



The Web Site of The Sacramento Bee

This story is taken from [Business](#) at sacbee.com.

Specks of safety

Tiny bits of film can be loaded with information, hidden on valuables and decoded by police

By Patrick Giblin -- Modesto Bee Staff Writer
Published 2:15 am PST Monday, February 27, 2006

It's long been a common practice to etch personal information onto valuables so they can be returned if lost or stolen.

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

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

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

They've attracted the interest of law enforcement agencies, auto dealerships and college campuses, including the University of California, Davis, and California State University, Sacramento, according to MicroID officials.

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.

The tiny black dots are difficult to spot in natural light, but can be easily spotted using an ultraviolet black light 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 - an identification number and the company's Web site - is linked to an online database. That database is accessible only to law enforcement to trace the owner of lost or stolen property, Campbell Sr. said.

Automobile dealers also have been taking notice of the technology. Although company officials said no automobile dealers in the Sacramento region are using DataDots, a number of dealers have tried them in the foothills area of Sonora, where MicroID is located.

New-car customers at Sierra Motors in Tuolumne County can have 1,000 dots applied to their vehicle, said Bill Rossi, general manager of the General Motors dealership in Jamestown. He said about 100 customers have asked that the dots be applied on their cars since the dealership began offering them a year ago. He charges \$189 to install a package of 1,000 dots.

"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."

Prospect Motors and Amador Toyota, both in Jackson, also offer the service, Campbell Sr. said.

Nationally, he said discussions are under way with several automobile manufacturers to apply the dots on all cars produced in the United States.

New BMWs bought in Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada have the dots, according to the DataDot Technologies Web site. So do Hondas in Asia and most cars bought in Australia.

Law enforcement agencies in the United States have taken notice. The Campbells have given presentations to numerous police and sheriff's departments in Northern California, the California Highway Patrol and college police departments.

Sgt. Rick Gilstrap with Stanislaus County Auto Theft Task Force (StanCAT) said he heard the DataDot presentation two years ago and was impressed with the technology.

But because the technology isn't widely used, he said, law enforcement agencies in the Modesto area usually do not look for the dots on recovered vehicles, unless they are mentioned on a stolen car report.

"If we knew there was a stolen 2004 Chevy Tahoe with (DataDots), we would start looking for them on every recovered Tahoe or Tahoe parts that we found," Gilstrap said. "It would be invaluable if more vehicles had the dots."

DataDots also are used to track personal property on several California college campuses.

Individual DataDot kits are sold at campus bookstores at San Jose State University; San Diego State University; California State University, Fullerton; California State University, East Bay, in Hayward; and the University of California at Irvine. Arizona State University and the University of Arizona also sell the kits.

The kits cost \$19.95, contain 500 dots and have instructions on how to apply them on cellular phones, laptops, iPods, bicycles, voice recorders and other personal items. They can be purchased from the Web sites www.microidtech.com and www.datadotusa.com.

Go to: [Sacbee](#) / [Back to story](#)

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852
Phone: (916) 321-1000

[Copyright © The Sacramento Bee](#)