

Reprinted from

HARTFORD BUSINESS JOURNAL

August 5, 2002

EJOURNAL

For 30 years, Sonitrol has ear to ground

By Diane Weaver Dunne

Hartford's police and fire departments are considering the installation of an automated computer program to collect fines for false security alarms, which bodes well for firms like Sonitrol of Hartford that boast low false alarm rates.

Sonitrol credits its live, 24-hour audio surveillance along with technological advancements in computer software for cutting false alarm rates to half those of most security firms.

Since its 1972 founding in Hartford, Sonitrol claims it has helped police catch 2,000 burglars.

"Of 50 burglar alarm activations, I get an average of 20 to 25 where something actually happened," said Claude Ruel, Sonitrol's central station manager. Those statistics are well below the 98 percent national average for false alarms reported by most security systems, Ruel said.

These rates are important locally. During the first six months of this year Hartford police responded to nearly 6,000 false alarms, said police spokeswoman Sgt. Maura Hammick. Most of those were false, consistent with the national average for false alarms.

False alarms are a huge drain on any police department — especially an understaffed one like Hartford's, Hammick said. She hopes once the city institutes a new fine collection system for false alarms, those additional funds will offset that drain. Hartford's ordinance stipulates business owners and residents be fined \$25 upon their third false alarm within 12 months. The amount increases up to \$90 for subsequent occurrences.

Said Ruel of Sonitrol, "[Police] are at their wits end. They need to hire more people just to respond to the alarms. But when you start billing people for false alarms, it could cost more than their system costs and they will start looking more for a verification alarm system that will really cut down on their false alarms."

Sonitrol credits its lower false-alarm rate to its audio technology. Sonitrol installs microphones in strategic locations throughout its customers' buildings in addition to traditional security equipment.



PHOTO/COURTESY SONITROL

Operators stationed in Sonitrol's Constitution Plaza headquarters monitor equipment that is listening to some of the company's 12,000 clients. The ability to analyze noises, either by computer or human ear, results in fewer false alarm calls.

During an interview at Sonitrol, audiotapes of a few police apprehensions were played, demonstrating how the system operates. Gary LaPlant, Sonitrol's COO, Chris Goff, senior security consultant and Ruel enthusiastically explained how Sonitrol's system allows their security operators to listen to break-ins as they happen.

"[Our technicians] hear everything. We even hear [the burglars'] names when they call out to each other," LaPlant said. This audio capacity enables a safer environment for the police department because operators inform the officers if the burglars are still in the building.

Goff explained cutting-edge audio technology, advanced computer software and experienced security operators are key to the successes. Sounds from in or outside the building are amplified clearly and sent to a computer system, which detects unusual sounds and then alerts the operator. The computer records and plays back the sounds to the operator. The operator then listens to the sounds as they occur in the building. Human intelligence, experience and training all come into play and the technician makes the decision to call or not call the police. Sonitrol's system allows operators to verify to police what they hear, whether it be voices or glass breaking.

Ruel recalls that not all of their most memorable "catches" involved burglars. In 1978, they were the first to notify police the Civic Center coliseum roof caved in. They also alerted authorities to a dripping water pipe in the ceiling of the Hartford Public Library. It was a tinny sound authorities soon discovered was a water pipe leaking onto the Colt gun collection.

Sonitrol can add video cameras for visual verification.

"One thing that I have found that separates Sonitrol from other security companies is that they are local," said Kendall Jackson, director of the Middletown Public Schools, who has dealt with Sonitrol as a customer for 16 years.

Because Sonitrol has a low turnover rate, its employees' knowledge and experience reduces false alarm rates.

"It's a good judgement thing on when to call or not to call," he said, whether it is the police or the building supervisors.

"That is something I really appreciate," he said. "The service side of it — (Goff is his contact there) — anything I need, I make the phone call and they bend over backwards. It's the total package."

Scott St. Germain, controller for Golfers Warehouse in the South Meadows, cites Goff and Sonitrol's customer service.

"We had an issue here and Chris was in my store at 7:30 the next morning. That is customer service to the 'nth' degree. He spent more time in our store than the police," St. Germain said.

Audio monitoring is a valuable tool in the security world, he said. "You can hear them jimmy the door. They hear it all. It gives us a little more time [to alert police]. "In security world, you do have a lot of fake alarms. Sonitrol, with their ears, cuts that down. You are hearing people, not the wind." ■

Sonitrol is located in Constitution Plaza and will be celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Its 88 employees serve Sonitrol's 12,000 security customers and 2,000 telecommunications customers. Sonitrol installs telephones and telephone systems and has a \$1 million retail spare parts warehouse at Constitution Plaza for its security and phones operations.