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action against business crime

Preventing Customer Theft

A Good Practice Guide
for Retailers

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This booklet contains advice on what steps retailers can take to reduce the effects of theft in their businesses.

Further advice may be obtained from your local business crime reduction partnership, trade association or security adviser.

Introduction

This guide provides information on how to deal more effectively with customer theft – shoplifting. Customer theft is very widespread and is often dismissed as minor crime. The advice contained in this booklet will help to reduce the impact of shoplifting – and since it is very likely that you will confront a shoplifter at some time, let us begin with the legal definition of theft.

What is Theft?

The Theft Act, 1968 says that: a person who dishonestly takes property belonging to another, with the intention of permanently depriving the other of that property, is guilty of theft.

The Main types of Customer Theft in Shops

■ Opportunists

Many shop thieves are not regular offenders, but may be influenced by the opportunity which presents itself to them at the time. Retailers should try to ensure that expensive items do not present easy targets. Thieves may steal on a daily or weekly basis, may be regular or long-standing customers and may mix purchases with stolen goods. It is prudent not to take anyone for granted. It will be difficult to prevent thieves stealing many smaller and less expensive items which are on open display - food, clothing, confectionery, cosmetics etc.

■ Juveniles

Young people can be influenced by pressure from school or friends to join in stealing. They may also be bullied or coerced into stealing. Groups of young people can present a particular problem and retailers need to try and manage them, perhaps by limiting numbers allowed into the store, insisting on an adult accompanying them or by excluding them at certain times - lunch breaks and after school. Plastic screens in front of confectionery displays can reduce the opportunity to steal.

■ Thieves who use children

Some people use children either to carry out thefts or to disguise adults stealing. Babies (both real and dolls) in prams can be used as decoys and to hide goods. Goods may be given to young children to walk out of the store with or they may be placed on the under-tray of the pram.

■ Mentally ill or disturbed persons

A very small number of people who steal may suffer from a compulsive condition. Other persons who steal may be suffering from other forms of mental ill health and retailers should always be conscious of the possibility that someone they are dealing with falls into this category. Some elderly people may be confused or forgetful and it may be appropriate to either offer to help them when they enter your store or see if there are friends or relatives who can accompany the person so as to prevent misunderstandings.

■ Drug abusers

The single biggest problem for retailers is that of drug abusers who steal to support their addiction. They are persistent and may try to steal repeatedly on the same day. They should always be refused entry to the store or escorted from the shop if found inside. It is safer to do this than to try and detain them once they have stolen goods, as their behaviour may become irrational or violent if their freedom is challenged.

■ **Distraction Theft**

This is a method where a group of people will enter a store and distract staff in order to steal either bulk items, or expensive goods. In many cases, retailers will be unaware that they have been victims until later. Some younger groups of distraction thieves may create a disturbance and become violent if challenged.

■ **Staff collusion**

All retailers (and other businesses) are at risk of collusive fraud and theft of goods and cash between staff and customers. Sometimes staff will willingly work with friends or relatives or they may be coerced into doing this. Frequent till checks, strict compliance with till procedures and personal or CCTV observation of suspected collusive staff will help to reduce opportunity and set the standard.

■ **Professional thieves**

The increasing number of thieves who travel locally, regionally or nationally to steal from shops several times a day, every day of the week is a growing and serious risk. They will steal large quantities of goods, mainly of high value, frequently work in groups and may resort to violence if caught. Retailers may not be aware that they have been visited until they discover their losses.

What can You do About it?

Not all of the following practical suggestions will apply to your business. The level of shop theft committed against your premises will depend on a range of factors.

These include:

- the type of goods you sell
- the location
- the layout of your shop and the style and location of your displays
- the local crime rate
- the hours you trade
- the number of staff you employ and their experience

You need to consider all of your circumstances and then choose the preventive measures which suit you best. Your local crime prevention officer will help you do this.

Remember – all retailers are at risk. Never think that your type of business isn't.

