

Security Systems Zoom in on Crime

WRITTEN BY ERIC BADERTSCHER

Giving back to the community is good business.

Video surveillance is already an integral part of operations for many carwash operators in the Mid-Atlantic region.

THE WORLD CAN BE A DANGEROUS PLACE FOR CARWASH OPERATORS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO RUN AUTOMATED, 24-HOUR FACILITIES. But for those times when no personnel are around to keep an eye on things, video surveillance offers operators a wide range of options for protecting their investment.

In part, this is due to advances in technology which have made systems more available, while increasing their capabilities. Modern digital technology has made possible recordings of high quality and long duration. Many systems also provide remote access, via the Internet, so that operators can ensure their facilities' security at any time of the day or night.

Video systems can deter crime just by their very presence, while also actively helping law enforcement by providing facial shots and car descriptions of criminals. In various parts of the country, local law-enforcement authorities are apparently moving toward greater emphasis on video surveillance for automated facilities.

That is the view of Mike O'Donnell, Vice President of Operations for Imagine Innovations, Inc. (www.coincarwash.com), whose firm has specialized in carwash security systems since 1996. Based in Corona, California, the company produces the Wash Remote™ and Wash Vision™ systems.

"The main issue with self-serves has always been the ability to interact with law enforcement," O'Donnell said. "A lot of our focus over the past few years has been license-plate cameras."

He said that many Western jurisdictions already require installation of video surveillance at car washes and other automated facilities, as a way to help law enforcement. California, Arizona, Nevada, and the Pacific Northwestern

A carwash monitoring system featuring digital recording and remote access for simple video monitoring of your carwash.



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According to O'Donnell, self-serve operators are basically split down the middle on the issue. Around half want to use video cameras as a tool to identify criminals and press charges; the other half consider video a "deterrent only" option, and rely on smaller, less expensive systems. This decision is typically related to the high cost of industrial-grade security systems.

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The Speace family, which operates the Columbia Junction Car Wash (www.cjcarwash.com) in Jessup, Maryland, uses the American Dynamics DigiMux™ DG4016, a 16-camera digital recorder with Internet connectivity. American Dynamics is a brand of Tyco Fire and Security. (www.americandynamics.net)

The DG4016 is "a nice unit," says Brandon Speace, who operates the facility with his father, Will. Columbia Junction Car Wash

The visibility of his cameras makes it possible not only to identify criminals, but also to act as a deterrent to crime in the first place.

In researching which system to buy, Giroux said he recognized the trade-offs between cost and area of coverage. "To do it cost-effectively, you can't necessarily get the tightest of shots throughout your property," he said. While some cameras provide wide-angle views, close-up shots should focus key locations such as the driveways and the vending machines, in order to obtain close-ups of faces and license plates.

He says there have been no real problems with remote access, which he attributes partly to having a cable modem at home, with plenty of bandwidth.

Freedom Wash has not experienced any major incidents since Giroux opened the site over a year ago. A few times, though, the cameras have caught people who have tried to walk off with unattended property, such as a computer bag. Giroux said his DVR system

states require the installation of video-surveillance systems in new construction of automated facilities.

Anecdotal evidence from distributors suggests, O'Donnell said, that local jurisdictions in other parts of the country will eventually require video surveillance at automated facilities.

"Probably in the last year and a half, our inquiries from the carwash industry have doubled due to this," he said.

Similar regulations apparently do not apply to full-time sites on the West Coast that have regular hours and onsite employees, O'Donnell said, adding that older facilities are more or less being "grandfathered." He noted, however, that Imagine Innovations had heard that some insurance companies have been calling for retrofitting of video surveillance as a condition for policy renewal.

offers self-service bays, a LaserWash, and a detail bay. The video-surveillance system has resolved several incidents favorably for Columbia Junction. Brandon Speace said that a driver, who denied running into the building's awning with his truck, was forced to change his story when confronted with video evidence. The man's company ultimately paid the \$3,500 in damages. In another incident, cameras captured a fist-fight over who would be next to use a self-serve bay. One man had his tooth knocked out, and the case went to trial.

There has been difficulty accessing the system remotely via the Internet, but Brandon Speace says that they are making some progress on the issue.*

Video surveillance is also a key part of operations at Freedom Wash (www.freedom-wash.com) in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The 24-hour automated facility, located on South

Independence Boulevard near the center of town, features two 16-camera digital video recorder (DVR) systems from Imagine Innovations, Inc. of Corona, California. Each system has 500 gigabytes of recording memory, and can be accessed remotely from the Internet.

Freedom Wash co-owner Chris Giroux, who has over a decade of experience in the carwash industry, has operated the facility for around 15 months. He says that in his business "it's a necessity to give the consumer a sense of security."

was able to identify those individuals, and the police handled matters from there.

The Virginia businessman says he likes working with Imagine Innovations, because they offer a full package and he can deal with just one company. Their system can also track when employees open and close money changers, sending Giroux text messages so that he As far as future features go, Giroux says he's looking forward to the day when a handheld device, such as a Blackberry, can dial into the system and check the cameras. He admits he's just speculating, but thinks that day might be soon.

*Editor's note: Lack of reliable Internet connectivity is a generalized problem, especially where slow dial-up connections are involved. In some areas broadband connections (DSL, cable) are simply not available yet. WashTrends will be looking at this broad topic in a future issue.

Eric Badertscher is a writer from the Baltimore, Maryland area, whose other freelance work has included assignments for United Press International (UPI). He has a master's degree in journalism from the University of Maryland at College Park.

Freedom Wash in Virginia Beach, VA was part of the MCA Spring Tour 2005. (Note: Cameras are visible)



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