

By Steve Schlesinger, July 2006

Camera theft ring.

On a Saturday evening in June, I received a distress call from a friend who had nearly \$8000 worth of camera gear stolen at a wedding at Mile Square Golf Course in Fountain Valley, CA. As if the loss of bodies and lenses wasn't bad enough, the memory cards were also stolen from the bag. Gone were many of the wedding images created that day. An insurance check can pay for replacement equipment, but it cannot redo the stolen images. It's for this reason alone I wanted to bring it to your attention and outline how the crime was committed.

How the crime was pulled off:

The theft took a total of 18 seconds. The subjects showed up at a certain time, never entered the room. One talked on the phone for quite a while, and then abruptly hung up. The two men, wearing suits and looking appropriately dressed for a wedding entered the room walking, not calling attention to themselves. They ran out of it.

There was a third person in on the crime, the person on the phone inside the room. They just watched the photographer work, then when they could see them leave their equipment and walk towards the buffet line, he or she told the two men in the lobby it was time to strike. In 18 seconds they were in and out of the room. This means they probably spent less than ten seconds going through the bags and grabbing gear.

One of the guests actually watched the crime go down. Did he go to the buffet line to get the photographers and tell them that someone was in their gear? No. Did he try and tackle the suspects? No. As the police showed up and took the report, and as the bride sat their balling in front of her guests he told the police "Two Hispanic males wearing suits with long coats ran out of the room with something under their coat." Though this wasn't enough information to help find the suspects, it did help the bride and groom nail down who they were in the surveillance video. From this, we have learned a lot about how the crime was pulled off, and it can give us clues to figure out how to protect our gear from this type of crime.

You would think they would grab the camera bags and walk out? This type of crime is a modified form of residential burglary where people simply go through open gates, push open screens of open windows. Go though and grab as many valuables as they can fit into their pockets (cash, jewelry, weapons) and then leave without calling attention to themselves. They appear to walk out with nothing in their hands which doesn't raise any suspicions among the neighbors or in the case of the crime of the reception, the distracted, happy guests. Busier weddings mean more people, yet it's amazing how little people pay attention when they are having fun.

I was a victim of a similar crime last year, yet I never really could put the pieces together of how it happened, until now. I was photographing a wedding at St. Dennis Catholic Church in Diamond Bar and went to the reception at the Diamond Bar Golf Course. Long story short I was the last person to leave the church and I used the delivery entrance to park. These guys followed me in a silver Honda Accord with black tinted windows. The reason I remembered this is because at the time I recalled them following me down the street and into a turn that nobody would know about making except for people who work at the golf course and vendors familiar with the place. They turned around and took off after I got out and stared at them. That evening, a few hours later, I had a few lenses stolen from my bag. Nothing as bad as my friend, but I never could quite figure out who did it or how.

What can be done?

Buy Insurance- With the change from medium format to digital gear in our industry the equipment we use has a much higher consumer demand. You can probably tell by the number of conversations you are having about your gear with wedding guests today versus five years ago. Stolen digital camera gear is small, light, and worth a lot of money on the black market.

If you lose your gear at a wedding, do you have the financial means to replace it, in total before your next job? Do you have the financial means to pay for makeup, hair, flowers, plane tickets and hotel rooms for a possible re-shoot?

Insurance is a funny thing. You're paying for something that hopefully you'll never use. The premiums every year can help pay for a good chunk of a digital body, or a lens, or something else. Why pay good money for a worst case scenario? Unfortunately, the worst case scenario is becoming a harsh reality at an alarming rate.

I have signed up for the WPPI endorsed Package Choice Program from Hill & Usher. My agent, Richard Reyes has been a tremendous asset and has helped me with some research for this article. There is also insurance from other sources, it doesn't matter where you get it from as much as that you get it. <http://www.packagechoice.com>

Take an inventory: If you suffer the great misfortune of having your gear stolen you will need to provide the police with a list of items stolen, including serial numbers. Take a few minutes and write up this list, just in case. Another thing to keep in mind is to fill out those warrantee cards and send them in when you get a new lens or body. If for some reason you can't find your serial number information you can always call the manufacture and obtain it.

