



## Caught on Camera

*Self storage owners have rights and responsibilities with video surveillance.*

*By Laura Williams-Tracy*

A spate of hidden video camera footage in the news showing people behaving badly has put a technology in the spotlight that is widely used in self storage to prevent and document crime.

In recent months, Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice saw his professional football career derailed by a video of him striking his then-fiancé in an Atlantic City hotel. The CEO of a stadium concessions company lost his job after being seen on video surveillance repeatedly kicking a friend's puppy in the elevator of a condo tower.

What people do when they think they are out of the public's view can be shocking and sometimes criminal. For storage owners, video can provide crucial evidence of a break-in or other on-site criminal activity. And the mere presence of cameras in the office and along main hallways can give tenants a sense of the operator's commitment to keeping their belongings safe.

Video remains a valuable tool. Just ask Corey Long, owner of CJ Long Contractors in Elkton, Maryland, who installs video surveillance systems in self storage facilities along the East Coast, including for some large publicly traded storage companies.

One large storage operator suffered a break-in and called Long the next day to install cameras. Just a few days later, the thief returned and was caught on camera, giving police the ability to make a positive identification.

"In my opinion, the cameras serve the purpose of making customers feel safe, and when something happens, 50 percent of the time we can get an image from the cameras that's useful," Long said.

John Fogg, general manager of Sentinel Systems Corp. in Littleton, Colorado, which sells security systems for self storage—including access controls for doors and gates as well as security cameras—said the industry is more

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susceptible to break-ins than ever, in part because of the high profile it enjoys thanks to reality TV shows like *Storage Wars*.

“That show has publicized what self storage is all about,” Fogg said. “Unfortunately on that show, every unit is full of a bunch of treasures when they open it. In reality, nine times out of 10 it’s not treasures, just someone’s boxes full of clothes.”

The threat of break-ins increases demand for security measures, and security cameras give owners eyes throughout the facility and a record of what happened. But making video surveillance systems pay off requires smart placement of cameras, an occasional investment in current technology and an understanding of the owner’s rights and responsibilities when recording activity in common spaces in a self storage facility.

### **Video’s Value**

There’s no doubt that customers like to see evidence of video camera security in the front office, and that’s one of the primary locations for video cameras, experts say.

“You should have a camera in the office where customers can see it,” said Jon Loftin, vice president of business development for PTI Systems in Scottsdale, Arizona. “It’s marketing the security of your facility to potential customers.”

Office cameras are also valuable to catch employees potentially embezzling money or outside visitors threatening office staff.

“I’ve been working in the security industry for 10 years, and there is no such thing as a fool-proof security system,” said Steve Weinstein, business development consultant for QuikStor Security & Software in Van Nuys, California. “Video surveillance systems are there to keep honest people honest. The way that you turn a reactive system into a proactive system is having it be a visual deterrent. A lot of people think they want hidden cameras, but my point of view is that I want the camera to be a big visual deterrent that will be seen.”

Along with the front office, another critical location is the entrance and exit gates to the facility. A covert, pinhole camera hidden in the entrance keypad also provides valuable video footage of who entered and exited the facility. A wide-angle camera at the entrance or exit can capture an image of the license plates of vehicles coming and going, helping to provide potentially valuable information if a crime occurs. For after-hours, infrared cameras capture images even in the dark.

### **Ensuring Quality**

Video surveillance is rapidly improving, and storage owners should make sure their technology is adequate to deliver a high-quality image that can aid in identifying the perpetrators of a crime. Most storage owners have moved away from antiquated VHS tapes and now record video using a digital video recorder, which records images to a computer hard drive.

“Digital video surveillance is a fast-paced technology sector,” Weinstein said. “There’s always something new coming out.”

Fogg says the technology is getting better, smaller and more precise, and in some cases, less expensive.

Newer cameras offer far better image resolution than cameras sold just a few years ago. Owners who are motivated to buy the least expensive video cameras should consider how important it might be to be able to discern a clear image of the face of someone breaking into a storage facility, Weinstein said. High-resolution cameras also make it possible to zoom-in and get a clear read on the license plate of a suspicious vehicle leaving the facility.

The newest technology available to the storage industry is IP cameras, which offer benefits over traditional analog cameras. IP cameras work on a standardized networking protocol for computers and wireless routers, which allows cameras to function as their own network node and allow for higher data transmission rates, allowing for higher-quality images.

Long said many of the systems he sees at storage facilities are 10 years old or more, and the resolution of the videos rendered isn’t good enough to see a face or a car make and model or license plate. He added that storage owners also need to make sure their system, however old it may be, remains in working order. It’s also possible to upgrade the quality of cameras in key locations without upgrading the entire video system.

“I would recommend that once a month someone go in and make sure they can pull up video from the previous month,” Long said.

For video surveillance to be truly helpful after an event, experts say operators should keep at least 30 days of recordings before over-writing the recording with new footage. Others say even more of a backlog of video footage can be helpful.

Owners should also ensure that the systems they’ve invested in are in working order, otherwise their investment is moot.

“A large portion of storage owners purchase a video system and then forget about it,” said Weinstein. “But storage owners are selling the image of security to customers when they walk in the door. That’s what self storage is all about.”

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Fogg agrees.

"I hear about more break-ins, even though it's still not a lot," Fogg said. "Overall it's still a fairly safe and secure business."

### Rights and Responsibilities

When security is breached, who is responsible for the video?

Carlos Kaslow, general counsel for the Self Storage Association, said while laws vary in states on recording audio conversations, there's practically no regulation of silent video, except in bathrooms or dressing rooms, which isn't typically relevant to storage.

So, if that video recording picks up footage of a crime and police are interested in that video, Kaslow said owners should remember that the video is the property of the storage owner.

"An owner can turn over voluntarily to the police anything they want, but they are not compelled to," Kaslow said. However, if the police have probable cause to believe the video has information of value to the investigation of a crime, they can get a subpoena or a search warrant to gain access to the video.

On the flip side, Kaslow said if a storage owner happens to notice something strange on a video, but there's little context of what's going on between parties because the video lacks sound, it's not the owner's responsibility to bring it to the attention of police.

"It's not up to self storage operators to be crime fighters. It's up to them to cooperate with the police and if there's an investigation, absolutely make the video available," Kaslow said. "You should be responsive and be a good citizen. You are not Captain America."

Likewise, if a storage owner is involved in an insurance claim and has video evidence, Kaslow said owners would want to voluntarily provide that video evidence. "You have a duty to cooperate when dealing with liability claims," Kaslow said. "The advantage of working with the insurance company is they will make a determination of how that video might be given out to requests from the attorney representing the third party, so you can let the insurance company handle that."

If a third party requests the video, Kaslow said owners can refuse to turn over the video. But if that third party obtains a court order to retrieve the video, storage owners must comply with the court order.

"The one thing about video is that it is what it is. There's no embellishment. It shows exactly what happened," Kaslow said. "It's probably better than anyone who has an interest in what occurred and their recollection of events." ❖