



Beat the thieves this Christmas

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Ahead of Christmas and during the January Sales, stores are heaving with customers and merchandise, and staff are rushed off their feet.

Shoplifters are busy too, in the knowledge that their activities are largely obscured by the festive spending frenzy.

Regional police forces are well aware that the black market goes into overdrive during the festive season when the chance of getting hold of cheap gifts is highly appealing.

Unfortunately there is little detail about how much of the £1 billion annual retail shrinkage bill can be attributed to Christmas.

Laurence King, managing director of shrinkage specialist ORIS Consulting, has previously been responsible for shrinkage strategies at Debenhams, Burton Group and Bhs, and until this summer, was director of profit protection at B&Q.

In his experience, music, books and DVDs, which are 'hot' all year, are especially so at Christmas. "Fashion and department stores also see increased shrinkage, and in supermarkets shoplifters focus on drinks - particularly spirits," he says.

"It would be naive to think shrinkage over the Christmas period only goes up in line with the seasonal sales uplift," says King. His advice is to assume the worst, and put a Christmas loss prevention strategy in place well before the seasonal rush begins. "Start by identifying the products that would be most desirable in the eyes of thieves and also the stores that are most vulnerable," he says.

"Hot products should be displayed in low-risk parts of the store, for instance, where they can be overlooked by cashiers, or are covered by CCTV. Perhaps an investment in EAS (Electronic Article Surveillance) tagging for the Christmas trading season is worthwhile, and if such technology is in operation, make sure thieves know so. Signage alerting thieves to CCTV and tagging may not look too festive but if it's prominent, it will put them off."

King believes staff training is key. "With so many extra temporary salespeople during the season, the importance of training can be overlooked, but time spent raising awareness is invaluable," he says.

Longer trading hours also pose a problem peculiar to Christmas. King recommends introducing an evening shift for store security guards, rather than expecting guards to work right through to closing time.

Staff vigilance is being addressed by Kent mall, Bluewater. Alan Jones, Bluewater marketing manager, says that while the centre's on-site security and recently digitalised CCTV network of more than 200 cameras, are effective deterrents, crime at Christmas is harder to control. "With so many more people swarming into the centre, risks do increase," he says.

For this reason Bluewater's police officers have just undertaken special training of staff from every store, to ensure they are aware of the kinds of crime-related problems that may arise at this time of year. "There was a focus on how to spot professional thieves and credit card fraudsters.

It's the cashiers and sales assistants who need to be refreshed on all areas of crime."



Thankfully, increasingly sophisticated loss-prevention technology can take a great deal of pressure off store personnel.

Security firm ADT's national account manager Ken Scotland warns that securing high resale value goods away from customers can result in lost sales. He recommends the use of source tagging on items such as watches and power tools, so that they can be openly merchandised, and easily purchased.

"People want to be able to touch and feel, and pay for goods quickly," says Scotland. "Also, if an untagged item is stolen, there is no way that the retailer knows. So that product becomes unavailable on the shelf, and the store loses the sale, effectively being hit twice."

Virgin is testing a new electronic alarm product, supplied by ADT, to secure high-value digital equipment such as MP3 players and cameras in 15 of its stores. Virgin's senior administration systems investigation services team advisor Phil Smith says: "If someone disconnects a display camera from its tripod the alarm will go off immediately, rather than at the store exit. We have invested in these systems because we don't want to put our product behind glass cabinets."

Virgin has also installed new 'smart' security barriers in 13 stores as part of another trial. The aim is to gather information about why the alarms are activated, when and how frequently. "The tags are regular acousto-magnetic, but the actual door pedestals can collate and send data. Information is logged by security staff via a wall-mounted panel, as events happen, and is fed back to a server at head office."

Smith says this information will be analysed so that Virgin can identify trends - peaks in shoplifting during the year, vulnerable stores etc - and plan resources accordingly. If the system is rolled out Virgin could be even better prepared for seasonal shoplifters next year.

Mike Schuck of the BRC congratulates retailers on successfully harnessing technology and loss-prevention strategies to drive down crime. "British retailers have shown themselves highly capable of employing data mining techniques, alarm systems, radio communications, CCTV and EAS tagging to great effect," he says. "This all helps us keep ahead of the villains. It's a war of attrition and retailers have no choice but to keep fighting, even at Christmas."