Gear in Cars: Before you can get in and out of a restroom at a Burger King someone can break into your car, steal your gear and be gone. It's okay, you have auto insurance, right? Read your policy, your gear isn't covered. Many of the policies for payouts were written in the 1970's. Many of the insurance policies have a maximum payout of between \$1500 to \$2500. That should be enough to cover your camera gear, right? If it's professional gear, it's most likely not covered at all. That's another reason to buy insurance specifically for your camera gear.

Another thing to keep in mind is that your car can get very hot sitting out in the sun all day long. Long exposures to heat over time isn't a good thing for your gear. Small ice chests can help with heat related issues.

For SUV's and vans only thing I've found that offers piece of mind is a trunk that can be bolted to the frame of your vehicle. One of the gals that shoots along with me has one of these trunks, they are kinda cool. Here's the place she bought it and had it installed.

Industrial van & truck
2517 Tyler Ave
South El Monte, CA 91733
(626) 443-9211

Rethinking your gear- Anyone who knows me knows I love camera gear. When I was newer in the field I used to bring everything I owned to a wedding. Now my thinking has changed. If I can't wear it on me, or I can't have it very well secured someplace where I know it will be safe or I can watch, I won't bring it. I know a lot of people have a certain photography style that means they need multiple bodies to do their work. If you can't strap it on you, and you just kinda leave the bodies laying around, in or close to your bag, well, this theft ring will be delighted to meet you. Be honest with yourself, if it only took these guys ten seconds to grab the gear, how many ten second opportunities do you give these guys in an average wedding?

Disaster Plan- If you have gear stolen at one job, and you have another job the next day, what will you do? Do you have enough gear at home do the other job? Do you have friends you can call who will loan you gear? A disaster plan is important. It's tied into my belief that you need to have enough gear to keep going if something breaks. For example, if your flash system dies, you need to have another one ready to go for a couple weeks while your first one is getting fixed. This is another good reason not to take all your gear to one job. You need some backup just in case.

Gun Safe- I recently met a videographer who had \$45,000 worth of gear stolen from his house. Yes, it does happen. It's a reason I don't believe in putting home addresses on websites. It's another reason why I believe in utilizing a huge safe. There are companies that sell safes that will deliver and install them for you. They can put in lights, bolt them to the ground from the inside and other things. You can obtain a fairly decent sized one from Home Depot for a few hundred dollars to some very large, professionally installed ones costing into the thousands of dollars.

Thinking like a thief- If you were a thief, what would you want? Two things come to mind, a big score, and not getting caught. Another thing is that you probably don't want to hang out all night listening to the DJ to play songs like "Celebration" by Kool & The Gang. If you were a thief you would love open camera bags, with gear just sitting there, especially if it was someplace out of the of sight from the photographer and guests. You would love it if it was close to an open door so that there would be less witnesses to see your face before you leave. If you were a thief you probably wouldn't hang around if the gear was too well

protected, locked down, alarmed, or maybe the photographer is wearing his or her gear. If the score looks to difficult, there is probably another wedding down the street you can move onto that would be easier.

When I had gear stolen at a reception last year, the groom was a cop, the room was loaded with off duty cops. And of course, nobody saw anything. Don't give yourself a false sense of security about anything. They will steal in a room full of cops, they will steal inside of a church, they will steal at places that have security guards roaming around. They will steal camera gear, and memory cards with no remorse. Put yourself in their minds for a moment, they are following you, watching you, waiting for an opportunity. Don't give them one.

Strategies for lowering risks of a theft-

Placement of gear-Keep your gear near you. If you place your gear at the back of the church, and you are shooting in the front of the church, how well could you watch the gear, especially before the kiss? I like keeping it closer to the front. Oh, sure the little church witch, I mean coordinator will want you to keep it next to the back door so when someone steals it, they won't make so much noise. My thinking is, if they want it to be stored somewhere, they have to be responsible for it. If you nicely explain the situation they will probably be more willing to help you find a solution. Sometimes they can put it in a locked office until after the service.

I've found that reception sites have very poor ideas of where to store your gear. They often like you to put them in broom closets or little room where they store the spare tables. Their concern isn't for your equipment's security, their concern is to get your junk away from their dance floor. The last place that asked me move my gear to one of these rooms, the room was located far from the dance floor, it was unlocked, and it was next to a side exit. If I were a thief I would be in heaven!!!!

