

How to Beat Shoplifting

from [Mike Delaney](#)

Inexpensive Retail Theft and Loss Prevention Ideas

Studies have shown that in the United States as many as one in twelve customers is a shoplifter, and that shoplifters commit an average of 50 thefts before being caught. That's if they are caught at all; it's estimated that only 10-15 percent are apprehended.

There are vast numbers of tips regarding how to deter shoplifting. With over 20 years' experience as a shoplifter, I know which are effective, and which are a waste of time. Here are a few battle-tested and inexpensive things you can do to minimize shoplifting in your store.

FIX YOUR FIXTURES

In most cases, shoplifters require privacy in order to conceal merchandise. This is especially true with small specialty shops that the arrangement of the fixtures creates many areas for the shoplifter to be hidden from sight.

Determine where your staff spends the majority of their time. For many small stores this is near the cash register. For others, it might be near the phone, or the office.

Arrange your fixtures with the goal of minimizing "blind spots" on the sales floor. From their usual vantage point, your staff should be able to look down almost every aisle.

Once you have maximized visibility by arranging fixtures, consider installing a large convex mirror to view any unavoidable hiding places.

Next time you are in a convenience store, take note of the layout. Most allow direct visibility of the sales floor to a lone clerk, and mirrors expose the remaining areas.

REQUIRE A RECEIPT FOR ALL RETURNS

Many shoplifters steal with the express intent of returning the merchandise to the store, the same or another branch, for a cash refund.

This can be addressed by requiring a purchase receipt for all returns. This creates some conflict, however, with the interest in delivering quality customer service.

A compromise policy is to require a receipt for cash refunds and general store credits, and to allow same-item-only exchanges without one. This way, the legitimate customer with a defective product, or with the wrong size or color, is accommodated, but the thief is not.

LOCK UP SHOPLIFTER-ATTRACTIVE MERCHANDISE

As a general rule, the smaller and more valuable an item is, the more attractive it is to a shoplifter; particularly to those who steal with intent to either sell the merchandise themselves, or return it for a refund.

Keep small, expensive items behind the counter or locked in a display case. If the display case has a lock, lock it; do not assume that the case alone will dissuade a shoplifter. Legitimate customers will understand this as a necessary evil and won't object, shoplifters will go elsewhere.

BE SMART ABOUT EAS TAG PLACEMENT

Electronic Article Surveillance (EAS) is a system in which merchandise has a small "tag" affixed to it which is either removed or deactivated when the item is purchased.

If not removed or deactivated, it triggers an alarm as it passes sensors near the store exit.

EAS systems are expensive, but fairly effective. If you have one in place, affix your alarm tags carefully. Hide the tags beneath seams and labels, or on an internal page of books and magazines. If you can't hide the tag, try to make it less noticeable by aligning it with physical aspects of, or the graphic design on the packaging.

Consider placing two tags on the merchandise: one obvious, and one not so obvious. The shoplifter may remove the obvious tag and not notice the other one, thus setting off the alarm.

Guerrilla Loss Prevention Tip: Even if you don't have a EAS system, consider buying some tags anyway. There are suppliers who sell recycled tags inexpensively. Shoplifters will recognize the tags, but since they don't see any sensor gates at the exit, they may think you are using a new system that they aren't yet aware of. It might just be enough to deter the theft.

SIGNAGE

Posting the correct signs around your store can deter many shoplifters, even (possibly especially) experienced shoplifters.

Guerrilla Loss Prevention Tip: Shoplifters are dishonest people, so don't feel guilty about stretching the truth a little on your signage, for effect. For example, you might post the classic sign that says simply, "Smile, You're on Candid Camera", whether you use cameras or not.

Or a sign with changeable numerals on J-hooks that says "## Shoplifters Prosecuted This Year. Are you next?" Be creative. All the retail greats were creative people. And remember your primary goal is to coerce shoplifters into taking their craft elsewhere.

CAMERA DOMES

A shoplifting study has showed that closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras are now the most feared anti-shoplifting device. Perhaps this is due to cameras being mentioned so often in the nightly news.

Whatever the reason, shoplifters don't like them. CCTV systems can be costly. But as with signage, if shoplifters can be deceptive, why can't you?

Guerrilla Loss Prevention Tip: The smoke-colored dome housings used to mount CCTV are fairly inexpensive. Buy several, and place a lot of them in the ceiling tiles all around your store.

Smart shoplifters know that not every dome has a camera inside. But then the question in the shoplifters mind is, "Am I standing under one that does have a camera in it?" This is extremely effective.

To see it in action, next time you visit a Wal-Mart, look up.

You don't have to prove you have any cameras at all in order to deter theft, all you have to do is make the shoplifter think you have cameras!

PROSECUTE ALL THIEVES

Call the police on every shoplifter you catch. No exceptions.

In the shoplifters' minds, if you don't call the police, they win, and they will continue to hit your store over and over.

Do not release juvenile shoplifters to their parents; prosecute them. The only time I was ever caught, I was thirteen years old. The police were not called, and I continued shoplifting another 15 years --including from the store in which I was caught.

Prosecute all thieves. Period.

EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE

This is, far and away, the single most effective thing you can do to deter shoplifting. By knowing where your customers are, offering your assistance, and anticipating their needs, you will virtually eliminate shoplifting. An alert employee is your most effective weapons against thieves who thrive on anonymity.

Isn't it strange how virtually everything about successful retailing eventually comes around to quality customer service?

About the Author

Mike Delaney is a former shoplifter and store detective. He is the author of ***It Takes a Thief: How to Beat Shoplifters and Increase Profits.***