

Minding your business

Cameras, Internet let owners look in

By Caroline Lynch

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Tamme Tannehill believes owners must be in their stores and be involved to do a good job.

Her philosophy posed a problem last year when she and her husband, who live in Louisville and have one coffee shop here, opened a second Lexington location of their franchise, The Coffee Beanery.

The solution was a technology barely affordable to small-business owners five years ago: real-time video surveillance.

Cameras in both of the Tannehills' Lexington stores transmit live video to her laptop via high-speed Internet. One of the stores, in Fayette Mall, has been open for six years.

"I can literally be sitting in my pajamas at home, drinking my coffee and watching what's going on in the store," Tannehill said.

As Internet access and video-surveillance technology get better and cheaper, businesses are trying out the benefits.

Rick Brinker, owner of RCI, a Louisville company that sells the systems, said businesses use them to monitor employees, protect themselves from lawsuits, catch thieves or even let clients look in on their work.



PHOTOS BY MARY ANN GERTH, THE C-J
Coffee Beanery owner Tamme Tannehill watched one of her Lexington stores via computer in her home office last week. Besides monitoring for theft, Tannehill said she wants to use her surveillance system to make sure shops are stocked and properly staffed.



Tannehill paid \$8,000 last year to outfit two Lexington stores with four cameras each. The system's software lets her see several views of each store. She said the devices will pay for themselves because they've made the stores more efficient and profitable.

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Jacqueline Unseld, owner of Unseld Child Care & Development Centers, recently bought a surveillance system for her newest child-care center, which is expected to open today at 2406 W. Broadway.

The purpose is to let parents log on and see their child.

Unseld got the idea from the Texas day care her daughter used for her granddaughter. That day care's system allowed parents who had a code to go online and see their child.

"I thought, oh gosh, I have to have one of those," Unseld said.

Tannehill uses her system to keep an eye on employees.

Last week, sitting at a Coffee Beanery table in her Oxmoor Center location, Tannehill used a laptop computer to call up the Web site that shows the Lexington stores.

The screen popped up four square, coaster-size images showing the registers, stock room and waiting area in her store at The Shops at Lexington Center, near Rupp Arena. An employee stood at the counter, making a drink.

Tannehill, who paid \$8,000 last year to outfit the two Lexington stores with four cameras each, said the devices will pay for themselves because they've made the stores more efficient and profitable.

Brinker said a basic system, with about four cameras that zoom, can go for under \$5,000. More complex systems with a dozen or more cameras run \$17,000 to \$25,000.

The technology of today's systems wasn't widely available five years ago, he said. With a dial-up Internet connection, images are choppy and slow, making real-time viewing almost impossible. Broadband has alleviated that problem.

Tannehill looked into video surveillance back then, when she had to prosecute an employee for theft, but the price tag of \$10,000 per store was too high.

Besides monitoring for theft, Tannehill said she also wants to use the system to make sure shops are stocked, cleaned and properly staffed. She has up to 65 employees during her peak season, many of them just out of high school or in college, and she deals with high turnover.

She logged on once and saw a line to the door of her location near Rupp Arena. Her employee was making drinks slowly.

She called the employee.

"I said, 'Why don't you try to move that line a little faster, I've seen a person or two walk away.'"

Tannehill said she rarely catches serious offenses, though she did bust an employee closing 10 minutes early. She makes no apologies for her surveillance system or management style. She said she's upfront with employees about the cameras and hasn't had complaints.

Travis Swinford, 20, an employee at The Coffee Beanery in Lexington's Fayette Mall, said he thinks the cameras are a good idea because Tannehill can't be in the store daily. Though she has never reprimanded him for anything she saw on screen, he knows she sees a lot.

"I do know she's watching me when she does call, because of what she says," he said.

Lewis Maltby, president of the nonprofit National Workrights Institute in Princeton, N.J., suggests that employers find other ways to monitor employee performance but says it's legal to put cameras in pretty much anywhere except for bathrooms or locker rooms.

"Video cameras make more sense as a security device than as an employee-monitoring system," he said.

Los Angeles business-security expert Chris McGoey, who owns McGoey Security Consulting, has other reasons for opposing video surveillance as a way to monitor employees and catch theft.

He said good managers, internal checks and goals and standards for employees can do the same thing for less money.

Plus, he finds many business owners who buy the expensive systems find they don't want to sit around and watch them all day. Then, they're useless.

"It could work," he said of the systems. "But ... it takes so much time and there are so many other ways to do the same thing."

For her part, Tannehill, who watches her cameras through most of the work day, said the benefits are tangible.

In the first month at her new Lexington store, labor costs ate up 35 percent of the revenue, Tannehill said. By watching online, she has chiseled that number to 23 percent by sending employees home when business is slow.

Brinker, who has sold seven systems this year to Kentucky clients, including Rocky Rococo Pizza and Pasta in 4th Street Live, expects the market for real-time surveillance to grow. He can see uses for small businesses, including stores, gas stations and day-care centers, as well as city governments wanting to monitor streets and police departments who need them at crime scenes.

"The nice thing about video cameras is that they never go on vacation and they never need a break," he said.