



*To organize and support  
community partnerships to prevent  
crime and the fear of crime*

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[www.portlandoregon.gov/oni/cp](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/oni/cp)



# Considerations for Commercial Security Systems

Office of Neighborhood Involvement Crime Prevention Program  
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When purchasing or upgrading a security system, there are a multitude of options to consider for alarms and camera surveillance. Alarms and cameras may deter crime and will add a layer of security to your property. The presence of a security system should be a complement to and not a replacement for other security measures. When alarms and cameras don't deter a criminal from targeting a business, they can help with the identification and apprehension of the offender.

False alarms are a significant problem caused by equipment failures and user, service and installation errors. They divert police officers from true emergencies and may lead to fines. When an alarm is tripped, the monitoring company will attempt to contact the business managers and employees on file to rule out if the system was accidentally set off. If they can't reach anyone, they will call the police. According to the Portland Police Bureau Alarm Unit, there were 17,532 alarm calls for service between July 1, 2015 and June 30, 2016. Of those calls, 13,120 (75%) were false alarms called in to 9-1-1 and 7,667 (44%) were not cancelled by the monitoring company or homeowner before the police arrived at the location. Reducing these kind of incidents should be included in your pre-purchase research. If you have an alarm system in the City of Portland, you will need to obtain a permit from the Portland Police Bureau. See [portlandoregon.gov/police/alarm](http://portlandoregon.gov/police/alarm) for information about permits and ways to reduce false alarms.

## ***Explore Your Options***

There are a number of options for security systems on the market and the technology is continuing to evolve. Some elements to consider when choosing an alarm or camera:

- What is your budget? Costs may include the equipment and installation of an alarm and camera system, maintenance, monthly monitoring fees and an alarm permit from the Portland Police Bureau.
- Do you want a verified alarm system? Alarm verification occurs when a security provider or you are notified of a potential security breach and can verify either audibly or through camera surveillance the source of the breach. This will increase the likelihood that when the monitoring company or you call the police, there is evidence to confirm that there is a crime-in-progress, which reduces the incidence of false alarms. If there is no verification process, the security provider will contact individuals included on the phone list to determine if the incident



*Some businesses post signs and stickers to announce that they have a surveillance and/or alarm system in place. The presence of an security system can be a deterrent for some criminals.*



*The ability to monitor activity remotely is an significant benefit of a camera system. The placement of this camera may capture activity out in the parking lot and is more difficult to vandalize. However, it doesn't provide a good angle to identify visitors.*

might be a false alarm.

- Should you purchase an alarm that is silent or audible when activated? If your business is located in a commercial district where all locations are closed at night, will there be anyone to hear or see the annunciator, a signaling device which may include sirens or strobes? Drawing attention to your property can be helpful in mixed use or largely residential areas and may limit the amount of time a burglar stays at a location, reducing potential losses. Silent alarms may lead to apprehension if burglars aren't aware that the alarm has been activated before the police arrive.
- Will you purchase a system that is installed and monitored by a security provider or will you install and monitor the system yourself?
- What kind of alarm sensors are most appropriate for your business? The security vulnerabilities and activities at your location should be considered when determining if contact, motion, glass break, photo beams, or other sensors are appropriate. Will the system test for carbon monoxide and fire?
- For camera surveillance, does the video capture clear images under all lighting conditions? The police should be able to use footage to identify suspects. Your equipment may be included in your contract with the security provider. Do your research on the equipment.

## ***Design Considerations***

Before you purchase a system, make sure that it is tailored for the design and activity of your business. Determine the reasons that you want an alarm and/or camera surveillance system and what should be considered in its design:

- What areas of the property do you want to protect and/or survey? If you are only concerned about burglary, that would be a different design than concerns about shoplifting, employee theft and/or loitering in the parking lot.
  - » Besides the entry points to your business, are there vulnerable areas on your property that need additional protection? For example, there may be a storage shed or display cabinets that contain valuable items or a back door to an alleyway that is concerning. Sky lights and roof hatches are often used as entry points because they aren't adequately secured.
  - » Are there other potential access points such as through a shared wall with another business? Even if you have the best security, burglars may be able to access your business by breaking into an adjacent business that has lax security.
- What are the activities in the business that will impact the alarm? Activities, including night deliveries or animals in the area, should inform what sensors are appropriate for your business.
- When and who will use the alarm? Are there times when someone such as janitorial or service staff will be on site while the alarm is armed? Do you need separate codes and protocols

for their activities?

