

Shoplifting is Costing Retailers Millions

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Did you know that Saturday is the most popular day of the week for shoplifting? Or how about that many shoplifters buy and steal in the same visit?

Very few shoplifters steal because of poverty or need, instead it is very much a crime of opportunity and greed. Between the professional and opportunistic shoplifters, retailers suffer millions of dollars in losses every year. Shoplifting, coupled with employee theft, is responsible for 30% of all business failures.

The traditional solution to the problem is to close your eyes and hope that it doesn't happen to you, and if it does, pray that your losses won't be large. Other retailers accept shoplifting losses as part of the cost of doing business. For the small business owner who has had to borrow from her retirement savings and has scraped by on a shoe string budget just to pay for inventory, accepting shoplifting losses as the cost of doing business is simply unacceptable! Retailers can win the battle against crime and the fight begins with education.

Though I am an advocate for arrest policies, the first line of defense and best solution for the small retailer is in prevention. You can not legally arrest someone for shoplifting until they leave your store and once you have made the arrest, you have to hold them until the police arrive. Now what happens if you are working alone? How are you going to make an arrest, hold this person and deal with customers until the police arrive? Closing the store is not an option and you can't expect them to sit quietly in the corner waiting for the police either. The conundrum grows because if they believe that you won't arrest them, it's guaranteed that they'll come back for of your merchandise and bring friends with them. You have to do something, so what are your options?

One option is to educate yourself on loss prevention methods. The key word is "prevention". Stop the theft before it occurs by increasing customer service. Acknowledge each customer that comes into your store and pay attention to what they are doing. I'm not suggesting that you stare at them or follow them around suspiciously. Instead, greet them with a friendly hello, give them a few minutes to look around and then approach them and ask if there is anything you can help them find. If they are carrying a few items in their hand, ask them if you can get them a basket or if you can bring them up to the cash register for their convenience. If you are going to watch them, be discrete. Watch their hands - after all, any theft that occurs will happen via the hands.

If you see someone take an item and conceal it [put it into their pocket or a bag], pick up a basket and approach them and say something like, "I noticed that you put that tube of mascara into you left pocket. I assumed that you wanted to keep your hands free while you shopped and so I brought you this basket." At this point you are not accusing them of trying to steal, but you have acknowledged that you saw them take and conceal the item. You have also given them a dignified way to change their mind which in all likelihood will cause them to quickly abandon the idea of stealing from your store. You also have the option of taking a more direct approach, which will probably work better on teenagers, and that is to directly confront the situation with a, "I saw you put the mascara into your left pocket. Hand it over and now leave the store."

If you are in a mall that has security and you make an arrest, the security officer can hold the shoplifter until the police arrive. What you'll need to do is get proper training for yourself and staff in apprehending a shoplifter safely and legally. If you have a theft problem, the other stores around you are likely to share this problem and perhaps can also share training costs. If you want uniformed guard coverage during peak hours, which can be a good deterrent, consider getting

together and sharing this cost as well. On your own, you could hire a floor walker who will take care of apprehensions for you. Sharing a floor walker with other stores isn't really a practical because you all need coverage at the same time.

You don't have to go to the police academy to learn how to arrest a shop lifter. It's not even that difficult to do. Though we recommend a much more subtle approach, you can yell "Stop dirt bag!" if you want to. You don't have to memorize the standard - *you have the right to remain silent...* spiel that you see on the TV police shows. However, what you do need to know is that any citizen can make an arrest and you are required by law is to tell the person you are arresting and detaining *why* they are being detained. "You are under arrest for shoplifting. I am holding you until the police arrive." That's it! Practice it in private so that when the time comes, you can say it with confidence.

There are three things that you need to do to make a clean arrest and avoid the infamous false arrest threat:

1. You must see the suspect take and conceal the item.
2. You must never lose sight of the suspect after you see him take the item. The reason is simple, you need to be sure they still have the item on them when they leave the store.
3. The suspect must leave the store before you can arrest them.

Once you have the suspect in custody, you may ask them to empty their pockets or hand you the item they stole. Do not search them yourself. Leave that nasty job for the police. Don't let the person out of your sight until the police arrive. You do not have to allow them to go to the bathroom or make a phone call, they can do that after the police come. Don't worry, you are not violating their rights. If you do decide to be nice and let them go to the bathroom - do not let them go alone. To protect yourself, make sure that a person of the same sex remains in the bathroom with them at all time and watches that they don't flush any of your merchandise that you didn't see them take down the toilet. It'll save you both a plumbing bill and a false arrest charge.

The final piece of advice on arrests are to make sure that when you arrest someone that you always turn them over to the police, even if you decide to let them off with a warning. In turning them over to the police, they can not come back later and say that you abused them in any way.

Getting professional advice from a consultant on crime prevention doesn't need to be expensive to be effective. Some consultants will do in-store training with all your staff giving you the opportunity to practice your detection, prevention and arrest skills. Shop around and find someone who has your best interest in mind that will provide you with viable solutions at a reasonable cost.