

To serve and protect – using new technology

UNFORTUNATELY THE OFF-LICENCE TRADE IS OFTEN A VICTIM OF RETAIL CRIME AND VIOLENCE. RON ALALOUFF EXAMINES THE SYSTEMS AND TECHNOLOGY AVAILABLE TO REDUCE LOSSES AND PROTECT STAFF AND PREMISES

According to figures from the British Retail Consortium, the cost of retail crime was £2.13 billion in 2004, up 9 per cent since the previous year. More worryingly, perhaps, physical violence was up 14 per cent and verbal abuse rose some 35 per cent.

Though there are no specific figures for the trade, off-licences can be particularly vulnerable, especially in high crime or secluded areas. A combination of long opening hours and shops staffed by just one person can exacerbate the problem.

In response to these trends, retailers spent some £710 million on in-store crime prevention in 2004. So what is available to the off-licence proprietor and manager in the way of intelligent, value-added security systems?

Unmonitored, external "burglar" alarms have become insufficient because of the problem of false alarms, which has resulted in police response to "nuisance" alarms being cut back. Police forces now require some element of confirmation that an alarm is genuine, either from someone who can actually see that it is, or from systems that comply to electronic confirmation standards (for example, two detectors being activated in sequence on entry to a premises).

An increasingly popular way of providing such confirmation is through a remote video monitoring service. This comprises

can be a verbal warning to the intruders (most systems are fitted with audio links) or the summoning of security patrols or the police.

Until recently, the use of remote monitoring has been limited by the low bandwidth and relative expense of dial-up systems and ISDN connections. But now the increasing availability of low-cost broadband means this option is feasible, even on a relatively small budget.

Some businesses have taken advantage of this sort of technology. Branches assessed to be at highest risk have been fitted with digital video recorders. Being digital, recordings are made directly onto a built-in hard disk, so there is no need to use or change tapes. They can be instantly accessed by various criteria, such as date and time or type of incident or alarm. Images are recorded on site, but can also be viewed by the monitoring centre. Thresher has installed this type of system in a number of its outlets.

Inevitably, as systems such as these become more dependent on computer networks, IT managers are becoming part of the security specification and operational process. This in turn means that security systems can be "justified" beyond security and loss prevention reasons. Access to security systems over company networks opens up a host of new possibilities, including monitoring of footfall



Remote video monitoring services keep an eye on premises, day and night

AVAILABILITY OF LOW-COST BROADBAND MEANS REMOTE MONITORING IS FEASIBLE

a mix of alarm detectors and CCTV cameras. During trading hours, the cameras can record activity for any post-incident analysis and evidence. If an incident occurs, an alarm can be sent to a remote video monitoring centre, where staff can access the cameras and provide the appropriate back-up, including calling the police.

Outside trading hours, any intruder detector that is activated automatically alerts the monitoring centre. There, staff can access images from the in-store cameras in order to assess the situation and provide the appropriate response. This

and merchandising by regional or head offices, and health and safety compliance. Easy access to video also means that customer complaints or claims – whether genuine or spurious – can be dealt with efficiently.

Point of sale

Many digital video systems now come with their own EPOS-enabled software, or are compatible with third party software. This means that video images can be readily linked to individual till transactions, and the system can be programmed to automatically flag up voids, no sales, or

those over a certain value. As the EPOS data is automatically tagged to each frame of video, images can be searched and reviewed by type of transaction. The combination of video and till information becomes a very powerful tool for reducing shrinkage.

Another way of reducing losses is by employing electronic article surveillance (EAS) with detector pedestals usually placed near exits. But this technology is now moving on, and is often integrated with CCTV or other monitoring devices, which again can be accessed remotely from home or from head office. One of the hurdles to the wholesale adoption of these measures is the difficulty or cost of applying tags in-store, so there is some pressure on suppliers to incorporate tags into products at source.

Much work has also been done on the development of "intelligent tagging", otherwise known as chipping of goods. The Home Office has studied various technologies over the past few years, including a pilot scheme with Allied Domecq, where bottles of whisky were tagged to individ-

ual cases and pallets. To date, this has concentrated the problem of duty fraud and theft in transit, but intelligent tagging could have benefits at the end of the supply chain too, in terms of security tagging, stock control and information, and even customer buying patterns.

Although much of the focus of retail security is inevitably on loss prevention, many of these systems can help play a part in a safer retail environment, as they can be readily integrated with personal attack alarms. The low-cost broadband system (similar to Thresher) has this feature and the supplier of the technology, Bell Security, has also undertaken a trial with Asda as part of the company's "Safe Place to Work and Shop" project.

And the results? Six months after trial in one retailer, there was no working time lost from assault or stress, turnover had increased 30 per cent, and there had been a marked reduction in the use of fraudulent cards.

● Ron Alalouff is editor of Platform, the magazine for security, technology and integration. www.platform-security.com