- Are cameras placed at angles that allow for clear descriptions of suspects including physical features? Make sure that vegetation, shelving or other items do not block camera views. Many suspects are identified from camera footage at the front entrance. If possible, actively monitor that area.
- Are there cameras installed by parking lots, entry points, all areas where cash and valuables are handled and lottery machines? Where possible, it's ideal to have the entire premises covered.
- Do cameras have the capability of tilting and zooming in on activity?
- Do you need vandal-resistant and more durable options for exterior cameras?
- Is exterior lighting enhancing or diminishing picture quality? Excessive or dim lighting can impair picture quality.
- Where are you storing your camera footage? If you have a NVR, you don't want the equipment and footage to be accessible to the criminal. If it's in the cloud, use a strong password to protect your images.
- Are the recordings kept for at least two weeks? One month of stored footage is recommended. Do the recordings automatically overwrite? Is it 24/7 footage or motion sensor activated? There may be details missed if it starts recording as the sensor activates. Some systems will record in low resolution until there is activity.

## Security Providers

If you decide that you want monitoring services:

- Check with other businesses to see what companies they recommend and why. Ask if they have ever had an alarm activated and what the response was like. What percentage of alarm activations are false alarms? Check their reviews on reputable websites, publications, the Better Business Bureau and other sources.
- Do you want verified monitoring?
- What is the protocol when the alarm is activated? What are the average times from the point when the alarm activates to the time that the police respond?
- What's the ratio of operators to the number of customers in the response center?
- How much does the equipment installation and monitoring cost? Is a contract required for monitoring? If so, what is the duration?
- What happens if the equipment breaks or becomes obsolete?
- What happens if there is a power outage or the system goes down?
- How do you guarantee that the security panel on your system is communicating to the operations center? How do you test this?
- Is your business vulnerable to robberies or patrons who display erratic behavior? Devices such as a panic alarm may be part of your plan. When the alarm is activated, most likely your monitoring company will be notified. Understand what happens when the alarm is activated and the response protocol. Be aware that the monitoring company likely cannot verify what's happening. If they call the police, they may only be able to state that the panic alarm



*One of the main purposes of camera surveillance is to use footage for apprehension. Camera placement is key. In the upper photo, the angle doesn't reveal facial features and won't be as helpful to the police as the photo below.*







*Reducing the number of false alarms is an important part of your plan. Only assign codes to employees and managers who need them. Make sure that they know the protocol to follow if the alarm is accidentally triggered. Make sure that the alarm company has the names of the authorized employees on file and update that info as needed. Codes should be changed immediately when an employee is terminated or leaves the company.*

## **Crime Prevention Strategies**

To learn about crime prevention strategies for your business, please visit our website at [www.portlandoregon.gov/oni/cpadvice](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/oni/cpadvice).

The City of Portland's Crime Prevention Program provides assistance to Portland businesses by organizing Business Watches, training managers and employees in topics that include shoplifting, commercial burglary and robbery prevention and working with businesses to problem solve ongoing crime issues. Contact us for assistance at:

503-823-4064  
[onicpa@portlandoregon.gov](mailto:onicpa@portlandoregon.gov)

was activated and cannot confirm that a robbery is in progress. Therefore, as soon as it safe to do so, call 9-1-1. The panic alarm should be used in addition to calling 9-1-1.

## **Do-It-Yourself Alarm Systems**

If you decide on a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) system:

- Are you purchasing a camera system and an alarm system? Camera surveillance systems may not include an alarm.
- Look at reviews from reputable websites and publications. Ask other businesses what they use. Does the system experience a lot of false alarms and notifications?
- Are you technically capable of installing the system on your own or should you hire someone? Do you have the infrastructure necessary to install cameras and the alarm?
- Are you immediately notified if the system is breached and by what method i.e. text, email, etc.?
- Are you able to verify what's happening when notified?
- Do you have an internet or cellular connection that is reliable and fast enough to process the images?
- What will it take to monitor the activity at your location?
  - » Who will respond if there is an alarm notification at night?
  - » Who will monitor activity when that person is on vacation?
  - » Is there a company cell-phone or tablet dedicated to monitoring and what amount of data is required?
- What is required to test the equipment and how often?
- What happens with power outages or if you are out of cell range?

## **Ongoing Responsibilities**

- Are cameras actively monitored by staff? Monitoring may be necessary for vulnerable areas of the property. Are they trained on what to do if they observe suspicious or problem behavior on the premises?
- Are employees trained on how to access and review saved video? If they cannot retrieve footage for the police in a timely manner, this may impact the investigation.
- How often does the security system need to be serviced?
- Are emergency contacts updated timely with the security provider when employee information changes?
- Are alarm codes only assigned to those employees who need them?
- Are codes changed immediately when an employee is terminated or leaves the company?
- If you have an alarm with an annunciator, ask your neighbors to look out their window if they hear it sound and call 9-1-1 if someone is breaking into your establishment. This will corroborate that there is a crime in progress, which may lead to a higher priority police response.

Many businesses benefit from their alarm and camera surveillance systems when they do their homework and consider business activities in the design. Security systems are best when used with other crime prevention strategies.