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## Low-tech valet parking gets high-tech treatment

By Chris Woodyard, USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — Not everyone here gets the star treatment, but sometimes their cars do.



Pechanga Resort & Casino's surveillance system.

By Dan MacMedan, USA TODAY

At least if they're being valet parked.

While paparazzi save their flashbulbs for celebrities, every car that's valet parked at the Pechanga Resort & Casino on the edge of Southern California's urban sprawl is automatically photographed from six angles.

The name of the valet is electronically recorded both when the car goes into the garage and when it comes out. The license plate is electronically recorded, too, and placed in a databank that will let supervisors know every time that car arrives at the casino.

The casino is one of a small but growing number of locations around the country that are bringing high-tech wizardry to the traditionally low-tech business of keeping track of cars and trucks in crowded garages.

The photo system is aimed at assuring customers that their cars weren't banged up after they turned them over to valets, making vehicles easier to find and retrieve, and keeping the staff on its toes.

"Clients wanted something more exciting than the pen-and-pencil approach," says Kai Schuette, who holds the patent and developed the system during the past decade as an executive for Computerized Valet Parking Systems.

Today, he says, various elements of the system have been installed in more than 200 locations. The most lavish setups have been bought by casinos in Nevada and California, costing upward of \$50,000 each.

San Francisco-based Schuette says he sells them by showing how much they can save.

While the systems can benefit customers by making cars easier to track, he says the real value is to the parking operations, by saving them from invalid damage claims.

The purpose of photographing the car is to be able to show that it wasn't dented while under the care of the valet parking attendant. With the pictures as evidence that the car arrived with the same scratch, customers are less likely to file false damage claims, Schuette says.

As part of the routine, attendants also wave a bar-coded identity card at a reader, which records who was driving a car. So if it is damaged, supervisors will know which employee was driving it.

"It's about accountability," says Paul Goodrich, valet supervisor at Pechanga, an Indian casino in Temecula, about 100 miles from Los Angeles. With the system, "There's no question about who parked it."

The MGM Mirage's New York-New York resort and Caesars Entertainment's Bally's and Paris resorts also use the systems, Schuette says. But neither company would talk about it.

Technology is helping valet parkers in other ways.

Jed Goniou, president of MasterPark airport valet next to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, says he uses a simplified version of the system to figure out which cars will be staying the longest. Then they can be arranged every night in a way that will allow them to be retrieved the most quickly for customers.

"We can push a button, and it will tell us everybody who is due back today," Goniou says.

For Computerized Valet Parking Systems, the latest technology is the ability for the system to automatically read license plates. That came through a partnership with another firm, Active Recognition Technologies in Phoenix, about a year ago. Among other things, having the capability allows the system to know how many times a vehicle has come on the property previously.

Casinos can use the license-plate-recognition technology not only to keep track of cars, but also to let casinos instantly know who is pulling up to the front door.

The system might recognize the car of a high roller, who is always accorded the royal treatment. Or it might be the vehicle of a cheat, who can be greeted by security and given the boot before he even makes his way into the building.

The system doesn't violate privacy because license plates are on public display anyway, and the system tracks only vehicles, even though it's the people inside them that interest casinos, says Arthur Lawida, CEO of Active Recognition Technologies.

The next goal is to make the system even more sophisticated.

Instead of just recognizing license plates, the next generation could include the ability for the computer to automatically discern makes and colors of cars. With that feature, even if a customer loses the parking ticket and can't remember the license plate number, the system will be able to locate a vehicle by description.

Schuette is also trying to use some of the same technology in other low-tech service applications.

So eventually, the wired parking valet at a hotel may have a new friend: the computerized bellhop.

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