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Shoplifting Principles to Remember by Victor Sellers

Whether you are a store manager, assistant manager or a plain clothes store detective you'll want to remember the following shoplifter principles as you decide to engage the thieves in the battle against retail theft.

 # 1 – The "Food on a Plate Principle"

I love back yard BBQ's. The smell of the food while it's cooking on the grill is mouth watering. The problem is, bugs like the smell of cooked meat too. Or potato salad, or whatever you decide to bring out to, and put on the picnic table. I especially don't like flies or bees or anything with wings landing on my food. What invariably happens when you put an open plate of food on an outside table? You invite every insect in the surrounding neighborhood to join you, and the chances are about 100% something is going to land on your significant other's special dish. The same goes for your high dollar merchandise in your store. Just as you wouldn't put a plate of food on that table uncovered, you shouldn't put expensive merchandise out on display unprotected. You will invite every dishonest person who walks past to help themselves to the banquet you have set before them. Merchandise that is prone to high-theft, must be presented

as a “false opportunity” to any would be thieves. In other words, it may not be covered or locked up, but someone is keeping an eye on it. Also, location is key when talking about opportunity. Keep unprotected items away from the front door or exit doors. Let’s not make this easy for them. Most “Grab and Run” thefts occur with unprotected merchandise placed too close to an exit door.

 # 2 – The “Flea on a Dog Principle”

If you have a pet, whether it’s a cat or dog, you probably have had to deal with the problem of fleas at one time or another. Unless you give the animal a flea bath, the only way to ensure getting rid of them is to literally pick off the fleas, one at a time. And if you try to do that, you will probably never get them all. In several ways, the fleas on your dog are like shoplifters in your store. Those fleas are a real pain and can suck the blood right out of your pet. Similarly, shoplifters are also a very real pain and can suck the profits right out of your business. Unfortunately, you can’t give your store a “flea bath”. The only way to get rid of shoplifters **is to pick them off one at a time**
. And like fleas, you’ll never get them all because as soon as you think you’ve eradicated the problem, new ones pop up to take their place. But, if you don’t do anything to clean up the problem, eventually you’ll have an infestation that can kill your business. So how do you get rid of the shoplifter problem? You begin by going on the offensive, catching them and prosecuting them. Then continue to be on the lookout for new ones that will inevitably come into your store.

 # 3 - The “Gender Principle”

Another principle I learned early on I call “the Gender Principle.” It goes something like this: **“W hen it comes to stealing, women are sneaky**
and men are simple.”
Women shoplifters, more so than men, will really challenge you and test your detective skills. I can explain with two simple (but not necessarily male) examples.

1) While watching women shoplifters steal cigarettes, they would almost always put them near their purse in the basket section of the shopping cart. After selecting them from the display rack, they will put them beside the purse on either the right or left side. Then they'll continue their shopping. Soon the cigarettes will be moved to the other side of the purse depending on whether she is right or left handed, how close to the aisle she is, etc. She may even move them to the top of the purse. From here they are easily concealed into the purse in one swift movement. But during the course of the shoplifting act, she moved them at lest once and maybe several times to make it easier for her, and harder for anyone else to see. She's not a professional, but she has this little theft act of hers, for several packs of cigarettes, down pretty good or so she thinks. Definitely sneaky, she will make you work for an apprehension. Men on the other hand, who steal individual packs of cigarettes, don't usually push a shopping cart. They will also select their three packs from the display, and then head back into the store. But here is where the difference starts. Almost without exception, they will conceal them within the first 30 seconds of taking them. And in most cases, they conceal them in the most widely used concealment spot for men…they put them down the front of their pants! They'll stop, look back to make sure no one is watching, and shove them down as far as they'll go. Then they'll continue on their merry way. So, more often than not, they really do make it easy for you. Nowadays, most cigarettes are secured or kept off the immediate sales floor. But this simple principle for men and women still holds true whether its cosmetics, jewelry, small grocery items or small tools (or even large tools as you'll see) being stolen.

