

Sonny's The CarWash Factory

Automating car wash operations with ALPR



Name

Sonny's The CarWash Factory

Industries

Manufacturing & Wholesale

Location

United States

Products

AutoVu SharpV



Sonny's The CarWash Factory helps operators increase revenue and enhance the car wash experience with Genetec AutoVu ALPR cameras

Sonny's The CarWash Factory, the world's largest manufacturer of conveyORIZED car wash equipment takes a progressive approach to all aspects of conveyORIZED car washing to help operators streamline operations and heighten profitability. Forward-thinking car wash investors, owners, and operators partner with Sonny's for innovative car wash education, services, software, and technology.

Pushing the boundaries of car wash innovation with ALPR

Innovation is a cornerstone of Sonny's business operations and global success. The company is constantly looking for new and better ways to enhance car wash operations. When the Sonny's CarWash Controls team first heard about automatic license plate recognition (ALPR) technology, they were immediately interested.

At the time, RFID tags were the most common way of detecting vehicles with car wash memberships, but they came with inherent challenges. When someone purchased a membership, attendants would need to install the RFID tag on the vehicle. Not only did this take time, but to ensure readability, the tag had to be placed on a specific spot on a vehicle's windshield. In some cases, the placement of the tag wasn't always welcomed by customers.

Likewise, from a business standpoint, RFID tags didn't provide an option to collect insights on customers and their visits. RFID technology merely detected vehicles with memberships and allowed them access to the car wash. Gathering more precise data on those subscription customers, as well as all the other vehicles entering the car wash, wasn't possible.

Regi Flanagan, Chief Technology Officer at Sonny's The Carwash Factory explained further: "With RFID technology, the membership sale experience wasn't a smooth process, and we didn't have valuable data on customer behavior. There were many assumptions. Without knowing the customers, it was difficult to tailor marketing promotions or improve the sales process. We wanted to see how we could leverage ALPR technology within our industry to streamline the customer experience, increase membership sales, and better understand customer trends."

Building an ALPR car wash solution with Genetec AutoVu

Flanagan and the Sonny's CarWash Controls team got to work and began building out a point of sale (POS) and Cloud-Based Back Office Management software to utilize ALPR. The goal was to integrate their software with an ALPR camera that could feed data back to the Sonny's system. This would allow operators to gather valuable customer information.

However, they soon realized it was challenging to find an ALPR camera that could read license plates with the level of accuracy they needed.

“When we were ready to start implementing ALPR, we bought six different ALPR cameras and began testing them. Many of the cameras didn’t have great read rates. The accuracy just wasn’t there. However, the Genetec™ AutoVu™ SharpV cameras came out as the winner in all areas,” said Flanagan. “It was the best camera and could easily be integrated with our system to give our customers a worry-free ALPR experience. The SharpV plate read accuracy far surpassed the others. Plus, the Genetec software and hardware are always kept up to date—they have an aggressive release cycle as we do, and they are open to feature requests from us. It has been a great partnership.”

Reducing friction points and increasing efficiencies

Today, over 1,000 individual car wash businesses have deployed Sonny’s CarWash Controls ALPR solution, and demand keeps growing. Sonny’s customers have been able to streamline their car wash operations, reduce labor costs, and improve their customer experience.

A carwash owner in South Florida recently upgraded to Sonny’s ALPR solution and commented: “It’s an assembly line now. We can just pump cars out. Our club membership sales are up by 5%, our ticket sales average is up, and our labor is down by 10%.”

Speeding up operations while enhancing the customer experience is a win-win for operators and their patrons.

“A lot of express car wash sites will do 1,000 to 2,000 cars in a day. So even just a few seconds of slowing down at the pay station or conveyor can affect how many cars they can process in an hour, which affects revenue. Using AutoVu ALPR, we’re able to enhance the speed of service,” explained Flanagan. “When someone with a membership pulls up, their license plate is read and the gate opens quickly. Customers who want a membership package can save time by purchasing memberships online. The experience is fast and seamless. Plus, operators no longer need to procure RFID tags, providing significant savings.”

Another unique feature using the Genetec ALPR solution is the Sonny’s Smart Queue, which includes an AutoVu SharpV camera at the tunnel entrance. As someone approaches the car wash tunnel, the ALPR camera reads the license plate and confirms the car is in the correct order in the queue. This prevents cars from getting out of order and receiving a higher or lower-level wash than what they purchased. If the system identifies the queue is out of order, it will automatically re-order the washes.

“In the past, an attendant had to make sure the right car was entering the wash and handle any needed adjustments. Now, using AutoVu ALPR, it’s completely automated. The attendant in the tunnel can focus on getting the cars onto the conveyor safely without having to worry about the order of the queue,” said Flanagan.



Reaping the benefits of collecting valuable customer data

In addition to streamlining operations, the AutoVu SharpV cameras can provide valuable customer data. The ALPR camera automatically captures customer license plate numbers, as well as the vehicle make and model. All data is immediately sent back to the Sonny’s Back Office management software. The car wash operator can view the information in real time from anywhere using an intuitive mobile app. They can analyze how often their customers visit the car wash and what types of car washes or upgrades they purchase most frequently. Using this information, operators can offer unique marketing promotions to visitors and determine the success of each initiative by looking at conversion rates.

“If it’s someone’s first visit to a car wash location, our system can recognize that and instantly offer them a promotion at the Pay Station such as ‘Welcome to our car wash! Here’s 50% off the top car wash package.’ Or, ‘This is the second time we see you this month, you could be saving with our monthly membership.’ Our car wash operators can configure new marketing promotions in advance, so they’re all automated. They can also see the ratio of new versus returning customers and look at real-time conversion rates on their promotions to know which ones are working best,” said Flanagan.

Through the streamlined membership buying experience and individualized marketing, operators can increase their membership sales.

Moving forward with new car wash innovations

The Sonny’s CarWash Controls team is currently working with Genetec to develop new firmware functionalities that will allow the ALPR camera to detect trailer hitches and bike mounts on vehicles.

“This is a valuable feature for our industry because if an employee doesn’t notice a trailer hitch on the back of a truck or car, some of the car wash equipment can get stuck on it and cause thousands of dollars of damage to the equipment or vehicle. With these enhanced

analytics, the ALPR camera will automatically detect a hitch and send that information to our Sonny's CarWash Controls system. Then the car wash equipment will stop and retract before reaching the trailer hitch," explained Flanagan.

In the future, Sonny's CarWash Controls is also considering other Genetec solutions to cater to the industry's broader security and safety needs. This could entail adding video surveillance and access control to secure car wash operations or installing cameras inside car wash tunnels to reduce liability and safety risks. There are plenty of opportunities to do more with Genetec technologies.

"Partnering with a company like Genetec helps our team make the ALPR car wash solution a success. The AutoVu SharpV cameras perform exceptionally well, and the Genetec team is always responsive and willing to help. But ultimately, it's the car wash operators who are benefiting the most. The ALPR solution helps our customers increase their sales, save on labor, and streamline the car wash experience so it's completely seamless to the end customer," concluded Flanagan.

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