

VEHICLE SECURITY

Keeping track of thieves

New technologies are helping vehicle security companies even the fight against increasingly determined and sophisticated theft syndicates.

The recent explosive demonstration of microdot technology, in which laser-etched identification dots survived the blowing-up of a car, shows the lengths to which the motor industry and its suppliers must go to defeat thieves. Up to 10 000 microscopic dots are applied to about 90 positions on a vehicle. Thieves can no longer conveniently file off vehicle identification and chassis numbers.

Statistics show 50% of stolen or hijacked SA vehicles are relicensed and returned to the roads; 30% are chopped up for spare parts; and 20% exported to neighbouring countries, says Fouche Burgers of Business Against Crime SA. Vehicle Security Association of SA (Vesa) GM Louise Taljaard describes the technology as a "breakthrough against crime". Says Nissan SA MD Mike Whitfield: "Criminals wanting to change the identity of a microdotted vehicle would have to go to such extremes that they would destroy the value of the vehicle and all its parts."

Demand for aftersales security is also growing. Many insurers insist on security systems such as immobilisers/alarms, vehicle tracker and recovery systems. Tracker spokesman Gareth Crocker reckons up to 1,5m SA vehicles are fitted with tracking and recovery systems.

Because such systems are usually considered "grudge" purchases, most consumers opt for the cheapest and most convenient. So when Richard Timm of Matrix vehicle tracking says system buyers should "select a company with an established track record that you are sure will weather the kind of economic storm we are currently in", his message is probably falling on a lot of deaf ears.

The "grudge" attitude may also be coloured by the view among some consumers that tracker technology has progressed little in recent years. Timm says: "In the early days, vehicle owners were excited to know where their vehicle was and that it had been recovered. Now they can know the exact location via satellite, be alerted if anyone is tampering with the



vehicle or if the vehicle is heading into an unauthorised zone and so much more."

Says Crocker: "There's also the personal safety aspect of vehicle tracking that should be of paramount importance to a substantial number of our clients."

With more than 110 tracker companies offering products to the public, Taljaard

says it's no wonder the public struggles to keep pace. Adding to the confusion is the fact that there are, as yet, no formal minimum standards for tracking systems. Vesa is working with the SA Bureau of Standards to write some. But the complication is that most of the leading tracker companies left Vesa five years ago in a standards dispute that became a row over alleged anticompetitive behaviour.

As members of Vesa's stolen vehicle recovery subcommittee at the time, the companies — including Matrix, Tracker and Netstar — were accused of setting standards that effectively prevented new firms from entering the market. Taljaard says the case is likely to come before the competition tribunal again in September.

Despite the number of tracker companies, participants say the market is not saturated. Many older vehicles are without them, and the market shift towards used vehicles opens new opportunities. So do neighbouring countries.

SA can't boast world leadership in many industries but vehicle hijacking, unfortunately, is one of them. As a result, the vehicle tracking industry is also a world leader. Systems have been forced to evolve quickly to counter criminals' response to advancing antitheft technology. "The challenge for SA vehicle tracking companies is to keep driver and passengers as safe as possible besides retrieving the vehicle," says Timm. ■