

INTERNATIONAL STYLE

Device Could Help Keep Thieves at Bay

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PARIS — High-value watch and jewelry thefts in the past two years have left owners of luxury stores in France feeling deeply vulnerable.

Now a new device has come on the market that may help them to at least limit their losses, should the robberies continue.

The device is a tiny beacon, small enough to be hidden inside a watch box. When activated, it emits a signal that can be tracked and plotted using a satellite or cellphone mapping system.

Called the Opuss Tracker, the beacon “is a real-time tracking system that transmits a continuous signal to help pinpoint the trajectory and speed of the beacon via dots on a map,” said Michel Tribouillard, a computer engineer with 25 years of experience designing software for the luxury industry.

“Many boutiques are bunkers already, but that has not stopped robbers,” said Mr. Tribouillard, whose company Solubee, in Biarritz, France, makes the tracker.

“Onsite security is often highly sophisticated, but ask insurers or law enforcement — once the robbery is completed, the likelihood of finding the stock is close to nil,” Mr. Tribouillard told a conference of insurance and luxury market professionals in Paris in July.



A watch with the Opuss Tracker attached. High-value thefts in the past two years have store owners looking for solutions. Solubee/Opuss

According to Mr. Tribouillard, the beacon can be hidden inside a watch box, put into a dummy watch in place of its movement or carried in a traveling jeweler’s briefcase. The GPS satellite tracking system can pinpoint the location of the beacon to within three feet, he said.

It can be triggered manually, or will start automatically if moved beyond a defined perimeter — that of a boutique — and starts moving at unusual speed.

Once triggered, it issues an alert to receivers on a pre-established list — such as security personnel, the shop’s owner, or others — and starts emitting a continuous signal.

“What is innovative about our system is the miniaturization of the beacon and its extended battery life,” Mr. Tribouillard said. “It is the smallest beacon on the market with the longest battery life.”

The beacon is about one inch long — a quarter the size of others on the market — and it has, according to Mr. Tribouillard, a battery life of 12 months on standby and 24 hours in active mode. The cost of the system starts at about 400 euros, or \$540.

The timing could not be better for the luxury industry in France.

“We have had several highly spectacular robberies with sizable losses, over €50 million each time, in Cannes and Paris in the last two years,” Stuart Wylie, an insurance loss adjuster, said in a telephone interview.

In June, a burglar armed with an assault weapon entered Karatt, a Paris boutique a few steps from the Champs Élysées, and made off with watches valued at more than €1 million, escaping into the Paris underground rail system.

“The Opuss beacon would have allowed the burglar to be tracked via GPS while outside, and via GSM cellular tracking inside the metro,” Mr. Tribouillard said.

Days earlier, the concept store Colette, on the fashionable and busy Faubourg Saint Honoré, was attacked by two men armed with an ax and a rifle who took watches worth about \$800,000 before fleeing on a motorcycle.

A few weeks before, just blocks down the street, the De Grisogono boutique was held up by two men who took more than \$550,000 worth of jewelry and watches during business hours.

In 2013, spectacular robberies occurred at the Vacheron Constantin, Audemars Piguet, and Casti boutiques, all close to the Place Vendôme in the heart of the Paris jewelry quarter. Watches and jewelry worth millions were stolen.

Given that onsite security is not foolproof, Mr. Tribouillard hopes to address the problem from a different angle.

“Our goal is to reduce the time it takes to locate the stock after the robbers have left the premises,” Mr. Tribouillard said.

“We conducted tests last summer in Pau, Megève and Biarritz, in real conditions with policemen who were not told the holdups were fake,” he said, naming three prosperous French tourist destinations in locations ranging from the Atlantic coast to the Alps. “In each instance, the arrests were made” in 11 to 25 minutes.

According to Mr. Wylie, very little stock is ever recovered more than 48 hours after a robbery — the time it takes for the goods to be dispersed into underground criminal networks.

“There is a 90 percent success rate in arrests in Paris, and both the Vacheron gang and the Karatt robber have been arrested,” Mr. Wylie said. “But zero stock has been recovered.”

Whether the insurance industry and law enforcement will support the deployment of the tracking system remains uncertain.

“Insurers prefer a more proactive system that dissuades the robbers from entering the store,” Mr. Wylie said. “But this system could be useful if watch manufacturers agree to integrate the beacon into dummy watches.”

The Opuss was put to use when masterpieces from the Treasure of San Gennaro in Naples, one of the largest jewelry collections in the world, valued at about \$1 billion, were exhibited in Paris this year. Both during the exhibition and after, when the jewels traveled to an undisclosed location, they were protected by the tracking system.

According to Mr. Tribouillard, discussions are underway with a number of luxury groups on integrating the system in their security arsenal. Further tests are planned in Paris with the local authorities.

“Once it is tested in a dense urban zone like Paris, we would have a better idea how effective the tracker can be,” Mr. Wylie said.