

The Retail Monster

By Sherry McCourt

It's a cold winter Saturday afternoon, my husband and I decide to take the children to rent some games from a popular movie rental store. As we walk through the front door I notice two attendants, an older male in the far corner of the store and two younger males in the "used games for sale" section. My children go running off to the Xbox isle and as I walk past these two young males something just doesn't feel right. My husband, noting my hesitation moves towards the cashiers as I walk back over to the same isle as these young men. They know they have been busted as they catch my eyes wonder to their irregular shaped stomachs. In all my years in the security industry (and they have been many) this was the first time that I was actually frightened of what the store attendants were going to do instead of the thieves. One of the attendants froze in a panic, not able to move or comprehend in real time what was taking place. The other attendant became very aggressive, placing himself, his clients and his partner in harms way. Although there were a multitude of mistakes made that afternoon by the attendants the biggest mistakes were made by the employer. The CCTV system they had was not being recorded and most of the camera domes did not incase an actual camera. The employee's had no training of any type in non violent crisis intervention, risk management or even policy on what to do should they catch someone stealing much less if they were actually held up or robbed. In the end the thieves got away with however many items they shoved up their shirts. And I do not think I actually let the breath out of my lungs until the aggressive attendant re- entered the store after chasing the thieves by himself with no back up and the local authorities not even called yet.

Not all shoplifters steal because of poverty or need, instead opportunity and greed rears its ugly head and the monster comes alive.

Retailers suffer millions of dollars in losses every year. And can you believe that shoplifting, coupled with employee theft, is responsible for 34% of all business failures. 34%!

Past loss prevention practices for retailers, particularly small business owners has been to close their eyes and pray that the losses will not happen to them or at the very least be minimal. Acceptance of the loss resulting from theft has been acknowledged as the price of doing business.

The first line of defense and best solution for the small retailer is in education and prevention.

Educate yourself on loss prevention methods.

The key word here is "prevention". There are a number of ways to stop the theft before it occurs. Increase your 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.

Proper training for yourself and staff in apprehending a shoplifter safely and legally is imperative.

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 this is not a viable solution due to cost, insurance or liability, you may opt for uniformed guard coverage during peak hours, which can be a good deterrent or you could hire a loss prevention professional who will take care of apprehensions for you.

Should you choose to take the retail monster in hand. 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, without making any attempt to pay for the concealed item before you can arrest them.

Making the arrest:

Know that any citizen can make an arrest and that you are required by law to Identify yourself, tell the person you are arresting and detaining them and *why* they are being detained. As an example "I am with store security, You are under arrest for shoplifting. I am holding you until the police arrive." And That's it! You have made an arrest. Practice it in private so that when the time comes, you can say it with confidence.

Once you have the suspect in custody, do not search them yourself, you may ask them to empty their pockets or hand you the item they stole. Do not let the person out of your sight until the police arrive.

The final piece of advice on making the arrest I have to offer you is:

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 loss prevention does not need to be expensive to be effective. Some security 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 and will provide you with a viable solution at a reasonable price.