

Web Alarms, Mobile Alerts Aim to Make You Safer

From emergency message networks that can reach 100,000 people within minutes to alarm systems that allow you to monitor your home over the Web, new technologies are aiming to make U.S. consumers feel safer.

While institutions such as immigration services, banks and credit card companies continue to improve their systems to prevent fraud or theft, in many cases homeowners and their communities haven't kept pace.

That's starting to change - but, unfortunately, it often takes a major disaster or tragedy to get people thinking about how to better protect themselves and their families.

Many new security technologies have sprouted as a result of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.

The deadly rampage by a lone gunman that claimed 32 lives at Virginia Tech university last month brought renewed attention to a wave of companies offering the latest technology to keep people informed, and hopefully safe.

"It's probably one of the most backward industries in the United States today," said Vincent Tedesco, chief executive of Total Computer Group (TCG), referring to security technologies for identifying criminals. His company builds software applications for law enforcement agencies.

TCG is trying to remedy the situation with software that helps give police departments rapid access to crime records via a handheld-device linked to a Microsoft-supported database.

TCG's system could clue-in police, in the course of a routine identity check, whether they are dealing with someone who has a criminal record.

"Mohammed Atta was pulled over (while driving) in Florida and he had no license," Tedesco said, referring to one of the September 11 suicide plane hijackers. "If that officer had this product he would have known this guy was on the FBI terrorist list."

In the last few months alone, TCG has reached deals with 58 police departments in Pennsylvania and 20 new departments in New York state. The company is also in talks with authorities in the United Kingdom and with the Sultan of Brunei.

Press '2' for Fire, '3' for Bake Sale

The Virginia Tech tragedy has spawned interest in ways to alert large groups of people of an unfolding crisis, whether by phone, text message or email.

"Everyone is becoming much more aware that there's technology out there in a situation where you want to get an urgent message out," said Mike Taylor, vice president of marketing for Honeywell Building Solutions.

"Until you have a crisis, the sense of urgency around doing something with it just isn't there," he said.

Honeywell recently upgraded a system used by schools to meet the needs of universities in alerting students to potential danger. The Instant Alert Plus technology can make 100,000 30-second phone calls and send 125,000 text messages within 15 minutes.

While that may be more than enough to cover a campus from students to faculty, employees and parents, the system could eventually cover much larger communities or entire cities.

"The good thing is this a very scalable system," said Taylor. "I'm sure we could add capacity if we had the need to do one million (alerts) in 15 minutes."

Such mass communication methods can be used for anything from notifying chemical plant employees of a leak to mundane matters like informing parents about a school meeting.

"In a Michigan school district, it was used to make parents aware that a man was posing as a policeman with a badge and walking up to students and asking to rifle through their schoolbags," Taylor said.

InGrid, a company that has developed a Web-accessible home security system, is mindful of the dual nature of systems meant to warn and communicate at the same time.

The company's technology is based on wireless sensors placed at many points inside a home that are linked to both a handheld device and a password-protected Web site.

The sensors provide real-time information not only on whether the house is safe from burglars, but whether children, parents or babysitters have entered the premises using their passcodes.

A newer application being developed by the company could help customers keep tabs on elderly parents from work or another location, hooking up to a medicine cabinet to make sure they are properly cared for.

"Once we have a system in the house, it provides a very efficient platform for collecting data of all sorts," said InGrid founder and Chief Executive Louis Stilp. "If your parents are living independently at home and no one has opened the refrigerator door today until 2 p.m., there might be a problem."

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