The most obvious choice is to store your gear near the DJ. After all, he's gonna be there all night. I know someone who had \$24,000 worth of gear stolen at the Waterfront Hilton, it was stored next to the DJ. One guy distracted the DJ, while the other just casually picked up the gear and left. Keeping it close to the DJ is a start, but it shouldn't be your only strategy.

Wear your media cards- No matter what you do, your camera gear can get stolen, it's a sad fact. You can minimize your risk of theft, but you cannot eliminate it without quitting the business. Of all the things you have, the number one thing of value are your media cards. An insurance check can get you newer and maybe even better versions of your camera gear. But, your art and your work is on your cards and exposed film (if you still shoot film). The most important thing you can do is to ensure that your media cards never leave your persons.

Wear your gear- Have you seen the belt systems by LowePro and Tamrac? I had some gear stolen at a reception last year and decided to carry my lenses on me using the belt system. I really love it! I keep the same five lenses on my belt, and I never change their positions so even in the dark I can find my lenses and switch off from one to another. The lack of having to run back and forth back to my bag has been a real benefit. Of course, not having any lenses

to steal in my bag is a real crime deterrent. I never take the belt off all day long until it's time to go home. There are also photo vests that you can wear, but I can't imagine wearing one of those on a hot summer day. The only warning I can give you about belt systems is that you need to zip up the bags when you're not using the lens, or they can fall out. You also need to check that the lens bags are securely attached to your belt before every wedding. You don't want them falling off.

I am partial to Tamrac, they are a great company, and since they are located in Chatsworth, it's good to support a local company.

<http://www.tamrac.com/welcome.htm>

<http://www.lowepro.com/>

Motion Sensors- A really cool little device that isn't very expensive is a motion sensor system. They are made for laptop computers and golf bags. They are small, light, and very noisy (120 db). I tested one out at a wedding reception, the DJ said he heard it over the music, outside of the reception. The blinking red light is a crime deterrent. Again if your gear looks like it's too difficult to steal they will be less likely to try. There seem to be a few different manufactures of these devices:

http://www.targus.com/us/product_details.asp?sku=PA400U

http://www.glbproducts.com/catalog/notebook_computer_cable_lock_and_alarm_w_motion_sensor_3910841.htm

<http://www.systemid.com/Broch/A03A3.PDF#search='notebook%20motion%20sensor%20alarm'>

You may also want to check E-Bay for a better price.

Bicycle Lock- A very low tech, inexpensive way to help prevent your bags from walking out the door is to lock it down to something when you can't keep your eyes on it. A little \$10 lock from Wal-Mart does the job. Keep in mind however that the current ring that goes around stealing gear likes to take gear out of the bag, and leave the bags.

Dining Strategies- Since a favorite time to grab gear is at dinner, if it's a buffet, and you have an assistant, let them go through the line first, then you later. If the reception site insists on having you dine in another room, no problem, take your bags with you. If you have to go to the bathroom and you are alone, have the bags watched by someone, place them next to them.

Exit Strategies- My major concern is that at the current time we have a non-violent crime wave. Other than stealing property I haven't heard of these people using force to commit crimes. But, that can change. A natural place to jump or hold up a photographer would be in the parking lot. Especially if it's dark, empty, poor security. For a few minutes you will need someone to really watch your gear at the reception, the parents of the bride are a good

choice. Don't wear it out to a dark parking lot alone. Go get your vehicle, park it up front, then get your gear and leave.

Mace is a very useful thing to have in your hands when walking out into a parking lot alone. A little can that can shoot between 12-20 feet can be obtained on E-Bay for less than \$10. Maybe I am a bit paranoid, but a little two ounce can won't take up a lot of space in your camera bag, or leave you with a lot of weight to haul around all day. I hope you buy it and never get the chance to use it, but feel secure knowing that you are set, just in case. Also many cars come equipped with a panic switch which will set off the car alarm. Keep your finger on the button as you approach your car. The noise alone should prevent an attack if you feel threatened.

Quietly Get The Word Out- The police department has enough crimes to try and solve. So far these criminals have been brilliant at moving around to different locations. It's a hard crime to solve because it's done so well, so quickly. I am concerned that media coverage of this crime will only encourage copy-cat crimes. Photographers need to know about it, so please help spread the word to other photographers. I am hoping that we help can put some resources together to pool some funds for the arrest and conviction of the criminals.

