

Britain's Facewatch Tool Puts Crime Reporting in Citizens' Hands



December 6, 2012 By [Hilton Collins](#)

Simon Gordon had a tough time protecting his livelihood at the turn of the decade. His business, Gordon's Wine Bar in London, experienced an alarming amount of theft that threatened its popularity with customers.

Shoplifting, pick-pocketing and other thefts plagued businesses in multiple industries at the time. In 2010, \$1.7 billion worth of goods were stolen from retailers in the United Kingdom, and at one point, Gordon's Wine Bar was the scene of 80 handbag thefts a year.

"It's really bad customer service to have your customers come and their bag's stolen or whatever," Gordon said.



Even closed circuit television didn't curb the crime that occurred in and around Gordon's Wine Bar in London. But

Tweet

7

4



Established in 1890 by vintner

Angus Gordon, the wine bar is a piece of London history and Simon's legacy. His father Luis Gordon (who's unrelated to Angus), bought the bar in the 1970s, and later passed the business on to Simon.

But the younger Gordon had a tough time maintaining a safe environment for customers, even with closed circuit television (CCTV) units installed. Police don't usually come to crime scenes for

after deploying the Facewatch tool, 80 bag thefts per year decreased to 24 in the first year. *Photo by Chris Creegan*

low-level crime, and when officers obtain recordings of incidents caught on camera, sifting through footage is often

time-consuming.

It's even worse when footage from multiple cameras is involved. "They will pick up the disc, take it back to the police station, and try to look for an hour of footage from maybe up to 16 different cameras," Gordon said. "Obviously that's extremely inefficient."

To rectify the problem, Gordon launched Facewatch in fall 2010. Today the startup offers businesses and consumers free technical crime reporting tools of two types. The first feature developed was an online module for businesses to upload CCTV footage of crimes that occurred on their premises and input witness statements before sending the evidence directly to the police. The second, and most recent, is a native app on mobile devices that lets consumers search for images of suspects, and once they identify a culprit, file a police report from their phone or tablet.

After Facewatch's debut, thefts at Gordon's Wine Bar eventually dropped from 80 bag thefts per year down to roughly two a month. "There's a very powerful networking effect, which is basically people working together to stop crime," Gordon said. "It stops the whole thing from becoming out of hand."

Crime Reporting Mechanics

The Web-based system deployed in Facewatch's first phase, which is still used today, overhauls the crime reporting process on business premises. If someone robs a business or customer, the tool allows both types of victims to join forces and notify the police without visiting the station.



50

The number
of people
charged with a
crime in 2012
from Facewatch
ID identifications.

Once a victimized customer notifies staff of a crime, the staff member takes down his or her statement and uploads still and moving CCTV footage of the incident to Facewatch's website, where it's received by police. The idea is that the workers and customers will find and deliver the right footage quickly and easily because they're the ones who experienced the incident.

Detective Chief Inspector Mick Neville of London's Metropolitan Police Service — who helped Gordon design Facewatch — thinks the technology is a boon to police officers who don't have the time or means to respond to every incident.

"The police do not have the resources to gather hours of CCTV for minor crime and view it and then try to find the suspect in a crowded bar," Neville said. "If victims see the footage, they will quickly pick themselves out and they can see when their bag is stolen."

Facewatch also helps victims move on after a crime has occurred. The system generates a crime reference number, which can be used for insurance claims, and victims can cancel their credit cards right after the theft.

"You can get back to at least enjoying your evening, because you know you've done everything you possibly can," Gordon said.

According to Neville, arrests are likelier to occur when Facewatch is used with CCTV footage. In some cases, he said, crimes are four times as likely to be solved when the system is used.

In fact, Facewatch has become popular with London businesses. In March, the National Federation of Retail Newsagents announced a three-year partnership with Facewatch that linked more than 16,500 businesses to the system. The media outlet, Info4Security, called the partnership Britain's largest crime reduction initiative ever.

The company's second major product, the Facewatch ID app for Android and Apple iOS, went live this summer, taking crime reporting mobile. Users enter a postal code, and the app presents them with images of suspects associated with the area. Users can input information about a person they recognize, including the suspect's name and address, and forward the data to police. Police supply Facewatch with images that populate the app, and it was only compatible with users in the London and Surrey postal codes as of October.

The app's popularity mirrors that of its sister product. Gordon's unsure of exact numbers but estimates that Facewatch ID experienced about 100,000 downloads within three weeks of its launch. Neville said the app's led to at least 50 people being charged in 2012, thanks to citizen identifications.

