

A restaurant with a view

Digital solutions give operators anytime viewing access to their restaurants

By Ed Rubinstein

The old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words holds very true for foodservice operators, especially in a post-9/11 era of heightened security concerns. Ensuring the safety of guests and employees is the chief reason that operators instal digital video systems, which give owners and managers anytime, anywhere viewing via low-cost Internet connections and Web browsers.

Of course, there are other reasons to install the systems. Those reasons can range from detecting and deterring employee theft, promoting unit-level consistency and even reducing the risks of legal claims to using them as part of an operator's employee-training arsenal. Many prominent and nationwide casual chains use video surveillance systems, but budding multiunit concepts and single-unit operators also are realizing substantial benefits, even though some may call the systems too intrusive.



Each Mediterranean-inspired Pasha's location has seven to eight surveillance cameras.

front and back doors, the register and in the back-of-the-house prep area.

"Many times I work from home, which means that I don't have to be in the store 24 hours a day," he added.

"Sure, my motivation was to deter theft and make sure that employees are as productive as possible. But safety was an even bigger reason," contended Bobby Moshiri, who for the past 11 years has operated a Subway sandwich shop on Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica, Calif.

A few years ago, and after several incidents that included an armed robbery, Moshiri installed a digital monitoring system from DTT Surveillance, a setup that includes DSL connections in the store and in Moshiri's home, which allow him to view any or all of four cameras, placed at the



Standard features from most system providers allow operators to split their screens in quadrants, to create digitally compressed backups and to access three- to four-week histories of video — a feat that used to represent stockpiles of VHS tapes when used in conjunction with analog-based closed-circuit television (CCTV) setups. Some studies have shown that digital-video-recording technologies generate a return on investment in nearly half the time of tape-based systems.

Some state-of-the-art wares can even link the digital feeds with the transaction logs in the point-of-sale system, which allows operators to precisely match the bill amounts rung up on the registers to the actual videos.

"In the restaurant business whatever you measure is what you are going to improve, and you'll have less headaches, too," stated Nicholas Cortes, president and chief financial officer of the three-unit, Mediterranean-inspired Pasha's of Miami, whose fare includes falafel, kababs, gyros and wraps.

Cortes, whose idea for Pasha's started as a Harvard Business School class project in 1996, uses a digitally delivered video system from Privid Eye as a training tool to gauge all steps from order taking to order delivery, in addition to using it for security and pilferage reasons.

Each Pasha's unit has seven to eight cameras. Via a fractional T-1 line the pcAnywhere communications software, Cortes and his store managers can view any or all of the cameras from any of the three units.

"It's not only convenient but if there is any issue that needs to be resolved we often do so with the video," Cortes said.

He recalled one instance when a guest said he inadvertently left his change on the counter but came back 30 minutes after the initial visit. "We took a look on the video and, sure enough, six transactions later, the cashier saw the money on the counter and simply put it in the register," he said. "There was a happy customer. Not just because of the meal but because of the video system."

And because of today's litigious society, video systems can even be an asset when it comes to validating an incident, some of which can leave operators exposed to lawsuits. "There are a lot of frivolous lawsuits and such systems can assess whether what someone claims is or is not the truth," Cortes added.