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Listening devices at donut sites stirs flap

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CONCORD, N.H. - At some **Dunkin** Donuts, the walls have ears.

So the next time you settle down over coffee and a cruller to trade gossip with a friend, keep in mind that hidden microphones may be recording the dirt you dish.

Manager Tony Wright insists he's not being nosy. It's just another way to increase security and keep employees on their toes, he said. He would never listen to customer conversations, he said.

"Do you think I would waste my time?" said Mr. Wright, who manages five **Dunkin** Donuts in Concord.

Use of concealed recorders is widespread at fast-food restaurants, convenience stores and other businesses, according to one company that sells them.

But unlike anti-shoplifting mirrors and surveillance cameras seen throughout retail America these days, hidden microphones are news to most of the public, judging from interviews Thursday at two microphone-equipped **Dunkin** Donuts in New Hampshire's capital.

"Knowing this, I would never have a conversation in here," said customer Frank Bowser, a private investigator who was discussing a case with a partner. "I think the general public would be in an uproar to know that every time they come in for a cup of coffee and a doughnut they could be heard."

Other customers, including Nick and Thalia Hondrogen, said they were more offended by cigarette smoke than listening devices.

Nonetheless, they were surprised.

"It's like spying. It sounds like Nazism or the KGB. It's not American," Ms. Hondrogen said. "Many times you say things to close friends you don't want overheard."

The systems also were news - unwelcome, at that - at **Dunkin** Donuts corporate headquarters in Randolph, Mass.

Any system powerful enough to record customers' conversations would be "highly inappropriate" and a violation of company policy, spokesman Bill Chiccarelli said.

Yesterday, **Dunkin** Donuts asked its franchisees to turn off their hidden

microphones, saying that using such equipment to listen to employees or was inappropriate.

"We have sent mailgrams today to all franchisees asking them to have such audio monitoring systems disconnected and removed immediately from their shops," the company said in a statement.

Still, store owners are using them. Jeff Meuse, owner of National Video Security Inc. of Manchester, says he has installed 500 systems throughout the Northeast in the last five years; of those, about 300 had audio monitoring. **Dunkin Donuts** is his biggest customer, he said.

Shops that have the monitoring systems display small stickers on their doors saying, "Audio monitoring on the premises."

All but the loudest customers are safe with many systems. At one **Dunkin Donuts**, Mr. Wright demonstrated that a customer standing at the counter below the single mike in the ceiling had to speak loudly and distinctly to be heard above the din of coffee grinders, staff and general restaurant noise.

The systems can be far more sophisticated, however. Lewis Weiss, chief executive officer of Louroe Electronics Inc. of Van Nuys, Calif., said his company's systems can pick up conversations within 30 feet.

"Unfortunately, this is going to be the future until we get to the point where there is minimal crime in this country," Mr. Weiss said. "Until then, store owners are going to have to have these devices to protect their employees and their customers."

The audio surveillance trend does not yet seem to have hit the Washington area: An informal survey of area **Dunkin Donuts** stores yesterday found none that said they used the listening devices. Some don't even use video cameras.

A few stores outside Baltimore, however, use listening systems, according to the Baltimore Sun.

But T.J. Chen, who manages a **Dunkin Donuts** in Fairfax, said, "At this moment, the video is adequate."

He said he may eventually consider installing a microphone if it seems necessary.

The Camp Springs **Dunkin Donuts** on Allentown Road has a microphone, but it's used to communicate from the front of the store to the back, not to listen in surreptitiously on customers' conversations, said Brian Lynn, the store manager.

Mina Ray, manager of the **Dunkin Donuts** on Richmond Highway in Alexandria, said she didn't see the point in listening to customers.

"That really isn't for us," she said. "To know what your customers or employees are saying?"

But the manager of the **Dunkin Donuts** on U Street near 14th Street in Northwest said that, because the Baskin-Robbins ice cream parlor next door has been robbed twice, she's looking into installing microphones.

"That would do us a lot of good," said the manager, who asked not to be identified.

She said she did not see anything wrong with listening to what's happening in the store.

"Nobody comes and tells somebody else a secret in here," she said. "This is a public place."

Barry Madden, manager of the **Dunkin** Donuts on Greenbelt Road in Greenbelt, said he'd install a microphone if he could afford it.

"We need them," he said. "You can never have enough {security devices}."

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) grudgingly accepts surveillance cameras and audio equipment at store and restaurant cash registers, providing customers and staff are notified.

"We would prefer not to see them at all, but if and when it does happen, we would strongly {want} there to be actual and functional notification," ACLU spokesman Milind Shah said in New York. "Often a sign on the door is not enough."

Federal law requires stores to post signs informing customers they might be monitored.

* Staff writer Tony Munroe contributed to this article.

Photo, A) A **Dunkin** Donuts manager, Tony Wright, stands by his monitor, which provides audio and video surveillance.; B) A small, faded sign that reads "Audio Monitoring on these Premises" is attached to the inside of the door, near the floor, at a **Dunkin** Donuts store in Concord, N.H., Both By AP

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