

Outsmarting the burglars

A combination of stylish design and wireless technology promises to bring home security into the 21st century. **Jon Excell** reports



A WIRELESS home security system said to be cheaper, smarter and simpler to use than a traditional burglar alarm is set to be launched early next year.

Alertme.com, the small Cambridge start-up behind the Alertme system, believes the product, which uses a collection of wireless sensors to monitor a user's home, will breathe fresh life into an industry that has so far failed to capitalise on the rise of wireless technology, mobile phones and the web.

Alertme is the brainchild of serial Cambridge entrepreneurs Pilgrim Beart and Adrian Critchlow. Beart founded wireless asset location firm activeRF and antenna specialist Antenna, while Critchlow was the founder of

ActiveHotels.com, which was recently sold for £90m.

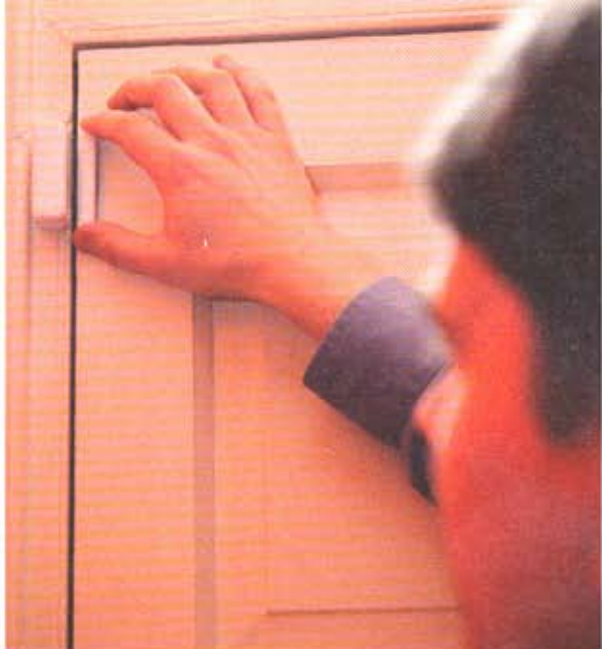
The brain of the system is the 'hub', an unobtrusive, four-inch square box that plugs into both the mains electricity and a broadband router's ethernet socket. This communicates wirelessly using the zigbee low-power radio protocol with a series of sensors distributed around the home.

Included in the kit are motion sensors that detect whether a door or window is opened, and even a detector that will listen for the high-pitched bleeping emitted by pre-installed smoke or carbon monoxide alarms. 'If you're away from your home and there's a problem you usually find out

when it's much too late. A normal smoke alarm is great if you're in the house, but if you're away nobody out on the street is going to notice until there's smoke pouring out of the window,' said Alertme's marketing director Nik Rouda.

The system also includes a key fob that can be used to arm and disarm the technology, and a small lamp that acts as both an ambient notification device — flashing red if there's a problem or remaining green if all is well — and a booster for the ZigBee signal.

Rouda said that if a break-in or fire is detected, the system will use the broadband connection to send a message to Alertme's central server.



This secure data centre, located in the bowels of an old nuclear bunker somewhere in the South of England, will then immediately relay the alert to the user via text message, phone call, or email.

If the customer is not available, the system will cascade down through a series of specified contacts such as next-door neighbours or family. Rouda said that if the home's broadband connection is somehow disabled the hub will communicate with the server via a back-up GPRS connection.

He claimed that Alertme represents a significant improvement over existing home security systems. 'We can tell you things that traditional devices can't, such as who's coming home when, and what

the temperature is.' He added that the company hopes to ultimately expand the service to include lighting control and integration with home entertainment systems.

The firm is also working on the development of an automated voice system that, in the event of an emergency in your home, will call you, give you as much detail as possible on the situation, and 'walk you' through the various options. This, said Rouda, will be considerably more helpful and sophisticated than the call centre approach employed by traditional security firms.

As well as its many hi-tech features, the Alertme team has worked alongside Cambridge design consultant DesignEdge to develop an unfussy, minimalist look that Rouda believes even the most avowed technophobe will find easy to set up and use. 'We've put a lot of thought into making something that's quite complex simple and easy to use. One of the things we think really differentiates this is that it's really people-friendly.'

This philosophy even extends to the

Perhaps the one area where traditional alarms still have the edge though is in the home insurance business. Alertme doesn't currently qualify as a fully-monitored alarm system.

This, said Rouda is because of the way existing industry standards are set up. 'They stipulate that there must be a certain number of people working in the call centre, that these people must be security screened and that you must have a siren on the outside of the house encased in metal that's a certain number of cm thick. But these things don't apply to us — they're outdated standards for what we're doing.'

'I certainly think the insurance business is a great potential partner for us. After all, what we're doing is helping people look after their homes — we're going to take it on a case-by-case basis.' Despite this, Rouda said he doesn't think it will make all that much difference whether insurers recognise the system or not. He claimed that a pretty thorough survey of companies revealed that many don't recognise any

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packaging which has been designed in such a way that the components can only be removed in the correct order from a series of numbered boxes. 'It's so simple that a box will come in the post and you can set it up in less than an hour,' claimed Rouda.

But despite Alertme's claimed 'idiot-proof' qualities, technophobes are unlikely to be big customers for the system. Indeed, with its glossy white finish, soft edges, intuitive control interfaces and pleasant lights all paying something of a stylistic tribute to Apple's iPod, Rouda believes the system's gadget appeal could be its biggest selling point.

'When you ask people why they don't have home security systems they say they're hard to use, they're ugly, they make a lot of noise and they are industrial looking,' he said. 'We thought why not make something that's modern that people wouldn't be ashamed to have in their homes?'

form of alarm system and those that do tend to offer negligible discounts on your policy.

Meanwhile, following a series of trials, the company is gearing up for launch. Last week, a customer in Cambridge took delivery of the first Alertme system and, assuming there are no glitches, the technology will be rolled out nationwide in January. Around 100 kits have already been delivered by the firm's Chinese contract manufacturer and another 1,000 will have arrived in time for the official launch. After that, said Rouda, Alertme hopes to scale up production considerably.

The kit, which will be sold directly through the company website, will cost £399, and will also include a monthly service fee of £10. Rouda said that the system has been aggressively priced to undercut conventional systems which cost in the region of £1,000 to install and around £25 a month in service fees.