



Steven Campbell Sr., left, and Steven Campbell Jr., own MicroID. The father serves as its president, the son as its vice president. The company is a national distributor for DataDots, which are microscopic pieces of film with identification numbers etched on them. Dots are then hidden on property to deter thieves.

Todd E. Swenson / The Modesto Bee

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## DataDots designed to deter thieves

### Tiny ID numbers can be hidden almost anywhere.

By Patrick Giblin / The Modesto Bee

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It long has been a common practice for people to etch personal information on valuables so those items can be returned if they are stolen or lost.

But now there's a technology that has taken the idea to a new level — the microscopic level.

DataDots, made by an Australian company, are small pieces of film with identification numbers etched on them. The pieces of film are then hidden on property such as cars and electronic devices.

Three foothills car dealers and a handful of California universities are using DataDots as a way to deter crime, said employees of Sonora-based MicroID, a national distributor for DataDots.

Law enforcement officials said the technology is not widely used because it's relatively new to the United States. But they are interested in how it works.

"The concept goes back to World War II," said Steven Campbell Sr., president of MicroID. "Secret codes would be hidden inside a period in a letter. You would need a microscope to be able to read the code."

DataDots, which are smaller than the period at the end of this sentence, are made out of film that's only 1 micron thick.

About 25,000 DataDots would have to be stacked on top of each other to reach 1 inch in height.

Because they are so small, hundreds to thousands of the dots can be hidden on automobiles, computers, cell phones, iPods and other valuables. The dots are hidden in corners, under batteries, beneath fenders, on top of screws — anywhere they might not be detected.

Because they are black, they can be difficult to see, but they can be found easily by using an ultraviolet blacklight because the glue that holds them in place glows under the light.

Steven Campbell Jr., vice president of MicroID, said the glue is water-, heat- and cold-resistant. Campbell, who owns MicroID with his father, said the glue can hold a dot in place for about 20 years if it is attached to the exterior of a car or device — longer if it's not exposed to the elements.

The information on the dot can be read with a special hand-held microscope. The microscopes are made available to law enforcement agencies after their officers are trained to locate and read DataDots, Steven Campbell Sr. said.

The information on the DataDots then can be traced back to the owner through an online database. Only law enforcement agencies have permission to search the database, according to DataDots USA.

New car customers at Sierra Motors can have 1,000 dots applied to their vehicle, said Bill Rossi, general manager of the Jamestown General Motors dealership.

"It's almost impossible for a thief to find and remove all the dots, but a police officer only has to find one of them to figure out who really owns the car," Rossi said. "Police can then trace the stolen automobiles or parts back to the original crime."

Personal DataDots kits cost \$19.95, contain 500 dots and have instructions on how to apply them on cell phones, laptops, iPods, bicycles, voice recorders and other personal items. They can be purchased from the company's Web sites.

DataDots could become more widespread soon. Officials with the California State University system have asked about using the technology on every CSU campus, Campbell Sr. said.

They are intrigued with the ability to track down the owners of all the items that are recovered by campus police each year, he said.