What the insurance companies say: My agent, Richard Reyes told me that gear is stolen everywhere. In churches, in cars, at wedding receptions, anywhere you go the thieves will go. He even said that in places where there unbelievably tight security where only press photographers were allowed, photographers have even stolen from each other. One thing that is hard for a lot of the older pros to come to terms with is how the times have changed. A few years ago you could leave your bag open and walk away from it. Nobody would touch it. Those days are gone forever.

I do want to thank the management at Mile Square Golf Course for letting the bride see the surveillance video. It gave us a lot of clues about this one particular criminal ring. There are more out there, perhaps doing other types of theft. If we can help capture these guys, it would be great. However, that's not really our job. No matter what type of photography we do, we are hired by our clients to do the best work possible. Part of our job is to ensure that we keep the images safe, and that we have the necessary equipment when needed. It's a sad fact that there are criminals who wish to steal our equipment, however, I still think that we can have the freedom to do our best work, while maintaining better security measures to keep our equipment safe.

I can't be certain that it's the same small crew of people who are doing the crime, or if there are more. I have a feeling it's more than just a few people. Regardless if a few or many, they tend to be employing the same simple plan. The problem with the plan is that now that it has been exposed we all know what to look for, and we can help let our banquet facilities know what to look for. They may be watching us, but do they have any clue that we may have eyes trained on watching them? In the case of my friend it was two Latino males, but I'm not convinced it just these guys. There may be other people who may not be just Latinos and may not be just males. Instead of racially profiling, I think it's safer to let our reception sites to know to be on the lookout for people who are loitering around the reception room who aren't

connected with what is going on inside the room. Focus on predictable patterns, not race. Many of these places have security, and they have a right to stop and question people, especially if they aren't invited guests hanging around the reception. The movie "The Wedding Crashers" romanticized the notion of crashing weddings. There isn't anything fun or romantic about these wedding crashers.

I would like to see if we could pool up some funds to put a financial incentive on the capture and prosecution of these thugs. The word is out on these people, now let's see about bringing them to justice.

For the DJ to read at the reception:

Ladies and gentlemen: The movie "The Wedding Crashers" romanticized the notion of wedding crashers as fun and charming people. Unfortunately there has been a ring of "wedding crashers" who come to steal photographic, video and other valuable possessions at wedding receptions. They have been making their way around Southern California, dressed as wedding guests, watching, waiting for the right time to strike. Please do not leave your valuable possessions unattended, and please report anybody suspicious to the banquet captain, DJ or wedding photographer. Thank you and enjoy the reception!

To: Wedding Reception Site PLEASE POST
From:
Re: Camera Theft Ring
Date: Summer 2006

There is a ring of criminals that target wedding photographers that have been working the Southern California area. They mainly hit wedding reception sites and often cover new sites that they have never been to before. They tend to like to hit golf courses and hotels. So far, the poor quality surveillance videos at many of these locations haven't been much help in identifying these suspects. We hope by spreading the word how they operate your staff will keep an eye out for them which will lead to a possible arrest.

They tend to operate in the same manner all the time. It's a simple crime that involves two or three people. One person stays inside the reception (a spotter), watching the photographers while one or two people stay outside the reception room, talking to the spotter on a cell phone. When the photographer is distracted or has walked away from his equipment, the spotter notifies the person on the outside of the room to come in. One surveillance video showed two men wearing suits walking into the room. They approached the camera bags, stuffed as much valuable gear into their suit coats and ran out. The total time they were in the room was less than 18 seconds.

They tend to like to strike around dinner, when the photographers are eating, away from their gear. If you observe people loitering in your halls for long periods of time, who seem disassociated from what is going on inside the reception room, please keep your eye on them, or have security speak with them.

The word is getting out to the wedding photographers in the area on how they operate. We seem to feel that as photographers take better steps to watch their gear they will turn to stealing your guests' cameras and purses that they leave on the tables. Thus far it's been a non-violent crime. We are also thinking that they may turn to jumping or holding up wedding photographers in the parking lots after the reception in the future. You can see the urgency in helping capture these suspects before their crimes escalate.

We appreciate your help on this matter.