

Shoplifting

One of the most common nonviolent crimes facing America today is shoplifting. Shoplifting is the theft of property offered for sale. Shoplifting is an expensive problem that ends up costing U.S. consumers and businesses billions per year. Businesses pay the costs of lost merchandise and security related expenses. Consumers pay higher retail prices for the goods because merchants pass on their costs. The police and the security industry should help merchants in their efforts to properly prevent and apprehend shoplifters.

Shoplifters represent every age group and income level. Anyone who enters a store could be a potential shoplifter. There are two types of shoplifters, professionals and amateurs. Professionals steal for a living while amateurs steal for a variety of other reasons. The reasons may include a simple desire to have the item, a desire to own luxury items, they steal for the thrill of it, peer pressure or group status, they may experience an irresistible impulse to steal (kleptomaniac), to support a drug habit, they believe the store owes it to them, they steal out of desperate need such as a vagrant taking food, clothing or alcohol, etc. . . .

Common Methods Used By Shoplifters

Shoplifters develop and use methods that are the most suitable for the particular talents of the shoplifter, and the type of merchandise to be stolen. The various methods employed include:

- Exiting the store with merchandise exposed either openly carried or worn by the shoplifter.
- Concealing the merchandise through a variety of means and walking out of the store. The means may include the following:
- Palming or sleight-of-hand is the carrying of a small item out in their hand. Packages, gloves, newspapers, or other aids that are normally carried in the hand can be used to cover up the act.
- Using aids to conceal the property. The aids may include:
 - ✓ Shopping Bags
 - ✓ Umbrellas
 - ✓ Books
 - ✓ Knitting bags
 - ✓ Strollers
 - ✓ Diaper bags
 - ✓ Purses
 - ✓ Briefcases
 - ✓ Paper bags

- ✓ Booster equipment. Booster is a slang for a shoplifter and booster equipment is any item used to aid their theft.
 - A booster box is typically a cardboard box that is large enough to conceal stolen items. It is usually wrapped to give the impression of a securely wrapped package. One side of the package opens and is held in place by a spring. Stolen items are inserted into the box through the trap door.
 - Booster coats are loose top coats with large pockets in the lining to hide items. Some booster coats have exposed hooks sewn onto the inside of the coat to hang merchandise on.
 - The wearing of skirts, pants, or other garments with elastic waistbands that can receive and hold stolen merchandise.
 - Booster bloomers have a flexible elastic waistband with the legs tied off just above the knees. Items are dropped down from the waist.
 - Booster cages are hollow cages designed to make a woman seem pregnant. Stolen articles are placed inside the cage.
- Using fitting rooms to practice their trade. Many different shoplifting techniques are used in fitting or dressing rooms where shoplifters feel secure and believe in the store's inability to detect their shoplifting activities. The most common method is when the shoplifter places an outer garment over the merchandise, and wears it out of the store.
- Talented professional shoplifters can crotch merchandise between their legs and walk out of the store in a normal fashion. The shoplifter wears a long outer coat into the store, and carries out items between his/her legs.
- Some brazen shoplifters find a vulnerable store area near an entrance or exit, particularly those with a street immediately outside, where he or she can grab an armload of merchandise from a display and run out of the store.
- Employing diversion techniques sometimes works to distract employee attention away from the shoplifter. An accomplice occupies the attention of the clerk while the shoplifter does the stealing. Employees should be on the alert for distractions that may be used to divert attention from an accomplice, whether the customer is too friendly, belligerent or demanding of attention.

Telltale Characteristics of Shoplifters

Store owners and employees should be observant for those customers who:

- Are carrying something in their hands throughout the store. Shopping bags, knitting bags,

umbrellas, handbags, books, diaper bags, baggy clothes, open-top boots, and arms in a sling are favorites for stuffing stolen items into. A wrapped present could be a spring-box into which the person can stuff merchandise (the door closes and the package still looks the same). An open purse can make concealment easy for smaller items. Strollers and baby carriers are sometimes used to conceal merchandise.

- Seem nervous and who do not want any assistance.
- Spend more time watching the sales staff than looking at the merchandise. The thief usually checks to see if anyone is watching before they commit their act of theft.
- Leave a sales area in a hurry. They may have concealed the merchandise and are in a hurry to make their exit.
- Reach into display cases or walk behind counters. They may also attempt to enter stock-room areas or back hallways.
- Wear overcoats or raincoats when the weather does not call for it. Large inside pockets or hoods are great shoplifting techniques. The common trend of wearing baggy or oversized clothing also lends itself to shoplifting.
- Arrive very early or very late in the shopping day. Some shoplifters want to operate at a time when sales staff is distracted by normal beginning of day and end of day routines.
- Frequent washrooms or fitting rooms. They may be seeking privacy in isolated areas to take merchandise to conceal.
- Come into the store with a group of youngsters. Much shoplifting perpetrated by juveniles is a result of peer pressure or on a dare.
- Don't seem interested in the articles they have requested to look at, or that they have in their hands.
- Are fussy and who keep interchanging articles frequently.
- Loiter or appear uninterested or who claims to be waiting for a friend.
- Pick up a lot of merchandise with no apparent attempt to purchase.
- Have unusual walks or who tug at sleeves, adjust socks, or keep rubbing the back of their necks.
- Cause disturbances in the store. Remember shoplifters often operate in teams; one will distract an employee while another steals.

