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Corporate crime fighters

> Companies increasingly harnessing heat and motion sensors, microphones, infrared cameras and other sophisticated technology to catch crooks

> Vancouver-based Sonitrol now in the business of catching criminals in the act, rather than merely sounding burglar alarms

By Curt Cherewayko

Smile thieves: you're on candid cameras. And if you're in Vancouver, there's a good chance those cameras are streaming real-time video or audio of your crime to Sonitrol security command centre.

As security hardware and software become increasingly sophisticated, the cat-and-mouse security game has become all about catching thieves in the act - rather than simply trying to scare them off with a blaring alarm. The heart of a remote surveillance network is its command centre, where workers listen and watch remote audio and video from security systems installed across a network of clients.

In 2010, Sonitrol's heat and motion sensors, microphone and night-infrared and color-digital cameras helped catch 227 crooks in the Lower Mainland in the midst of stealing from or robbing one of the company's clients.

"We catch a thief almost every night in Vancouver," said Sonitrol CEO Joe Wilson.

The company's clients in Canada, a majority of which are in the Lower Mainland, represent a wide cross-section of businesses, from homebuilders and restaurateurs to jewellers.

The company provides remote surveillance for national businesses such as the Keg, Can-



Joe Wilson, CEO, Sonitrol Canada: "we catch a thief almost every night in Vancouver"

adian Tire, Kal Tire, Best Buy, Future Shop, and Stuart Olson Dominion Construction.

"The guys who hit the residential construction sites are the tradespeople," said Wilson. "They steal from each other. In all industries, that's the way it is."

Sonitrol was founded in 1962 in Anderson, Indiana, by a former police chief frustrated over the many false alarm calls he received.

Wilson learned about Sonitrol in 1992 after the Toronto police department introduced him to Sonitrol's technology while he was a director of security for Labbatt's Brewing Co. and Molson Coors Canada.

At the time, he tested Sonitrol's system at 100 beer stores in Ontario. The stores' losses dropped to \$37,000 from \$1.4 million in one year.

Sonitrol, which has 197,000 customers across North America, is right most of the time: it's false alarms represent 3% of all calls.

With its low false-alarm rate, Sonitrol is one of the few security companies in Canada that has priority-calling placement with the RCMP.

About five years ago, police across North America instituted a policy to ignore alarm calls without "verified dispatch:" they won't answer alarm calls unless a break-in

has been confirmed.

It costs an office similar in size to a video store about \$2,000 to install Sonitrol and \$75 a month for monitoring.

Wilson said Sonitrol does \$300,000 a month in new installations in the Lower Mainland.

"We warranty everything we do, so if we have a miss, we take the hit; we pay," he said. "We become a client's insurance policy."

James Weldon, who owns JTW Consulting, a construction consultancy, said a Sonitrol system helped catch a thief in early February on the site of a social housing renovation project he was supervising in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

"You rely on proven technology rather than the diligence of a night watchman, who may be concentrating on something else or may even be asleep."

Weldon added that he also used Sonitrol's systems while he was BC Housing's director of innovation and standards.

"You rely on proven technology rather than the diligence of a night watchman, who may be concentrating on something else or may even be asleep."

- James Weldon,
construction consultant,
JTW Consulting

"When security guards are getting \$15 an hour, they're not necessarily motivated."

He said remote Sonitrol security costs a fraction of what it costs to have an on-site security guard.

"There's nothing worse than getting a job finished and then going back in the morning and all the copper wire has been ripped out," said Weldon.

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