HOME SMART HOME

EASYDOM

The home of the future is finally here

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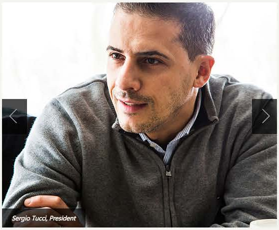
Writer



Sergio Tucci, President

The Easydom team

Meet the people who are bringing home automation to the masses

Sergio Tucci was vacationing in the little Italian seaside town of Alba Adriatica in 2004 when he had the vision of controlling his home from his smartphone. Wireless access and smartphones were just beginning to reach the masses.

"He was on the beach reading a technology magazine, and he said, 'Why can't I manage and control my home from my cellphone or with a PC connected to the Internet?'" recalls Romina Panella, Tucci's wife. "From that moment, his vision was clear, and all the work was focused on finding a way to manage the home from anywhere in an easy way."

Tucci, an electrician who already worked in the field of building automation, returned home to Milan and started tinkering in a garage with software programs that could speak to automation hardware.

"I was in this field, and I knew it could be adapted to houses," Tucci said. "I thought, 'Why not make it accessible to everyone worldwide?'"

Soon, Easydom was born.

A combination of "easy" and "domotics" (home automation), Easydom has been installing home automation systems across Italy since 2011. The company has become a European leader in the growing world of ubiquitous computing, also known as the Internet of Things. This month, the company prepares to launch its first wireless solution, Easydom Next. Subscribers will be able to control their home's security system, climate, lighting and just about everything else, on nearly any device and platform, from the comfort of beach chairs anywhere in the world. For this, Easydom was named an innovation award honoree at CES 2015 in Las Vegas in software and mobile apps. The company of 11 employees is preparing for its reach to extend dramatically beyond its mostly Italian market as it shifts from business-to-business to business-to-customer.

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> lighting and just about everything else, on nearly any device and platform, from the comfort of beach chairs anywhere in the world. ”

But the road to Easydom’s success has not been, well, easy.

“I’m from a working class family,” said Tucci on a recent visit to Redmond, Washington, with four members of his team — including his wife, the brand manager. Tucci began working at the age of 14 to help support his family. “I had big ambitions but few economic resources.”

By 28, he owned his own electrical installation company, and had been taking advantage of professional development opportunities in the automation industry for over a decade.

“In 2003 building automation was the centralized heating management inside the whole building. Bill Gates’ house was the first example of home automation in the world,” Tucci explained. “I wanted to simplify home automation, but I didn’t have enough resources to build physical products. All the efforts were toward creating hardware.”

But Tucci had a knack for software ever since his father gave him a Sinclair ZX81 PC when he was 10.

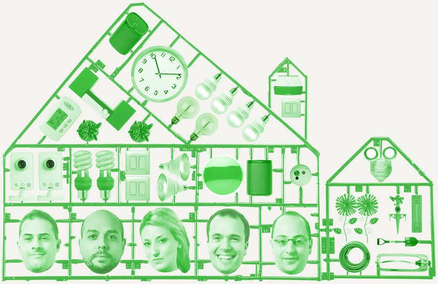
“I used to create little games. My passion was software programming, but my job was electro-technology — cables, electrical power, et cetera,” Tucci said. “I built a work group where I offered my personal experience with electrical systems, and the other experts could help me to create a software interface.”

Tucci licensed the software and began selling the product, but in Italy that’s not as simple as it sounds. The country’s traditional business structure leaves little room for startups, and the economy doesn’t accommodate angel investors.

According to Carlo Purassanta, general manager of Microsoft Italy and an organizer behind the digital initiative Restart Europe, Italians are expected to climb the career ladder to achieve leadership positions in their 50s or 60s. There is a huge divide between the older generation and the digital natives, and despite the technical savvy of the younger generation, 40 percent of young Italians are unemployed.

“The young generation is very, very prepared to go digital,” said Purassanta. “That's why we’re doing Restart Europe and Restart Italy: to demonstrate that young people have great ideas. There’s a lot they can bring to the table. We need to hire them and make them chief officers of a company.”

Easydom’s success in Italy is anomalous in this sense, a fact Purassanta attributes to its early relationship with Microsoft. Startups sometimes achieve success by partnering with established companies.



With a laugh, Tucci recalls the early days of pitching his software to Microsoft. He called every day for four months. “The call center told me to read the website, and there were no operators available for my request,” he said. “My friends would make fun of me, saying, ‘What, you didn’t call Microsoft today?’”

When Microsoft launched Windows Media Center in late 2005, Tucci asked his developers to come up with a remote control for the software to make it more appealing. Then, one day, he got his lucky break. Someone new at the call center picked up the phone.

“The employee on the other end of the line asked me a few questions, like, ‘What does your software do?’” The operator then gave him the email address for a person in the marketing division. That person was Lorenzo Santagata. Santagata is now Easydom’s director of marketing and sales.

“Easydom was looking for a good partner to help launch,” recalled Santagata. “We became friends in a couple of months.” A couple years later, Santagata was looking for a change and joined Easydom full time.

Santagata and Tucci laugh when they reflect on their first formal email exchanges.