- Take more than one item into the dressing room. They sometimes come out with only one with the other worn under the shoplifter's own clothes.
- Hang around entrances or exits. They may be waiting for the chance to grab an arm full of merchandise and exit quickly.
- Keep the sales staff busy getting items from the back stockroom. They may be wanting to remove the staff from the area to shoplift. If possible, have another staff member supervise the area while the first employee is gone.

Shoplifting Prevention Techniques

Prevention is the best approach in dealing with shoplifting and is the first avenue of deterrence.

- If the store is small, have a buzzer or bell that sounds when the front door is opened.
- Greet every customer you meet. Let customers know you are aware of their presence. The most effective deterrent to shoplifters is an alert and competent sales staff. Train your staff if you expect them to effectively prevent shoplifting opportunities and safely apprehend shoplifters.
- Control backpacks and other parcels brought in by customers.
- Sales people should be able to personally monitor all areas accessible to customers. Mirrors and cameras can be used to extend the surveillance capability of the sales force. The use of CCTV with a VCR capability may help deter theft, but will also strengthen any arrest made that has been recorded on tape.
- If possible, try elevating the cash register area to increase your field of vision and allow better monitoring of customers. Placing the register near the front of the store allows cashiers to help keep an eye on customers as they enter and exit the store. The cash register should be inaccessible to customers, locked and monitored always.
- Enforce a strict anti shoplifting policy (“Shoplifters Will Be Prosecuted”) and advertise your aggressive anti shoplifting policy in plain view.
- Sections of the store, such as cash registers, fitting rooms, exits, etc., should never be left unattended.
- If possible, have an employee in charge of the dressing room. Fitting rooms should be closely monitored for garments, hangers and tags, and should be kept clean between uses so evidence of theft can quickly indicate the possible thief. The number of garments allowed in the fitting room at one time should be limited and monitored.
- Watch persons wandering aimlessly up and down store aisles, fingering objects and fre-

quently glancing at employees and other customers.

- Keep valuables away from store exits to prevent grab and run situations. Clothes-hanger hooks should be alternated to prevent theft from the grabber.
- Expensive merchandise should be in locked display cases in an area close to where salespeople are located. Limit the number of items you remove for customer inspection only to those you can adequately supervise at one time. Keep display cases locked at all times. Check to make sure the glass of the display cases cannot be lifted out.
- Use an electronic shoplifting deterrence system or Electronic Article Surveillance (EAS) system. Various electronic sensing devices are available now to deter and detect shoplifting. A tag or embedded sensor with special electronic or magnetic characteristics is attached to an item. Special electronics are located at the exit of the store to detect tags which store personnel have not deactivated. If an EAS is used, each employee should receive extra training on how they work and the importance of properly removing them or deactivating them once an article is purchased. They can be expensive and time consuming to install and remove from the merchandise.
- Proper aisle layouts and low counters should maximize visibility to allow monitoring of the customers.
- If the items are sold in pairs, only display one part (i.e., left shoes only).
- Keep the store neat and orderly. Pattern displays and keep them filled so that you can tell in a glance if something is missing.
- Anchor all valuable display models to counters. Use cable tie-downs to restrict the movement of merchandise.
- Items inspected, but not sold, should be immediately returned to stock.
- Price marking equipment should not be left unattended.
- Items found on the wrong shelf may show that a shoplifter is in the store, and he or she disposed of the items thinking they were observed.
- Alert other employees immediately if you notice suspicious activities. You may want to use a code if the store has a public address system.
- Watch for price switching. Cashiers should do price checks if warranted.
- Have cashiers check every item being sold to make sure it does not contain other merchandise (a compact disk hidden inside a book). Large bulky items like trash containers, coolers, etc. should be inspected by the cashier for smaller items hidden inside.

- Each customer should receive a receipt for every purchase. This prevents the shoplifter from returning stolen items for a cash refund.
- Every bag should be stapled closed, with the sales receipt attached. If possible, spot-check sales receipts at exits.
- Control exits by designing exit lanes so that all persons leaving the store must pass by the scrutiny of a cashier or other employee.
- Ask that a convicted shoplifter's court judgement or condition of probation include a prohibition on returning to your premises.

Apprehension and Arrest of the Shoplifter

Be thoroughly familiar with your state's law and current case law as it relates to the detection, apprehension, use of force and arresting of shoplifters. Know the boundaries of the shoplifting law in your local jurisdiction. Management should write policies and procedures for store employees to follow in dealing with the theft of company assets and they should thoroughly train all employees in their use. You should seek competent legal counsel as serious legal problems may result if you fail to abide by your current state law.