same frequency as the LMR. Such interference could be the equivalent to stealing the house key to thousands of homes across America.

Marantec America is one of the manufacturers that are readying a product to address the problem. "It's a simple external receiver that will connect to any operator and allow it to work on a lower frequency," explains Annino. The new transmitter converts existing GDOs to operate at 315 megahertz.