

## Cloak and broolly thieves outwit alarms

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By Wendy Knowler

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Some security companies have known for months that burglar syndicates have found a way to make themselves "invisible" to the passive infrared detectors of conventional alarm systems, yet have elected to keep their clients in the dark while they source new systems to outwit the criminals.

The directors of Durban insurance brokers Eikos thought the contents of their Berea office were adequately protected by the alarm system installed by South Africa's biggest security alarm company, Chubb, but last weekend thieves managed to break in and make off with R50 000 worth of computers without activating the alarm.

"We were baffled and called for records from the company's control room, which showed the alarm had not failed," said Eikos director Hemraj Sewbalas.

"It was then that Chubb's PRO told me how burglars could 'cloak' themselves to reduce their emissions and elude detection by the sensors," he said.

"When I asked why we hadn't been informed that our alarm system could be overridden in this way, I was told the company did not want to create panic among its clients, which seems ridiculous given the risks involved."

In contrast to Chubb's approach, rival alarm company Enforce sent letters to its 7 000 Durban clients a few weeks ago, warning that the company had footage showing intruders "screening themselves from detection by conventional Passive Infrared Detectors (PIRs) by hiding behind open umbrellas".

As infrared sensors pick up body heat as opposed to motion, the cloaking "reduces the amount of emitted infrared energy to such a level that it does not cause activation of the PIR". The letter urged clients to upgrade to a dual technology detector consisting of an "either/or" system of PIR and microwave, which picks up motion.

"When we discovered the 'cloaking' ploy, we went to our suppliers and asked them for an affordable alternative," said Enforce group marketing manager Gary Tintinger.

After running trials on the new system - involving staff running about in wetsuits, wet blankets and clutching umbrellas - the company offered the alternative to their clients.

"Hundreds of our clients are converting to the dual technology," said Tintinger.

Each sensor costs R500 and an area the size of a three-bedroomed home, for example, would need two.

Tintinger admits to "teething problems", but says the company is fine-tuning the system.

Chubb's regional manager Neil Zaltsman slammed the Enforce approach as "irresponsible".

"By going public with the fact that thieves are using umbrellas and wetsuits, we're going to see a lot more of these incidents in the coming months," he said. "Chubb has known about this problem for at least a year, but we elected not to tell our clients because we don't believe that the alternatives offered by the suppliers are thief-proof."

Johannesburg-based risk consultant Dave Casey, who conducts forensic investigations for the insurance and security industries, said in 43% of burglaries during which the alarm did not activate, poor installation was to blame.

"In other cases, thieves were able to remain undetected by crawling along the floor between office desks," he said.

He recommended the "either or" dual technology detector as a alternative to conventional infrared detectors.

Durban-based insurance assessor Philip Pass confirmed the upsurge in computer theft by "very slick operators" who are able to bypass alarm systems by many means, including "cloaking".