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■ Establish a Policy

Establish a store policy for the prevention of customer theft and ensure that all staff are aware of it. Remember to brief new and part time employees on store policy and procedures.

■ Train your Staff

Well trained and alert staff form the basis for good crime prevention. Don't rely on technology instead of investing in proper staff training. Get advice from the Business Crime Reduction Partnership, crime prevention officer, trade association or trade newspaper. Training need not be expensive – 15 minutes each week should be enough to refresh your staff's memories, and stay alert.

■ Be Vigilant

Teach your staff to be alert, and to recognise shop thieves. Thieves will often look around the room rather than at the products, or behave in other suspicious ways. Train your staff to spot potential thieves.

■ Deter Offenders

The most effective – and cost-effective – way to prevent shoplifting is to deter known offenders by declining to let them enter your store, or politely asking them to leave if they have gained entry. This reduces the risk of violence, which can occur if an arrest has to be made and lets the person know you are alert and aware (see Store Banning).

■ Know what to do

Decide what you expect your staff to do when a suspect is identified. Making suspects aware they have been noticed will often be enough to deter crime. Use the normal sales approach, e.g. 'can I help you in any way?' or 'can I help you find anything?' Make yourself busy near the suspect; keep walking past them; smile at them, and look them in the eye. If the theft has already occurred you will want your staff to keep the suspect under observation – or alert specialist security staff if you employ them – with a view to making an arrest - see 'Making Arrests' Good Practice Guide.



Physical Security

Use a combination of preventive measures. Most strategies work best in combination rather than in isolation, e.g. CCTV can work effectively, particularly where helped by security mirrors, good lighting, and alert well-trained staff. Store design is important. Ask your crime prevention officer to advise you. Some useful measures are:

■ Dummy display goods

Empty display boxes or disabled products can help to reduce theft of electrical goods, music or other high risk or small items.

■ Security cabinets

High value goods can be displayed in lockable glass cabinets. BUT, they must be of a good quality, with doors that are not able to be lifted out, with good quality locks and strictly controlled access to keys.

■ Warning notices

Signs advertising the presence of recorded CCTV, central station alarms, hold-up alarms or the store till and cash policy (no cash left on premises) can play a part in deterring potential thieves, burglars or robbers.

■ Mirrors

Mirrors can help you keep an eye on areas which would otherwise be out of sight.

■ Display ('loop') alarms and tagging

High value goods can be protected by alarm wires which 'loop' through them to an alarm box. If the wire is disconnected or cut, the alarm sounds. Product tagging may also be of value.

■ Store Banning

Shops are private property with an implied invitation to enter to purchase or browse. A retailer can ban a person from a shop if his/her presence is not conducive to the business. This will include people who are violent, threatening or abusive, drunk or under the influence of drugs, or who are known or strongly believed to be involved in theft. A person who is banned should be told only that his/her presence is not wanted and that they should shop elsewhere. Do not become involved in giving detailed reasons for your actions.

Working With Others

Business Crime Reduction Partnerships

There are over 200 business crime reduction partnerships (BCRPs) in towns and cities helping to reduce business crime and violence. They operate as membership organisations and link businesses, mainly retailers, through radio links so members can be aware of current criminal activity. The radios are frequently also linked to the local town CCTV, police and other agencies such as wardens.

They also share photographs and other information about known thieves and operate partnership exclusion schemes whereby known thieves and anti-social persons are excluded from the premises of all the members.

These partnerships are very successful in deterring known and prolific thieves from members' stores and reducing the incidence of crime, abuse and violence. BCRPs are an important part of the local community safety plan and work closely with other organisations and agencies to ensure that business crime continues to be seen as a key issue for community safety.





How to Join

For more information on whether there is a BCRP in your area go to the Action Against Business Crime (AABC) web site: www.businesscrime.org.uk and click on 'crime partnerships' then telephone or e-mail AABC for further details.

The web site contains much information about the work of AABC, so please take some time to see what is being done to support businesses in their fight against crime and see how you can make an active contribution by joining your local BCRP.