

SHOPLIFTING PREVENTION

Retailers lose tens of billions of dollars each year to shoplifting. Shoplifters come in all ages, sexes, economic and ethnic backgrounds. Oftentimes shoplifters will work in pairs or groups in order to divert associates' attention. A shoplifter can hit your store at anytime, but you are most vulnerable just after opening, just before closing, at shift changes, and during associate break times. A successful shoplifting prevention program depends on your staff being trained in standard methods of shoplifting deterrence, as well as how to recognize "red flags" and how to react when a shoplifting is suspected or actually observed.

Common Shoplifting Techniques

Shoplifters can be divided into six distinct groups: professionals, opportunists, impoverished, drug users, thrill seekers and kleptomaniacs. The *professional* steals for a living; the *opportunist*, who may be a frequent customer, steals because they think it's OK since they are a good customer or that it's "no big deal" and the store can afford the loss; the *impoverished* steal because it's something they really need, but can't afford; the *drug user* steals to support a drug habit; the *thrill seeker* steals as part of an initiation, ritual or just on a dare; and the *kleptomaniac* is, indeed, sick and steals just to steal. Each group has its own individual modus operandi, but there are also common mannerisms that associates should be trained to recognize and know how to act in response when observed.

Be on the alert for "booster" devices, which range from clothing worn to conceal stolen product (e.g., coats, jackets, expandable underwear and socks, etc.) to large purses, backpacks, shopping bags, boxes and even baby strollers.

Oftentimes shoplifters will use a bag, purse or backpack as a tool to conceal merchandise. During rainy weather, umbrellas are a handy tool for a shoplifter to conceal small items. The shoplifter will keep the umbrella closed facing down, making it easy to conceal a small item. Other shoplifters will just pick up merchandise and walk out the door. They rely on the cashier's reluctance to challenge them.

Most shoplifters succeed because they are allowed a degree of privacy. The best way to prevent shoplifting is through excellent customer service. Stores that have high levels of customer service typically have reduced levels of shoplifting, since great customer service reduces the opportunity for a shoplifter to succeed. Shoplifters oftentimes will enter the store in groups and then separate and go to different areas of the store.



Shoplifting Prevention

Keep an extra sharp eye on the hand tools, power tools, plumbing and electrical aisles. These aisles contain product that is routinely shoplifted. Items in the plumbing and electrical departments which are rarely sold, expensive, small and easy to conceal, also need to be closely monitored.

When approaching a customer in an aisle, ask a pointed question that requires more than just a "yes" or "no" answer. For example, if the customer is looking at circuit breakers,

you might ask “which circuit blew in your house?” If the customer is looking at copper fittings, you might ask “what kind of plumbing project do you have?” An honest customer should provide a straightforward response without hesitation. A shoplifter, however, will not have a ready response and will hesitate and/or not respond with a common sense answer. Also look for nervousness, perspiration and darting eyes, all of which are common characteristics of a shoplifter.

If the customer appears nervous and refuses assistance or spends more time looking around to see who’s watching them instead of looking at the merchandise, this is a distinct red flag and should result in an extra measure of customer service. Be especially alert when the store is crowded. Remember, you cannot be criticized for providing too much customer service. A good response to customers who say they don’t need any assistance is to simply state that you’ll be in the area and will check back with them in a few minutes.

Cashiers should be trained to look inside of items that can be used to conceal other items (e.g., coolers, trash cans, etc.). They should also check to ensure that factory seals on boxes have not been compromised. Cashiers need to make sure that EAS tags are deactivated or removed (if applicable). And cashiers must be familiar with the prices and products to detect shoplifters who have either switched price tags or similar, but differently priced, items.

Reacting to a Shoplifting

It is vitally important that you have a PLAN to deal with suspected shoplifting. A manager should always be contacted and make the decision as to how it is to be handled. Always allow the customer to exit the store; always have a manager, along with an associate, make the detention; never touch or accuse the customer of theft during the detention – simply invite him/her back into the store to resolve a discrepancy; always have a cashier or other associate call the police at the time you exit the store; always keep the hands of the shoplifter in sight at all times during the detention process and after return to the store. These and other important components of the detention process must be followed to safely and successfully resolve a shoplifting incident.

Retail Loss Prevention offers an on-site training session designed to train management and associates in shoplifting prevention strategies and the detention process. Contact Retail Loss Prevention at 630-972-2670 and speak to a member of our staff, or e-mail us at info@acelossprevention.com for additional information.