

Officer Todd Stevens' Evaluation Report of The Coban vs The Arbitrator In-Car Video Systems

In October, 2011, I was tasked with evaluating the Coban in-car camera system & in March, 2012, I was asked to evaluate the Panasonic Arbitrator in-car camera system. The following are my observations of both systems. I shall strive to report solely on my experience in the use of the equipment, in addition to my dealings with each company.

Coban

My initial impressions of this system were positive. The training provided by the company was very thorough and the sales & tech team seemed to understand the needs of the Key West PD and law enforcement in general. The training was very thorough and easy to follow and understand, complete with practical demonstrations. Upon completion of the training, I felt confident in my abilities to use the system. The system is very user-friendly. As with many new technologies, proficiency in its use is perishable; however, the simplicity of the buttons and functions of the Coban system are self-explanatory and has not required any "refresher" training. The system is independent of the car, i.e. it has a flip-down screen that is installed in the headliner of the car and does not appear to replace any of the existing components. Thus, it can be flipped-up, so as not to impede the visibility of the driver/operator. The touch-screen is Windows-based and is very easy to see, use and understand. The screen can be turned off while in operation, if the operator wishes to covertly record.

The system's activation triggers appear to function as in the iCop system. The screen gives up-to-the-minute status of episodes being recorded, including speed, light bar activation and ignition.

The system has a "snapshot" feature, wherein the operator can take a still picture of whatever is in front of the camera. It also has a "close shot" button in which the camera will micro-focus on an object held close and take a still photo, for example a driver license, and incorporate it into the recording.

The resolution is far superior to that of the iCop system and appears very detailed, even in low-light conditions. The quality of the in-car microphones, in addition to the remote microphone is excellent. Furthermore, I have tested the remote at various distances with assorted barriers in the way and it has only failed to initiate the system once, while inside The Reach resort, when I was deep within the hotel at the opposite end of the property. The remote is small and simple: it has two buttons, one to initiate recording and one to bookmark an event. The remote also alerts the operator while it is recording by vibrating every minute when activated.

A feature that has been very useful is the ability of the operator to input references onto the video. For example, once recording is completed, the operator can enter the case number, in addition to a ticket number, CAD number, defendants name(s) & details, type of activity (eg. arrest, accident, citizen contact, traffic stop etc) and a narrative. The remote has a "book-marking" button, which has proven useful. I have initiated it during

interviews, for example when Miranda is read, or when an admission is made by a suspect. This makes for easy reference when reviewing the recording, so that the operator can easily locate the time that certain occurrences happen. This is a particularly useful feature for officers conducting DUI investigations, during field-sobriety exercises.

Another impressive feature is the remote upload ability. In order for an iCop video to be uploaded, the operator has been forced to contact a supervisor to remove the hard-drive and manually upload its contents. The Coban system does this remotely, when the officer pulls up to the station. The operator can wait for the system to detect the vicinity of the server, in which case, the system automatically uploads the video, or they can manually instruct the system to upload. The speed at which uploads occur is impressive. The screen gives an easy-to-understand progress report of uploads as they transfer to the server. If the officer needs to leave the station, the system pauses the upload with no effect on the system's recording or operational functions. When the officer returns to the station, the upload picks up where it left off. All the uploads that I have observed have taken less than five minutes.

The only issue that I have experienced was early on in the test period. The system froze completely after I attempted a hard shut-down. The system would not shut down through normal procedures, so I held the power button down, for fear of the car battery being drained. Coban support staff were able to resolve the issue in a matter of minutes and they explained that the system occasionally updates itself, which is why the system would not shut down. They further explained that the system has a fail-safe power mode, wherein if it detects that the vehicle's power supply drops below a certain level, the system will shut itself down. The system also shuts down after approximately half an hour of the vehicle's ignition being turned off.

Lastly, I have had very good experiences with the staff at Coban. I was given cell phone numbers for several people, including their tech support. When the system malfunctioned, they were immediately available to remedy the issue and I returned to normal service in a matter of minutes. I have called several times to ask about certain capabilities or features and my questions were answered immediately and to my satisfaction. I have received regular phone calls from sales and tech support, inquiring if I had any further questions. The system also comes with an easy to understand, laminated quick reference "cheat sheet" which describes each of the functions in simple language.

The system is very comprehensive in its abilities and I have found it easy to explore its various features.

