

**Bar owner
calls time
on handbag
snatchers**



Simon Gordon's customers suffered regular bag thefts before he invented Facewatch, which is being trialled by chains such as Pret A Manger

Hi-tech assault on bag thieves

Matthew Goodman

THE couple kissing in the grainy black-and-white footage are oblivious to the crime about to take place.

As they canoodle in a dark corner of Gordon's, a popular London wine bar, they fail to see the hand reaching behind them, skilfully lifting the woman's handbag from the table.

Police officers who have watched the few seconds of footage also struggle to spot the theft taking place. Simon Gordon, owner of the bar near Charing Cross station where the crime took place, has shown the CCTV clip to 200 police, including some of the country's most senior officers. He promises them dinner if they can spot the snatch — and has had to fork out for only a handful of meals. "Very few of them see it," he said.

Gordon carries the footage on his laptop as an advert for his high-tech scheme to fight crime. Tired of having to deal with regular thefts from the wine bar, he decided to do something about it.

He created Facewatch, a computer system that emails snippets of crimes caught on CCTV direct to the police, saving them the bother of having to wade through hours of footage — most incidents are easier to spot than the one in the low-birds clip.

It is a simple idea, but one with profound ramifications. A tie-up with Crime-stoppers will soon bring a national system where the public can see CCTV images of local offenders the police want to identify by tapping their postcode into an app.

National retailers such as Pret A Manger and Starbucks have been testing Facewatch and are impressed. Starbucks, which has the software in five outlets, said: "Our customers want to relax without the fear of crime, and this initiative is helping us cut thefts and make life tougher for criminals."

Clive Schlee at Pret A Manger said: "Pret was one of the early adopters of the Facewatch system, more than a year ago. We quickly recognised that it would

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>> Continued from page 1 help us create a safer environment for customers and staff."

Gordon hopes to add more names. He is in advanced talks with the National Federation of Retail Newsagents to persuade its 16,500 members to install the system and he is also trying to get some of the big supermarket chains on board.

The idea was born out of Gordon's frustration at the level of bag thefts in his bar. He had swapped a career in insurance for the bar trade and found he was a natural, with sales trebling at the business he took over from his late father. However, for several years he had little impact on the level of thefts. "We were trying to provide a fantastic time for people and it was so upsetting when they had stuff stolen," he said.

At first, Gordon tried to deal with the problem by pinning up posters warning customers to keep an eye on their belongings. Then he asked the staff to wear T-shirts emblazoned with the same advice.

Later, Gordon invested £30,000 on upgrading the bar's CCTV system, but it did not seem to help much because it was difficult getting the relevant images to the police. Sometimes, officers would make three separate visits to pick up one tape; at other times, none came at all. And even if officers did get their hands on the footage, there was no guarantee they would find the relevant portion of film.

The brainwave came in the summer of 2009. The solution, he realised, would be to find a way of delivering the edited, relevant piece of CCTV footage to the police, rather than giving them hours of material to wade through.

Gordon worked with a small group of friends, including a former airline pilot and a security expert, as well as a former colleague from Skandia, the insurer. The group developed the software with encouragement from the police, who thought the idea had merit.

It was initially hoped that the police might contribute to the development costs, but it soon became apparent that squeezing money out of the public sector could take years.

It was quicker to fund the enterprise privately, a decision made easier with the police hinting that they would be prepared to work with a new system if it could deliver on its promise. By November 2010, and with £600,000 of Gordon's cash invested in the project, Facewatch was ready to launch.

Early guinea pigs included London's National Gallery, which used it to deal with visitors having their bags stolen rather than to combat art thieves, and a collection of West End pubs. Since its debut, trials have been extended to Cheshire.

Like most good ideas, Facewatch is a simple concept. If a customer has their bag stolen, they can report it to a member of staff, who is able quickly to

email the relevant clip, often lasting just a few seconds, directly to the police. At the same time, the system is able to create a witness statement, and can link up with the credit card protection scheme to put a block on any stolen plastic.

In short, Facewatch is designed to streamline the process of reporting crimes that appear to be low down the police's priority list, but which still cause serious disruption to victims.

Traditionally, if a customer suffered a bag theft, they would have to visit a police station to report it, and the officers might take a day or two to visit the scene of the crime to collect the CCTV footage. They would then have to spend several hours wading through the images in the hope of finding the crime captured on film.

Facewatch cuts through all that, giving the police useable data much faster and making it more likely that the perpetrators will be caught. Images of a suspected offender can be circulated to officers in the area and to bars nearby.

It seems to work. Gordon claims that since adopting the

argues is relatively low given the impact it can have.

The system can be expanded to reflect the needs of different types of customer. For example, the supermarkets are likely to be attracted to a new function that will allow them to keep an eye out for personal injury fraudsters. Facewatch will be able to home in on CCTV footage of shoppers who make dodgy insurance claims after faking a fall in the aisles.

"Take theft, whether by customers or staff," said Gordon. "That typically represents about 1.5% of a big retailer's turnover. If everyone was using Facewatch ... well, it's a no-brainer."

Hotels, too, are on his list of possible customers, while there is also that forthcoming tie-up with Crimestoppers.

The latter, especially, seems designed to answer one of Gordon's complaints. "I don't think the public do enough to help the police. They throw stuff at them and expect them to sort it out," he said.

It is easy to be swept along by Gordon's enthusiasm, but he has won over the police too, as



GET THE THIEF, BUT TO STAMP OUT LOW-LEVEL CRIME

well as several leading businesses and even Big Brother Watch, the privacy group that has complained about the prevalence of CCTV.

Detective chief inspector Mick Neville of the Metropolitan Police, is a fan, saying that it is "saving much police time and enabling officers to focus on identifying the criminal and making a quick arrest".

Gordon is at pains to emphasise that the point of Facewatch is not simply to vilify criminals and troublemakers.

He has suffered from depression, and said he can see how problems in life can set people on a path to trouble. If and when Facewatch begins making a profit, he would like to set up a fund to help the more unfortunate members of society.

"I know how bad things can get and how difficult it can be," Gordon said, before pointing to a CCTV image on his laptop of a thief leaving a bar with several bags in his hand.

"I'm not out to get him. All I am doing is trying to stamp out low-level crime — that's the biggest criminal activity we have in this country."