

# Crime Stoppers goes high tech in county



John Deans

With the recent spike in criminal activity here in Washington County, I have been busy working on security cameras at work and Crime Stoppers at home. Just last month I had to pull the video of four young males who stole four wheels from a truck at a client's secured parking lot on Hwy. 50.

Though one of these suspects took a tire iron to three of the outside cameras, we still got some good digital video and still images of them even in total darkness. After posting the pictures on our Crime Stoppers Web site at [www.BrenhamCrimeStoppers.com](http://www.BrenhamCrimeStoppers.com), we got several good tips on their identities.

We have just completed the re-certification process for our Crime Stopper charter for the next two years and are implementing some new projects. Last year we set up tip submitted directly from the website via the new TipSoft Crime Stoppers software. Since then we have received numerous tips from the web interface and now we are going to the next phase.

Since many of our tips appear to be coming from younger tipsters we are trying to reach out to them for more information to help solve crimes in our county. The reason I used the word 'appear' is that since Crime Stoppers is completely anonymous, we do not have any type of tipster demographics.

One thing I do know is that when I drop off a couple of dozen of our Crime Stoppers business cards in the visiting window slots at the county jail on Wednesdays, we usually get a slew of tips that night or the next day. Basically, the friends and family of the bad guys make the best tipsters.

This summer our Crime Stoppers coordinator Washington County Deputy Damon Wegner and I along with the help of TipSoft's owner Kevin Anderson, upgraded our TipSoft system to Version 5.0. This new version is now all web-based and can be securely accessed from any Internet connected PC.

Whenever we get a tip from any of our three tip portals, both Damon and I get SMS Text message alerts sent to our cell phones. From there we can both logon to the TipSoft Web site and view the tip specifics. If it is a hot one we can call dispatch or Damon can jump in his squad truck and go hunt down that felon we got the tip about.

The new online version of TipSoft keeps the tipster data secured at a remote site rather than on our own desktops or laptops. We are still learning the full capabilities of this new version and are trying to utilize the many features that help us track and document the critical information delivered to Crime Stoppers.

Deputy Wegner took a Crime Stoppers course this month that covered many issues including a detailed class on TipSoft and how to organize the information to provide comprehensive reporting capabilities. These reports should help us review the data better and enable us to track tips submitted to crimes solved comparisons and analysis.

Those three tip submittal portals to Crime Stoppers include the local phone number of 836-TIPS (8477), the online tip submittal form on our Web site at [www.BrenhamCrimeStoppers.com](http://www.BrenhamCrimeStoppers.com), and our new portal we just set up last month - Text Messaging from any cellular phone!

This new Text Messaging tip submission portal is targeted for the younger crowd since they spend most of their day texting anyway. Now if they witness a crime or hear some loser bragging about all the guns he stole that weekend, the tipster can anonymously type in the tip information via their cell phone to the address "CRIMES" with the keyword "TIP508" within the text message.

This tip text message is sent to the CRIMES server and then relayed without any sender identity what so ever to our TipSoft online service. Damon and I are then immediately notified by a pair of alerts on our phones that the text messaged tip has been submitted. From that point Damon and/or I logon to the secured TipSoft Web site and reply

back to the tipster, again anonymously, that we have received the tip and are now evaluating the information.

Being both a computer networking geek and the chairman of Brenham Washington County Crime Stoppers, I have been able to utilize numerous technical tools to help receive and deliver these tips. But it is the tipster that is stepping forward and sometimes putting themselves at risk calling, typing or texting in these tips that is absolutely critical to the success of the Crime Stoppers.

Some other cool stuff we have put on our Web site is the county's "Most Wanted" pictures, audio players for our public service announcements that run on KWHI and KTEX, and some really neat safety videos (good self defense moves) that you should check out at the Crime Stoppers Web site.

Our next step is to start promoting the Web site, phone number and text message address so tipsters are familiar and comfortable with leaving tips with Crime Stoppers. For those tipsters that are technically challenged or just not near a computer, remember that the phone number 836-TIPS (8477) has a live person the tipster can talk to twenty four hours a day seven days a week.

I plan to meet with the administrators of the high school and Blinn College to start putting signs around the campuses to advertise our three tip portals and how we pay up to \$1,000 tax free cash for anonymous tips leading to arrest of

a suspected criminal. We are surprised at the number of tips we receive from people that appear not to be interested in getting paid for their information since they never call back to check on their tip money.

Since all calls, web submittals and text message tips have no tipster identities associated with the information, we cannot call or contact them back to get the money to them. So for any of you tipsters out there that have submitted tips to us and want to inquire for the reward status call the main number of 836-TIPS (8477) using your original tipster secret identification code and talk to the Crime Stoppers operator that is always available.

Bottom Line: Now with three ways (phone, Web site, text messaging) to leave tips to Crime Stoppers all we need is some good American citizens of Washington County to step up and deliver the dirt on the dirt bags!

One Last Thing: Changed my mind and bought the Honda Civic Hybrid instead after finding out more up-to-date information on battery life - I'll let you know how that works out in about three years.

Next week's column: Dangers of Text Messaging.

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