

# Shoplifting & Internal Theft Prevention



Crime and Violence Prevention Center • California Attorney General's Office

## Put a stop to shoplifting!

Shoplifters assume they won't get caught. Your strategy is to prove them wrong. The following tips require thought and ingenuity, but cost very little.

- Alert employees are your best defense. Establish procedures for them to follow if they suspect shoplifting, and make sure they are familiar with shoplifting laws.
- Make sure you can see everything that goes on in your store. Keep counters low, no more than waist-high. Mount mirrors in corners so there are no blind spots.
- Arrange counters and display tables so there's no direct route to the exit. Some stores put turnstiles at entrances so the only way out is to pass the checkout counter. Place expensive items in the center of the store away from exits.
- Arrange displays so that missing items are easily noticed. Place small items in neat rows or clearly defined patterns. Attach inventory alarm tags to expensive merchandise. Reverse alternate hangers of hanging garments to prevent "grab and runs."
- Announce and observe a zero tolerance policy to prosecute shoplifters. The threat of being caught, questioned by police, put on trial and maybe even put in jail, may be enough to discourage shoplifters.

## What shoplifters use

Shoplifters use the following to conceal items:

- Bulky clothing: coats, pants and maternity outfits.
- Packages, bags, backpacks and purses are hiding places, and sometimes they may have false bottoms.
- Special props include hollowed-out books, fake casts, umbrellas, secret pockets, belts or hooks under coats.
- Folded newspapers or magazines are used to hide small or flat items.

## What to look for

- Be aware of customers' hands — and their pockets, purses, handkerchiefs.
- Notice open packages, purses, shopping bags, backpacks.
- Watch for customers who are nervous, have wandering eyes, are loitering or lingering in hidden areas.
- Watch groups of people, especially if a person tries to distract you.

## Employees are not exempt

Some experts believe businesses lose more to employee theft than to burglary, robbery and shoplifting combined. Examine your management practices. Make your employees feel that they've got a stake in your business. Then they won't be tempted to steal it away!

## Embezzlement & pilferage

Sometimes employees only take a few items, like office supplies, or they use company equipment, like cars or copying machines, for personal use.

But embezzlement and pilferage can get bigger. Cashiers may use “short ring ups” — ringing up a lower price on the sales register to cover money they’ve taken from the till. Or they may overcharge customers and pocket the difference or undercharge other employees and friends.

Embezzlement can go from simple overloading of expense accounts to payments made to non-existent companies. Watch for the following:

- Records are rewritten so they’ll look “neater.”
- Stock shortages increase in frequency or size.
- Employees refuse vacations or promotions.
- Business patterns change when a certain employee is absent.
- Customers complain about errors in monthly statements.
- Collections decline.
- Employees seem sensitive to routine questions about procedures.

### **Maintain strict inventory control**

There are many ways dishonest employees can cheat their employers:

- A cashier in a grocery store “accidentally” damages boxes and cans often so she can buy them at reduced prices.
- A maintenance worker stashes calculators and typewriters in trash bins.
- A stock clerk saves discarded customer receipts and uses them to show that stolen goods were “paid for.”

The best defense is frequent, thorough inventory control. Limit employees' access to stock and inventory records. Periodically check trash bins, nooks and crannies. Conduct unexpected inventory checks so dis-honest employees know they run the risk of being caught by surprise.

### **Computer fraud**

Computers are used for checkout, billing, inventory records and payrolls. Computers can be tampered with to commit theft, larceny, embezzlement and fraud. Here are some tips to protect your business from computer crooks:

- Make sure your computer is programmed to prevent unauthorized use.
- Separate programmer and operator functions.
- Minimize after-hours access to the computer.
- Monitor and log computer activity.

### **Bribery and kickbacks**

The employee who lets a business secret slip for a price; the loading supervisor who ignores a short order for a fee; the contract officer who will speed things up for a gift. These are examples of bribery. It may not seem like a big problem at first, but these little favors can mean big trouble.

Watch for the following:

- Purchasing agents use one supplier despite a policy of rotating suppliers.
- Employees associate with vendors or suppliers.
- Employees receive free tickets for sports events, shows, etc.
- Reputable businesses refuse to submit bids.
- One person has responsibility for issuing and approving bids.

To fight the problem, institute policies against accepting gifts, make sure employees get competitive bids and rotate purchasing agents and suppliers when possible.

## **Good business management**

Tighten hiring practices. Require job applicants to fill out a detailed application, then contact all references and former employers.

### **Separate functions**

Your accounting system should enforce accountability through a series of checks and balances. Each function should serve as a check on all transactions that went before. For example: The bookkeeper should not handle cash; the person who mails purchases should not be the one who pays the bills. An independent company should audit your books.

### **Set a good example**

The boss who takes merchandise and office supplies without paying encourages employees to do the same.

### **Keep employee morale high**

Employees who are treated fairly and generously are less likely to steal. Get to know your employees. Ask for their suggestions and seriously consider them. Involve employees in crime prevention practices. Consider starting a profit-sharing program. Make sure your salary rates are competitive — an underpaid employee may feel that stealing from you merely “makes up the difference.”



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