THE PERFECT FIT

Des Moines store owner migrates from analog to VSaaS to in-house IP to reduce theft

By Mary Wilbur

The business proposition of Plato's Closet, a popular consignment store chain, differs from those of upscale department stores and big box retail outlets.

At Plato's Closet, shoppers bring in gently used brand-name clothing and accessories, which the store's buyer makes an offer on based on the items' style, condition, brand and the store's current stock levels.

Once the buyer and seller agree on a price, the seller can walk out of the store with some extra cash or shop for a hot new outfit. Plato's Closet prides itself on providing a large selection of trendy designer styles, as well as the basics. The items the store buys from the seller are generally things that have been stocked in the retail stores within the past 12 to 18 months or are styles currently being sold at the mall.

In short, it's a cash-heavy business, and video surveillance details are crucial on many fronts.

The Clothes Rack

Plato's Closet is a subsidiary of Minneapolis-based Winmark Corp., but each store is owned by a franchisee, who bargains for the store's inventory and is responsible for inventory control, loss mitigation and security.

Steve Olson, franchisee of the West Des Moines, Iowa, Plato's Closet has gone to great lengths to ensure the security of his store's inventory, partly because his store is one of the top-grossing outlets in the nation. What started out as a 2,000-square-foot retail area is now a mega store with about 7,000 square feet of retail space.

"We decided to invest quite a bit of money in the security system," Olson said. "We wanted to be aggressive against theft and work jointly with law enforcement to stop shoplifting and vandalism."

In order to do that, Olson's surveillance system needed to grow with the store and provide much better image quality than its original analog system. For that, it had local integrator ICS Advanced Technologies to thank.

"This store is doing a phenomenal business," said Patrick Bailey, president of ICS Advanced Technologies. "The store was expanding every two years, and the most recent upgrade called for an increase from 12 to 24 cameras, but more importantly, getting rid of six analog cameras and offering higher resolution with IP cameras."

ICS suggested a gradual transition to IP video as the logical and affordable way to an eventual top-of-the-line video surveillance system. The first step was to digitize the few working analog cameras left in the store with two four-channel AXIS 241Q video encoders and install new AXIS M3202 fixed-dome network cameras with SVGA resolution.

Using a server-based VMS would have been costly for the retailer's small system, but as a local Internet service provider, ICS had the perfect solution: Video Surveillance-as-a-Service (VSaaS). It was an idea that leveraged Salient Systems' CompleteView Enterprise video management system and a local network-attached storage device from Iomega as redundant backup.

Yes, It's Open Architecture

CompleteView is built on the foundation of open architecture and provides the tools for unlimited scalability and flexibility to manage multiple servers and sites. This allows administrators to monitor the status of any and all servers, add or remove users, change configurations on servers and clients, and push software updates out to servers and clients from a single desktop application.

"There has been a strong trend for retailers to move to a VSaaS platform for video security," said Brian Carle, product manager at Salient Systems. "VSaaS provides retailers with a video security system that is professionally managed, upgraded regularly and hosted off-site to avoid the risk of DVR theft."

In West Des Moines, Olson and his wife appreciate the response that VSaaS offers them because they aren't always at the store but are able to peek in from their home computers. The system allows the Olsons a couple of keen advantages: Because of the resolution of the IP video surveillance, they are able to pinpoint shoplifters and turn them over to law enforcement and focus on shoppers who

try and switch price tags from one item to another.

"The software makes the entire difference in how the security model is planned and implemented," Bailey said. "Using CompleteView means the streaming video defaults to their own server with a remote backup. Olson has the ability to control his own video, and if there is an upgrade to the software, it is always kept up to date."

It's the Software, Silly

The software, according to Bailey, provides quick and easy access to the platform and allows law enforcement to be active in any investigation rather than take a passive role.

"If there is an incident and word gets out that a thief has been caught, anyone else thinking of going up against this type of security system will have to think twice," Bailey said. "If they think twice, it's usually determined that stealing against this type of security configuration will not be profitable."

Olson's Plato's Closet, like any other retail store, has had to deal with theft and crime issues, but since the existing system was installed, shoplifting has dropped below 1 percent and Olson's margin for retail success has grown significantly. It also means he can view video from anywhere, on his time schedule.

"Using CompleteView VSaaS, video is accessible from anywhere via an Android, iPhone, iPad or Web interface client," Carle said. "The CompleteView VSaaS platform provides bandwidth management via dynamic resolution scaling, tools for VSaaS providers to manage multiple recording servers in the cloud and multi-tenancy architecture."

Plato's Closet is a rather unique shopping experience in that the seller is as active in daily marketing as the buyer. It's the security system that keeps everything just as it should be. Olson said his store has cameras aimed on both the point of sale and the point of purchase "just to keep things straight."

The system helps in reducing shrinkage; equally important, it stops fencing operations in which someone who has lifted some new clothing at the mall tries selling it to Olson's team. Upon seeing the new clothes, employees ask the customer why he or she did not take them back for a refund or exchange. ◎

Mary Wilbur is the chief marketing officer at Salient Systems.