

Preventing Customer Theft

A Guide for Retailers

The Definition of Theft

A person who dishonestly takes property belonging to another, with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it, is guilty of theft.

Terminology

Many believe that theft is taken less seriously if it is against shops, and that use of the expression 'shoplifting' has contributed to that downgrading. We want to convince people that this is not so and it would be better to use the phrase 'customer theft' or 'shop theft' instead.

You can help prevent customer theft at your premises

This is one of a series of booklets providing information about crimes committed against retailers and retail staff. It offers practical advice about what you can do as a retailer to deter customer theft in your shop. The booklet offers ideas and options which can of course be discussed in more detail with your local crime prevention officer.

The scale of customer theft

Recorded crimes

The Criminal Statistics for England and Wales for 1994 show that 115,494 offenders were found guilty at court or cautioned by police for theft from shops.

Surveys

The 1994 Home Office Commercial Victimization Survey (covering England and Wales) estimated that the costs of customer theft to retailers amounted to some £203 million.

The 1994/95 British Retail Consortium annual survey of crime against retailers (covering the whole of the UK) showed that the witnessed incidence of customer theft cost retailers £213 million. However, retailers also estimated the cost for unwitnessed customer theft as an additional £451 million.

The main types of customer theft in shops

Non-professional

- Opportunists

Many shop thieves are not regular thieves, but are influenced by opportunities such as easily accessible display areas, or goods left unattended on counters.

- Persistent thieves

Many thieves steal regularly – every day or every week perhaps. They mix genuine purchases with some stolen goods and may be some of your oldest or most trusted customers. Do not take anyone for granted.

- Juveniles

Young people can be influenced by peer pressure to steal. This can be part of a 'group syndrome' where young people only steal when they are together. They tend to steal such items as electronic games, CDs and fashion goods.

- Thieves who use children

Some family teams make use of children to steal items (in order to avoid convictions) or to cause a distraction that will conceal the theft.

- Mentally disturbed

A very small group of people have a mental disorder which compels them to steal. Sometimes goods are taken which are of no value to the thief (such as single shoes), and when caught, they are often found to have large quantities of such goods hoarded at home.

- Drug abusers

Many shop thieves steal to support a drugs habit, which can cost users hundreds of pounds a week. They often see shop theft as the easiest way to raise money.

- Steaming

This is a technique where a large gang will enter a shop and intimidate, threaten or distract staff in order to steal large quantities of goods before running off. It is dangerous to tackle these people as they are likely to resort to violence.

- Staff collusion

Sometimes shop staff help thieves to steal, either actively, or by turning a blind eye to what is going on. Thieves may pay the member of staff to co-operate with them, or they may intimidate them into doing so.

- Professionals

Professional thieves target high value goods, and often steal a great many items eg entire racks of clothes at one time.

They often work in teams passing the goods through several pairs of hands before they are eventually taken away. Some gangs also employ 'minders' to protect them.

What can you do about it?

Not all of the following practical suggestion 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.

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 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 your crime prevention officer, or your trade association or trade newspaper. See also 'Theftstop' at the end of this leaflet. Training need not be expensive – 15 minutes each week should be enough to refresh your staff's memories, and stay alert.

- **Vigilance**

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. (See 'Theftstop' in the further reading section at the back of this leaflet.)

- **Knowing what to do when a suspect is identified**

Decide what you expect your staff to do when a suspect is identified. Making suspects aware that they have been noticed will often be enough to deter crime. Use the normal sales approach eg '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.

Physical security

Use of a combination of preventive measures. Most strategies work best in combination rather than isolation, eg 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:

- **Display dummy or 'disabled' goods**

Empty record sleeves and compact disc boxes. Electrical equipment with key components removed.

- **Cabinets and cabinet security**

Displaying goods within glass cabinets. If high value goods are displayed in cabinets, the glass needs to be fixed so that it cannot be lifted out. Locks must be of good quality, and access to keys strictly controlled. Put yourself in the place of the thief and see how easy it is to steal, and then introduce those measures which make it harder.

- **Warning notices and signs**

Prominent signs and notices warning customers about the consequences of theft. They are inexpensive and work best if displayed in areas shown to be most at risk.

- **Mirrors**

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

- **Display ('loop') alarms**

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.

- In-store closed circuit television (CCTV)

CCTV cameras will deter some thieves, and can help with prosecutions if good quality equipment is used. Cameras should be highly visible, eg monitors may be mounted at entrances, and signs displayed alerting potential thieves to the use of CCTV. Dummy cameras can provide an inexpensive short term deterrent on their own, or increase the apparent cover and hence deterrent value of a live system. But do not rely solely on dummy cameras. Thieves will soon find you out.

Working with others

- Radio-link schemes

These schemes link a number of different retailers, and usually provide a channel with the local police. So warnings about the approach of known warnings about the approach of known troublemakers can be given and they can also be used to summon police assistance. Talk to neighbouring businesses, and ask your local beat officer or crime prevention officer for advice.

- Town-centre (or shopping centre) closed circuit television

CCTV in town centres can also deter shop thieves and be used to assist with their arrest if they are not caught immediately. Connecting town centre CCTV schemes to a radio link, pager system or other communication system linked to the police or other control centre greatly increases the value of CCTV to retailers.

- Truancy watches and unaccompanied children

Truancy watch is a partnership scheme which trains retailers how to deal with children who are in shop during school hours. The schemes usually provide police and education authority contact points for problem cases, but the idea is that just being noticed will deter schoolchildren from truancy. Shopkeepers can put up stickers to advertise their involvement with a scheme. Some shops limit the number of unaccompanied children they allow in the shop at one time. Plastic screens in front of sweets displays can reduce the temptation to steal.

- Store banning

Your shop is private property, just like your home. Although there is an implied invitation to come in and shop, you are fully entitled to exclude any person from your shop if you feel that their presence is unhelpful to your business – eg drunks, or someone whom you have previously caught, or suspected of stealing. You do not have to give any reason for banning someone. Just politely tell them that you would rather they did not shop here any more, and that you would appreciate it if they do not come into your store again. If they return they will be trespassing, and you can order them to leave. If they refuse, you are entitled to call the police to assist you in removing them. If your shop is in a shopping centre, then you can call a security guard.

Remember...

- Train your staff;
- Keep your shop secure, and cut down opportunities for thieves;
- Investigate the use of CCTV;
- Work with others: eg retailers; the police' local authorities to see what you can do to prevent crime in your shopping area.

For a copy of Your Practical Guide to Crime prevention contact the Crime Reduction

Officer at your local police station or write to:

Crime Prevention Publicity
Home Office
Room 155
50 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AT