



News > Local News > Crime

Video alerts give Modesto security officers an edge over criminals

BY ERIN TRACY

etracy@modbee.com August 2, 2014 Updated 13 hours ago



Ontel Security Services officer Evan Jacobs had just started his shift on the afternoon of April 13 when he got a phone call alerting him to an intruder at the the former Save Mart on Pelandale Avenue.

Within minutes, a 10-second video was sent to the computer in his patrol car. It showed Jacobs nearly live security footage of a man and woman, each on bicycles, circling the loading dock in the back of the business.

As he and his lieutenant drove from Ontel's downtown office to the vacant grocery store, more videos were sent to their computer. Jacobs watched as the couple got off their bikes, the woman poked around in a bag of recyclables in a trailer attached to one of the bikes and the man started using a crowbar to pry at a metal door.

When Jacobs and his lieutenant arrived on scene, they approached the loading dock from opposite directions and found the suspects walking away. But before the security officers even arrived they knew who they were looking for and what they were wearing.



Art Dunn installs a wireless video camera at the former Valley Meat processing plant on Daly Ave in Modesto Calif., on Wednesday July 30, 2014. **ANDY ALFARO** — aalfaro@modbee.com | **Buy Photo**



The suspect, Westley Ray Douglas, protested when he was apprehended, saying they were merely searching the area for recyclables.

"I told him we have him on video with a crowbar trying to take off the door hinge," Jacobs said. "He was silent after that."

Ontel Security two years ago started partnering with Art Dunn, director of Art Dunn Alarm Co., to offer businesses, school districts, construction site contractors and private citizens this unique combination of immediate alerts, verification of a crime and armed response.

The partnership has resulted in nearly 50 citizen's arrests by Ontel officers in Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties, said Chief of Security David McCann.

"With regular security systems, you get crystal-clear video of whatever the bad guy is using to hide his face, two days after the fact," Dunn said. "Without that response, it's all irrelevant. The most information you can get to the first responder, that's what's important."

The role of private security in preventing property crimes and making arrests has increased over the past few years as police departments have reduced staff. Some departments have stopped responding to alarms without verification a crime occurred. Many in law enforcement familiar with the system used by Dunn and Ontel see it as a valuable tool in prevention, as well as prosecution.

Turlock and Modesto police stopped responding to home burglary alarms without an independent verification in 2005 and 2006, respectively, after studies found that about 99 percent of them were false due to operator error or equipment malfunction. Modesto dispatchers still advise officers of alarms, but they most often are too busy with other calls to respond.

The systems installed by Dunn, called Videofied, were designed by RSI Video Technologies to eliminate false alarms by using heat- and motion-sensor cameras, said sales representative Kent Brust.

The wireless devices communicate through a cellphone or Internet signal, and are battery operated so they can be placed in the middle of fields to protect farm equipment or construction at sites with no power.

Typically, the videos are sent to a central station, where an operator views them to determine if the alarm was activated by a bird landing near one of the cameras, a maintenance worker who has permission to be there or an intruder. If it's the latter, the operator will call police dispatch, which will send an officer to the scene.

The verified response heightens the call priority and generally decreases law enforcement's response time. In Brust's experience, a call that would otherwise have a response time of more than 30 minutes is reduced to fewer than 10 with the verified response.

"But law enforcement can't always get there on time," Dunn said. "It's just a property crime compared to everything else they have to respond to."

And "there is a delay. ... Adding another link to the communications chain, you are losing information," he said. "If you take a video and try to describe it to me over the radio, how much information is lost?"

Dunn figured out a way to bypass the central station, using a secondary software to unscramble the video and send it to anything with a Web portal, like a smartphone, tablet or the computers in Ontel Security's patrol cars.



RECENT HEADLINES

Convicted murder escapes from custody near Livingston

Modesto Police Department incidents for Saturday, Aug. 2, 2014

Video alerts give Modesto security officers an edge over criminals

Father and son accused of scamming Foster Farms

Defendant ordered to stand trial in "execution-style" shooting near Modesto

TODAY'S DEAL

\$39 for 6 home videos converted to

"Instead of 'man in parking lot, camera five,' the security officer sees what he is doing, what he is wearing and what he looks like," Dunn said.

Brust said other alarm companies around the county use Videofied coupled with "guard enhancement" but said he isn't aware of anyone else who uses the cameras quite the way Dunn and Ontel do.

Dunn and McCann said their premium package has eliminated theft at the 19 locations.