A Broad Horizon

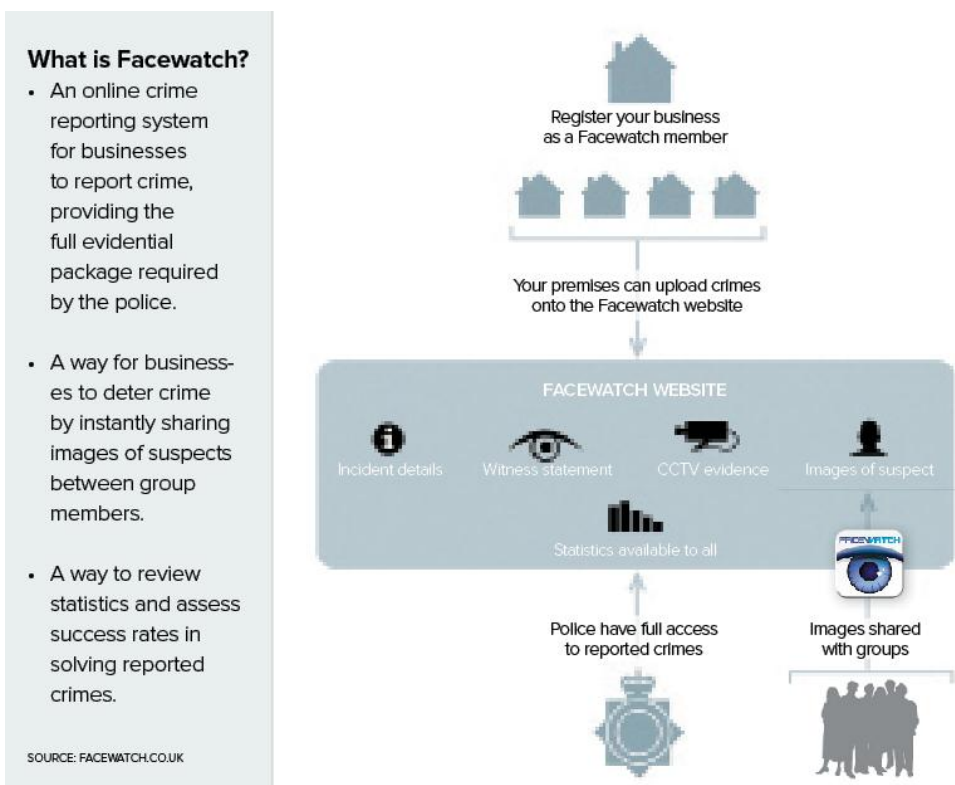
Facewatch will likely spread beyond Britain. Gordon is targeting the U.S. market, and he spoke with interested American law enforcement representatives at a 2012 International Association of Chiefs of Police conference. Between these potential deals and the existing National Federation of Retail Newsagents partnership, Facewatch may grow considerably in the near future.

Gordon works diligently to network and expand Facewatch's reach. "That's my whole life now," he said. "I'm just doing it all the time."

He's come a long way since Facewatch's 2010 launch. The system, funded by business sponsors through the Facewatch & Partners nonprofit, is written in the open source application framework Ruby on Rails, and the application programming interface (API) allows people to write apps for it. Gordon plans for his company to receive a portion of the profits when developers generate revenue from apps they create from Facewatch's platform.

Gordon expects that police departments and security guard companies will develop products with his technology. And he's confident others will follow suit.

"It's an open platform with API that will enable people to write very clever apps and things for it that we couldn't possibly think of," Gordon said.



You may use or reference this story with attribution and a link to <http://www.govtech.com/security/Britains-Facewatch-Tool-Puts-Crime-Reporting-in-Citizens-Hands.html>



| [More](#)

Comments

Add Your Comment

Name *

Email

Comment *

You are solely responsible for the content of your comments. We reserve the right to remove comments that are considered profane, vulgar, obscene, factually inaccurate, off-topic, or considered a personal attack.

Latest From Security

[RSA 2013: How Bad Will Cyber War Become?](#)

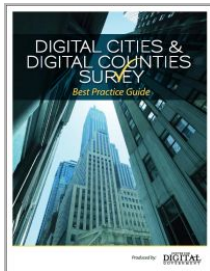
[Colorado Embraces New IT Security Philosophy](#)

[RSA 2013: Hackers Await Government's Embrace of Mobile Payments](#)

[Are Web Apps Highly Susceptible to Attack?](#)

[RSA 2013: Is Obama's Executive Order on Cybersecurity Too Vague?](#)

GovTech Papers and Case Studies [View Library](#)



Digital Cities & Digital Counties Survey: Best Practice Guide



The Future of Transportation Studies: A Comparative Review



Top 10 Organizational Trends You Can't Afford to Ignore



Selecting and Sustaining IT Investments in Government: A Guide to Effective Strategies