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**The Screen Savers: Join the Fun of Discovering the Ins and Outs of Technology**  
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Presented by **napster.**

## The Tape Tells All

**Police officer Mike Block from the San Francisco Video Unit explains how digital video software brings surveillance cam footage to the courtroom, Friday 3/15 at 7 p.m. Eastern on 'The Screen Savers.'**

Also airs 3/15 at 10 p.m., 3/16 at 1 a.m., 3/18 at 11:30 a.m. Eastern.

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Video surveillance cameras are becoming as common as telephone poles. The average person is

captured eight to 10 times a day on video tape, whether it's traipsing through the mall, driving through at McDonalds, or even simply [stepping out on the sidewalk](#).

Of course for the police, these cameras serve a necessary role: to catch criminal acts in real time for later use as irrefutable courtroom evidence.

### Digital detective work

In traditional police investigations, video surveillance could often be more of a hindrance than a help. Wall-mounted video cameras are only programmed to capture a series of still images every five seconds to conserve videotape, and most businesses record a rotating series of images from several cameras. When investigators used to sit down to watch archived footage, they were often presented with a confusing jumble of awkward shots, none of which clearly showed the act in progress.

But that was before [dTective](#), a new digital video forensics package powered by [Avid Xpress](#). Here are some of the perks for police that use dTective:

- Avid Xpress can convert a series of still images into a smooth, real-time video.
- It can be programmed to show only the shots recorded from one particular camera at one particular angle.
- Since all the video is digitized, investigators can easily zoom in on particularly troubling pixels.
- Footage can be cleaned up and clarified with simple, pre-programmed image filters.
- [More features](#) from the dTective site.

### Bottom line, it works

Officer Mike Block is the head of the San Francisco Police Department's video unit. Before he discovered dTective and Avid, his department would spend up to \$5,000 on video surveillance analysis for one homicide case. [Read on](#) to hear how a simple software upgrade is helping him make quick work of putting crooks behind bars.

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## One Cop's Avid Upgrade

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Capture. Analyze. Convict. That's my new motto.

Prior to acquiring the Avid system, I was loaded down with a hodge-podge of computers, VHS decks, multiplex units, and storage systems. After a year-long search for an alternative -- and even after being told that capturing video from surveillance cameras was impossible -- I stumbled upon the [Ocean Systems](#) website.

One phone call to Ocean Systems' sales manager led me to Grant Fredericks, Avid's law enforcement manager. I learned that Fredericks not only had experience in law enforcement (Vancouver PD, 10 years), he also had a background in television production.

Grant agreed to come to San Francisco and put on a demonstration, so I quickly assembled approximately 60 members of the SFPD and outlying agencies to attend a two-hour seminar.

I was amazed to learn that I had only been capturing 50 percent of the available video evidence using traditional methods, which meant I was missing half of the criminal acts committed on surveillance tape.

After attending courses in forensic video analysis and the law given by the FBI, additional training at Henninger Post Production facility, and even more training at Ocean Systems, the SFPD's Avid arrived, and I was ready to go.

I now analyze three to five tapes per day. Due to the astounding quality of evidence produced, I rarely go to court. My cases are usually pled out immediately after the bad guy and his counsel see what the never-blinking eye of the camera has found.

The [Luggable](#) model of Avid can easily be brought into court and set up in a matter of minutes to recreate -- right in front of a jury or judge -- the exact steps taken to analyze the video.

One must remember we are usually dealing with extremely poor quality video from unmaintained systems. We are often handed VHS tapes that are years old or recorded on heads that have never been cleaned.

The tools developed by Ocean Systems for Avid, from de-multiplexing to image stabilization to frame averaging, are quite easy to use but a little complex to explain. I suggest anyone with interest visit the following sites:

- [Avid Forensic](#)
- [Ocean Systems](#)

With Avid, we also have the ability to export uncompressed sequential frames to common presentation programs such as PowerPoint for simple disclosure and presentation. The most important factor is that Avid captures video in "lossless" (no image quality loss), uncompressed form, neither adding nor subtracting image information from the evidence.

The evidence tape needs to be played only one time at normal speed, reducing the pausing that used to be necessary to capture still images from video. The evidence tape is then secured, and only digital files are examined. This allows us to go into court generally unchallenged to the veracity of our product. Our final evidence can

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then be output to VHS with virtually no loss in quality -- and truthfully -- looking better to the human eye than when it was originally captured.

Having been a police officer for more than 20 years and in the Crime Scene Investigations Unit for more than 10 years, I have never seen a piece of equipment that can better analyze this type of evidence.

Capture. Analyze. Convict. Those are my contributions to the great city of San Francisco.

Officer Mike Block is the head of the [San Francisco Police Department's](#) video unit.

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