“Lorenzo invited us to Microsoft Italia, and I was afraid to show the software. So I brought a screenshot presentation. I said, ‘It took us a year to develop this software, but Microsoft could do that in one day!’”

Tucci gave in to Santagata’s request for a working demo, and a partnership was born.

“From that moment on, we were on the market, and interest in the Easydom project grew even more,” said Tucci.

What began as a technical and marketing partnership with Microsoft allowed Easydom to grow into its own company.

So Tucci took out a bank loan and sold his house to finance the company’s growth. “The world was changing,” he said. “Interest in smart home automation was growing larger.”

At that point, Tucci hired Simone Colombo, a hardware specialist, and Easydom moved into home hardware installation. Across Italy, Easydom specialists began wiring homes for automation, which is operated via a wall panel. At the same time, Easydom continued to follow Microsoft’s lead in software and development. Today, Easydom is seamlessly integrated with and accessible through Microsoft’s secure Azure platform and cloud, Windows 8, Windows Phone, Web browsers and Xbox.

“What we are doing here is creating a connected vision with third-party products,” Tucci said. “I don’t believe in a home controlled by just one technology. We want to set you free.”

“We transformed our developing process following Microsoft’s strategies, and we developed everything on the Microsoft platform,” he said. The strategic decisions are thanks to Fabrizio De Angelis, another developer who joined the team in 2009.

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“Fabrizio convinced me to embark on the most difficult path,” Tucci added. “Those were tough days, but we were rewarded. Easydom Next brought us to CES in Las Vegas. We’re here now thanks to the choices we made back then.”

Remember when remote control garage door openers hit the market, and for the first time a simple tap on your sun visor would raise the door like magic as you rolled into the driveway? Now imagine that as you approach your house, your phone alerts your home of your imminent arrival and triggers your happy-hour preferences. Not only does your garage door open automatically for you, but your lights switch on to your desired luminosity, and your favorite after-work music playlist cues up as you walk through the door. (Now if only the martinis would shake and pour themselves. As more home appliances come equipped for automation, this may not be as far-off as it sounds.) At night, the home can put itself to bed by dimming and turning off lights, lowering the heat, locking the doors, activating the security system, even closing automatic blinds. Likewise, the house can wake you up in the morning — parents, take note. Better yet, you can control the settings from anywhere in the world at any time. Worried your spouse won’t wake up in time for work while you’re on a business trip overseas? Easydom’s got that covered, too. Just set the lights and stereo to full blast and they’ll be out the door in no time.

Home automation is not a new concept — you can see the wheels turning in episodes of “The Jetsons” half a century ago and even as far back as Nikola Tesla’s idea to remotely control vehicles at the turn of the 20th century. While Tucci follows the lead of George and Jane, he was ahead of the market, which is only now catching on to the possibilities of automation following advances in technology. What was once the stuff of sci-fi is now becoming as normal as coffee machines and icemakers.

In a windowless lab off a parking garage on the Microsoft campus in Redmond aptly nicknamed “The Batcave,” Santagata welcomes me into an Easydom demo home — three shelves on a pegboard wall representing a living room, bedroom and garden, outfitted with lamps and a stereo.

Santagata demonstrates how clients can control the light, heat, music and security through their phones, PCs, Web browsers and TVs through a set of specific scenarios. The system also tracks energy usage and plots out financial forecasts and the environmental footprint of a home or business.

On a large screen in the center of the room, Santagata sets up a scenario for me. I choose my logo (a donut) and my music preferences (Amy Winehouse). Using his Windows Phone, Santagata instructs Cortana to launch the Emily Scenario.

“Emily!” Santagata announces into the phone.

“I am executing the scenario ‘Emily,’” Cortana replies.

A purple lava lamp clicks on in my mock bedroom, my garden lights turn off, and “Rehab” blasts through the speakers.

Cortana is attuned to the nuances of a home. When Santagata asks her to set the temperature to 22 degrees Fahrenheit, she will not obey. “Do you want to freshen up your home?” she asks. “Or make ice for your drinks?”

“The first time we switched off a light with voice commands, it was three o’clock in the morning,” said De Angelis. “We said, ‘switch off the light,’ and the light went off. That was incredible.”

The developers, De Angelis and Colombo among them, are integral to Easydom’s vision. Colombo, who manages connectivity between the user interface and the devices, imagines a smart home with no need for buttons or switches. Potentially, the house could respond to its residents intelligently, minimizing the interface.

“The house should have its own soul. It should know if you are at home, if you are not, and it must recognize you and activate your personal settings,” Tucci said. “Everyday we see people who need to communicate through social networks, and it could be amazing to communicate with our houses in the same way. The house plays a special role in family life.”

“The strongest thing is our shared vision,” added Tucci. “There have been moments when I had to choose among private life, fun, friends, and working night and day with Fabrizio. It was a tough time. Especially when you’re young and you want to hang out with your friends. So I asked myself, ‘Am I doing the right thing or am I wasting my youth?’”

Without the support of Panella and De Angelis, Tucci admits he might have given up. In 2012, after being together a decade, Tucci and Panella finally got married.

“Otherwise, we never would have done it,” Tucci says with a laugh.

“I would do it again,” said Panella about the long road she traveled with her now-husband.

“Definitely,” said Tucci.

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