The package costs \$1,000 to \$1,800 a month, but an armed guard protecting the business around the clock costs upward of \$10,000, Dunn said.

A 157,000-square-foot former meat-processing factory in the airport neighborhood suffered \$370,000 in copper wire theft in a 10-day period when it changed ownership from Valley Cold Storage LLC to Umpqua Bank in January.

Real estate agent Mike Harris with Cassidy Turley Commercial Real Estate Services said he'd get calls in the middle of the night from the security company informing him of a breach. Law enforcement or security officers would check only the exterior of the building and report no signs of a break-in.

"But there are so many doors and so many ways to get into the building, you could easily disguise the break-in," Harris said.

The contract the bank had with Ontel at the time didn't allow security officers to go inside, but Harris eventually got a key to McCann.

By then, thieves had ripped apart conduit lines and entire electrical panels to get to the copper wire inside.

Harris said it appeared they'd been there for hours undisturbed, leaving behind bottles of water and flashlights.

Two Videofied systems with 20 cameras were installed in the Daly Avenue factory in February.

Responding to the Videofied footage within minutes, Ontel officers have since caught six people on the property. They were arrested for crimes ranging from felony burglary to trespassing. One man was found with a BB gun that had been painted black.

The story has been repeated at other properties, such as a new senior living facility under construction on Downey Avenue where copper wire and tools were regularly being stolen until cameras were installed in April.

Empire Union School District was one of the first to get the premium package after tens of thousands of dollars in damage was done to air-conditioning units at schools.

The cameras were installed and three people were promptly arrested.

"Ever since then, we've had a few minor things but ... once (thieves) realized there are cameras, they don't mess around with that," said Joel Sanders, the district's director of maintenance, operation and transportation.

Monday night, the cameras alerted Ontel officers to one of the schools, where they caught four people trespassing on the roofs.

Once security officers have placed trespassers, burglars and vandals under citizen's arrest, they will call law enforcement.

DVDs (\$109 value)



\$39.00

Buy Now!

dealsaver.com

NATIONAL VIDEOS

NYPD chokehold death of Eric Garner was homicide: medical examiner
WPIX - New York



Water Toxins Force State of Emergency in Toledo

Toxins possibly from algae on Lake Erie fouled the water...

1:01



Second Ebola patient expected to arrive in the next few days

Kerry Kavanaugh reports

0:59



Under Armour Launches Biggest Women's Campaign with Inspiring

Under Armour is starting a conversation with women...

1:11

Modesto police Officer Joe Pimentel responded to the vacant Save Mart on Pelandale after Jacobs apprehended Douglas.

The Ontel lieutenant at the scene told Pimentel he had video of Douglas. Pimentel was surprised when the lieutenant led him to his patrol car to show him the clips.

“That is so much better than an outdated DMV photo,” Pimentel said. “In real time, you have exactly what he is wearing and exactly what he looks like right there in your patrol car. That’s worth its weight in gold.”

Pimentel was the lead investigating officer in court last week during Douglas’ preliminary hearing, at which Jacobs testified about the video system. Douglas was held on the charge of attempted burglary and will be arraigned Monday.

Pimentel said he wishes there was a way for the department to use the technology, but knows placing cameras all over town isn’t feasible.

Stockton Unified School District uses the cameras, but skips the central station by having the videos sent to dispatchers, Dunn said.

He thinks law enforcement could use the cameras on a small scale for sting operations or areas with chronic crime.

Officials at the Modesto Police Department and Stanislaus County Sheriff’s Department were not familiar with the cameras but agreed the system sounds like a valuable tool for law enforcement.

Ripon became a model for how a police department could use security cameras in 2007 when it developed a proprietary system that uses military radio communication technology, said Lt. Steve Merchant. Hundreds of agencies from around the country have visited Ripon to learn about its system and many have improved on it with new technologies.

Up to two dozen of the city’s 76 surveillance cameras can be monitored in its dispatch center at one time, and patrol officers can access live feeds from any of the cameras from the computers in their cars.

It works differently, but the concept is the same as Dunn’s “secret formula” with Videofied: to equip the responding officer with the most information possible.

“If (the Videofied) system were in our city, we’d embrace it,” Merchant said. “Any tool that area police can use to assist them in responding to calls; that saves time, that saves money, but more importantly, that can save lives.”

Bee staff writer Erin Tracy can be reached at etracy@modbee.com or (209) 578-2366. Follow her on Twitter @ModestoBeeCrime.



Order a reprint of this story