# No Thumbprint, No Rental Car

By Julia Scheeres  |  Also by this reporter

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When James Glave arrived at Oakland International Airport and went to retrieve the rental car he had reserved over the Internet, he was dismayed to learn that the agency not only required his driver's license and payment information, but also his thumbprint.

The New Mexico-based magazine editor said he found out about the requirement when he walked up to the Dollar Rent A Car counter and noticed a display featuring a drawing of a big thumb making the A-OK sign with the words "Thumbs Up!" printed on it.

The display explained that thumbprints were being collected from customers as part of an effort to reduce fraud and theft, Glave said.

When he refused to fork over his digit, the employee refused to rent him a car.

Glave, a former reporter and editor at Wired News, had unwittingly walked into Dollar's biometric experiment, which is being conducted at the agency's outposts in 13 airports across the country.

"It's all about asset control," Jim Senese, Dollar's vice president of quality assurance, said.

The vehicle rental industry is plagued by theft and credit card fraud, which often go hand in hand: Fake or stolen IDs and credit cards are used to rent vehicles, which are never returned.

U-Haul has been thumbprinting clients in areas with high theft rates since the early 90s, said company spokeswoman Jennifer Flachman, who added that the prints are destroyed at the customer's request when the equipment is returned.

At Dollar, the rental agreement forms -- and thumbprints -- are stored at the company's corporate headquarters in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for seven years before they are trashed.

Senese said the system would benefit customers by keeping rental prices down. The month-long pilot program, which concludes Dec. 1, has successfully reduced fraud and theft at the test locations, Senese said. He refused to divulge the particulars of the test, which had been scheduled for rollout this month before the Sept. 11 attacks.

Deterrence is a key feature of the system, he said.

"If someone has a bad intention, they're going to go somewhere else," Senese said. "It's kind of like being the one store in the mall that drug-tests new applicants -- people won't try to get work there if they have a drug problem."

He was surprised to learn of Glave's reaction to the program, saying that thousands of Dollar customers have been thumbprinted in past weeks and the company has received few complaints.

Privacy advocates say that the burgeoning use of biometric data -- including face and finger scans -- by government and corporations is poorly regulated and worry that information could be used to track and monitor citizens.

"It's important not to be blindsided by these things," said Lauren Weinstein, the moderator of the Privacy Forum.

In the climate of fear following the Sept. 11 attack, the public has been more willing to forfeit privacy for the promise of greater security, without considering the long-term consequences, Weinstein said.

"How would you feel if you went to the grocery store, and you went to sign a check and they demanded a thumbprint?" Weinstein said. "Ten years from now they'll be demanding your DNA."

The Dollar pilot program has been rolled out in the following airports: Philadelphia International, Ronald Reagan Washington National, Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport, Chicago Midway, Detroit Metro, Baltimore/Washington International, Dallas Love Field, William P. Hobby Airport in Houston, San Diego International, Los Angeles International, San Francisco International, Denver International and Oakland International.

"I don't think companies have any role collecting biometric data," Glave said. "It takes us into a surveillance society that is profoundly disturbing. What's next? Am I going to have to be fingerprinted when I check into a hotel in case I trash my room?"

"The only print of mine Dollar is going to get is the front side of my middle finger," Glave said.

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