Panasonic Arbitrator

My initial impressions of this system were less positive. This system is run through our Panasonic laptops and required a lengthy installation of the required software, which took me out of service for over an hour. The training for the system was also time-consuming

and difficult to follow and many questions asked by those in attendance were not answered. On my first day of using the system, the computer would not sync to the recorder. I made contact with a Panasonic representative and he was unable to ascertain a solution, saying that it might be a problem for the City's IT personnel. When the City's IT specialists were able to look into the problem, they determined that the Arbitrator software was in conflict with another program that was installed on the computer.

The system appears to have many of the functions of the Coban system, however, it is less user-friendly and operation is more complex. Because the system operates through our laptop computers, the user is forced to toggle between screens for navigation of the system. On a positive note, I have not noticed a discernible difference in the speed of the computer's other functions (e.g. CAD, Report manager, DAVID) while the Arbitrator system is running.

The Arbitrator model that I am currently testing has four cameras which give the operator a 360 degree recordable view. This is a useful feature in capturing events to the side and rear of the car. When the system is activated, all four cameras record simultaneously, thus negating the need for the operator to choose which camera to activate or, if outside the vehicle, the remote will initiate all cameras simultaneously. The Arbitrator screen size is adjustable and can be minimized or maximized for ease of viewing.

As with the Coban, the triggers for recording are similar to those for the iCop. These are also displayed on the screen and are highlighted when activated, similar to the Coban. The Panasonic system, however, appears to operate on a delay. It seems to take several seconds for the sensors to react to stimuli, such as pressing the brakes and, while it records speed, it does not seem to be in "real-time", i.e. it takes several seconds to record a decrease or increase in speed. Consequently, one can be stopped and the system still displays that they are travelling.

The camera device is slightly larger than that of the iCop or Coban. It does have switches for basic operations, such as buttons for "Record", "Auto Zoom" manual zoom, and brightness displays. This is a useful feature in the event that the computer controls are ineffective, or in a high-stress situation. Like the Coban, the system also has a "snapshot" feature. However, in the Arbitrator, because the system is operated by the in-car computer, this can be e-mailed directly from the laptop.

The display for the Arbitrator system appears "busy", i.e. there are too many controls and is confusing. Whereas the Coban display is simple and easy to understand, the Arbitrator screen has numerous buttons and controls which can make it confusing. Furthermore, their functions are not easy to understand. While there is an easily located, highly visible "Record" and "Stop" button, the rest of the controls seem extraneous and bewildering. A nice feature is a large, easily recognizable "REC" icon that appears at the top of the computer screen while the device is recording. This appears in all of the windows, regardless of which window is being utilized. When the vehicle is switched off and then on again, the computer needs to re-sync to the recorder. This can take between several seconds to several minutes. While this is not crippling, it is an inconvenience.

The remote is a convenient size, however, it has more buttons than seem practical, especially in a high-stress situation. It has a "Talk" button (which must be pressed twice to initiate recording), an on/off switch, a "mute" button and a "mode" button. It also has several red and green lights which indicate the status of the recorder, however, after trial and error I still do not know what they are indicating. The remote has a range which seems similar to that of the Coban's.

The internal microphones can be turned on and off in one of the computer screens, a feature which is lacking in the Coban. The system also has a bookmarking feature, however, this is only accessible on one of the computer screens and is not a feature of the remote, like on the Coban. Therefore, to utilize this feature in the Arbitrator, one must be on the computer, rather than in the field.

The system has all of the features that would be useful, however, it seems less efficient than the Coban.

Summary

While both systems are similarly comprehensive in their abilities, the Coban system was the easiest to learn and to utilize. The controls are very easy to understand and use and the reaction time was faster. Furthermore, the camera resolution, coupled with its sound quality makes the Coban a superior product to the Arbitrator, in my opinion. The screen display of the Coban is easier to navigate and, during times of stress, it is easier to operate. The additional features of the system are easily accessed and utilized through a "More" button on the screen. The ability to enter case number, CAD number, defendant name and pedigree information, in addition to narrative and type of event is also a big plus. The upload time of the Coban is also far superior than that of the Arbitrator and its ease of use eliminates much of the responsibilities of the operator, supervisor or evidence custodian. Overall, the Coban system is much more "user-friendly" than the Arbitrator, or even the iCop. Lastly, the customer service I have experienced with the Coban team has been very satisfactory.