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Technology, pawn shops help close cases

County police use 'hits' from stores to make arrests

by Andre L. Taylor | Staff Writer

Pawn shops, with their quick payouts and underpriced secondhand items, are attractive to thieves looking to get rid of stolen items.

They are also a key component in solving robbery and burglary cases. Montgomery County Assistant State's Attorney Stephen Chaikin said he has relied on information from pawn shops to prosecute suspects in 25 cases in the last year.

"It's almost like a starting place" to find suspects, since they have to use picture identification when pawning items, Chaikin said. "That's the clue that we need. If that person isn't the stealer, they may know who is."

Most pawn shops use computer technology to record and report all transactions. Dallas-based LeadsOnline sells subscriptions to their Web site nationally to law enforcement agencies to track down stolen items.

Famous Pawn in Germantown reports all daily transactions to LeadsOnline and works closely with Montgomery County police, said Rick Wessel, chief executive officer of Dallas-based First Cash Financial Services, which owns the pawn shop. An iPod sold to the pawn shop in January led to the arrest of a Germantown man wanted for two thefts.

Information from pawn shops is being used in five current cases Chaikin is prosecuting, he said.

Chaikin credits information from a pawn shop in Frederick for helping to prosecute Jayson Mosley, 24, of Germantown. Mosley and four other men went to Frederick to pawn a stolen laptop, but when police showed up, Mosley ran and police arrested the four men with him. The four men said Mosley stole the laptop and he was arrested in Rockville days later. Mosley now faces 27 years in prison for several burglaries. Mosley was convicted in January of felony theft scheme and will be sentenced March 11.

Statewide, customers must provide to pawn shops their photo identifications and detailed personal information, Chaikin said. "It's a great investigative tool," Chaikin said of this law enforced by the state's Department of Labor Licenses and Regulations. "It lets the police see if there are hot items at any time in a pawn shop."

More advanced ways to track a stolen item at a pawn shop yield speedier results.

Within a couple minutes of typing a description or serial number of a stolen item anywhere in the country, a police officer can find the location of that item if it is in a pawn shop, said Dave Finley, chief executive officer of LeadsOnline. Police agencies can get a 30-day free subscription to the tracking site. Prices start at \$1,000 a year and go up depending on the size of the police department,

Finley said.

"It's worth the price because of the quick turnaround of tracking stolen items and returning them to their owners," Finley said. "There are a number of pawn shops in Maryland that use our service."

Famous Pawn reports all transactions to the site. Wessel said his company cooperates with law enforcement agencies in every state they have businesses. Keeping record of driver's licenses and merchandise serial numbers is how his company helps police capture criminals.

"A criminal is much better off taking stolen goods to a flea market rather than bringing anything into a pawn shop," Wessel said. "If the item is stolen, we have a map right back to the person who stole it."

Capt. Thomas Didone, commander of the 5th District station in Germantown, said the relationship between the police and pawn shops is essential to closing cases. Didone could not supply statistics, but said county police have made more larceny arrests from "hits" on stolen goods sitting in pawn shops in the last two years.

"When we recover stuff, they lose money," Didone said. "But that hasn't stopped them from helping us close our cases."