



# Hands down

The Spa Lady chain of fitness centres in Alberta was looking to reduce fraud and make entry to their ladies-only facilities easy. Biometric hand readers were the answer.

By Jack Kohane

**P**ina Start knows the nuances of shape and texture posed by the 27 bones that comprise the human wrist, palm, four fingers, and thumb. In her experience as an aesthetician, she says she's never seen two digits among her clients that are exactly the same. But she admits she didn't realize just how individualistic our hands really are until she placed her palm onto the biometrics reader at her favourite fitness club. "It was like something out of a futuristic movie," she smiles. "I was hesitant at first, and it took a while to get the hang of placing my fingers precisely between the positioning pegs, but now I think nothing of it. It only takes a couple of seconds to complete — I have instant access and get to my workout quickly."

Start's club is Spa Lady Canada, a ladies-only fitness facility serving thousands of clients at six locations in Calgary and Edmonton, Alta.. Each club processes between 800 to 1,000 transactions per day. In 1996, grappling with a 30 per cent fraudulent membership dilemma, Barry Sarazin, the club's general manager, resolved to get serious about combating the problem.

"We needed to tighten up use of the club," emphasizes Sarazin. "Up until then, we relied on an honour system, where customers signed in to enter the facility. We were spending too much time policing this, which wasn't cost effective and the fraud persisted."

Sarazin investigated numerous types of access control measures, including retina scans, swipe and proximity cards, seeking a system that was both simple to operate and error-proof. To find the right answer for Spa Lady, Sarazin

visited numerous fitness operations in the United States. "Most of them were using photo ID," he says. "I saw them pull up a picture of the client on a computer, and many times the image didn't resemble the person. I didn't like picture ID because people tend to change their appearance over time, and the picture files are too large and too slow to bring up on a computer swiftly. Though I thought retina scan was cool, I also knew it would be far more daunting for our clientele." He opted against those systems.

When he learned about hand-reading biometrics technology, and viewed it in action during a demonstration, he was sold. "I went with hand geometry because of its ease of use. And once clients are familiar with the system, and understand we don't share their handprints with police or financial information with agencies like Revenue Canada, it isn't intimidating at all. We've had hand-readers in place for eight years with virtually no complaints. Those few clients who refuse to use the reader are asked to bring a picture ID and copy of their contract every time they come to the club."

After conducting his research, Sarazin selected the hand-reading biometrics from IR Recognition Systems. Based out of Campbell, Calif., Bill Spence, IR's director of marketing, says there are more than 70,000 IR hand geometry units throughout the world reading millions of hands each day.

Partnering with Spa Lady to provide specific access control solutions for a high-volume enterprise, Spence recommended IR's HandKey unit. "It's ideal for applications large and small, integrating seamlessly into existing systems, and bolstered by low, field-proven error rates," says Spence. "High volume, high throughput environments can't tolerate errors, so the value of hand-readers is that they maximize fast, reliable and easy enrolment and use. Simple ID badges can be lost or stolen or given to friends, but the HandKey minimizes the inconvenience of worrying about keeping track of a card or key."

Spa Lady's hand-readers are positioned at the turnstile

entrance, in addition to a separate unit placed in each administrative office to enter new clients onto the database and designated as a station for staff and customers to practice working with the reader. Sarazin points out that the time needed to manage the hand-reader learning curve is about 15 minutes.

"Everything ties into the client's database, their financial standing with each club and attendance," Sarazin explains, adding that every client is also given a five-digit member number. When patrons come to the front entrance, they provide the receptionist with their member number and the receptionist pulls up their information. Then the client places their hand onto the reader and the turnstiles allow them through. "The client needn't use the keypad on the hand-reader, because we prefer to give our members a more personal touch," he says.

Over the years, hand geometry biometrics has proven to Sarazin it can do the job. "Fraud has been virtually eradicated since we installed the system," he remarks. "There's no way an impostor can bypass it. Problems only arise when our staff hasn't fully explained to a client how to use the reader. This is one of best security investments we've made, one which has paid for itself many times over in low maintenance, reducing staff costs and access convenience for clients." Sarazin notes that there are currently 12 hand-reader units in operation at Spa Lady, and he has plans to increase that number to 18 to accommodate new "express lanes" for frequent users at each club. "We'll upgrade our existing units for this additional procedure, as well as including staff time and attendance applications."

According to Start, who has been a Spa Lady patron since 1981, no one seems to mind the idea of biometrics access. "Everyone here has taken it in stride," she insists. "As for privacy concerns, I don't think it invades mine in any way. I'm comfortable with the technology."

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