2) Another example of stupid male shoplifter syndrome (I wonder if I can get this legitimized as a medical diagnosis) was a male in his mid-20's with a set of work overalls on. He was in the store looking at tools, specifically crescent wrenches. He finally picked out the one he wanted. It was the biggest wrench we sold. It had to be between a foot, and a foot and a half long, inside a blister pack. He must have needed this particular wrench pretty bad. And he really didn't have a place to put it. So, you by now know where it went. Yeah, down the front of his overalls, somewhere between his waist and his knee. After I stopped him and brought him back into the store, I told him I was glad he didn't try to run. He definitely would have injured some part of his anatomy in the process.

 # 4 - The "Spread the Butter Principle"

What does spreading the butter on a piece of bread have to do with retail security? If you have toast for breakfast in the morning, you decide how much butter to put on that piece of toast. For whatever reasons, whether it's because you are on a diet, or just personal taste, you decide whether to lay it on thick, spread it on thin or somewhere in between. If you are on a tight budget at home, and you have to make the butter last until the next grocery trip, you may have

to spread the butter pretty thin. Did you get it on all four corners, or just the middle? If you put jelly on it, then it probably doesn't matter all that much. The problem is if you are only given so much, where do you allocate it to give you the best coverage? The same approach goes with the security budget for your business. Whether it's paying for a security system or hiring detectives to monitor your store, you only have so much money to spend, and where do you allocate it to give you the best coverage? Just like on that piece of bread, where you can only spread that butter so thin to be able to taste it, don't spread your coverage so thin that it doesn't have a chance to be effective. Depending on your specific business, allocate your resources to give you the best bang for your buck. All retail businesses are slightly different and will have slightly different problems. A loss prevention professional can show you how to identify and address the specific problems in your store.

 # 5 - The "Opposites Principle"

Take time to study people: the final principle we'll take a look at is called the "Opposites Principle". What that means is…An ordinary customer might look and even act like a shoplifter, but a shoplifter will not look and act like a customer. They will try to at first, but they always give themselves away eventually. As you begin to watch people, start noticing the following clues that may tell you that you have a potential shoplifter. In each of the following examples, the 'Opposites Principle" applies:

a. **Sudden head turns** – As you walk past an aisle and look down it, the person shopping in the aisle quickly lifts up or turns their head to notice you. If they are about to conceal something, they are looking up to see if you are watching them. This person is either nervous (you should ask yourself why?), very observant, or up to something. A normal customer will not normally act this way.

b. **Eye movements** – Same as with the sudden head turns. If a person is more concerned with watching other people than the merchandise in front of them, there is probably a reason. In most cases when someone is stealing, their eyes will give them away. A normal customer is not concerned with other people. If youare trying to watch someone, the one thing you cannot do is make eye contact with a potential shoplifter. That will give you away almost every time.

c. **Look at what people are carrying** - (large purses, empty bags, a coat over the arm) – This goes especially for women. If you notice someone entering your store carrying a large shoulder bag that appears flat, that is a red flag! Odds are that bag will "magically" fill up as this

person shops around your store. The same goes for men (or women) walking into your store carrying their jacket or coat. If it is that warm outside, why didn't they leave it in the car? Why carry it in? It is very easy to put something underneath that jacket or coat and walk out with it.

d. **Look at what people are wearing** – The clothing people wear should match the weather outside. Now I have seen increasing amounts of people, mostly young people wearing t-shirts and shorts, even sandals on cold days. It's the other extreme you need to worry about. If they come into your store wearing a long winter coat, and its 60 degrees and sunny out, I would probably keep an eye on that person. Also baggy clothing is another red flag, since merchandise can be concealed and not even show on the person. Again, how does a normal person dress on a warm day?

e. **Look at what is in their shopping cart** – Again, notice what kinds of items people have in their shopping cart. If someone walks past you exiting the electronics department pushing a shopping cart with multiple DVD's or CD's, I would follow them to make sure they went directly to the checkouts. What you need to keep in mind is the
"flow of merchandise".
If someone selects an item, and places it in their cart or under their arm, where do they go with it next? Do they go pay for it, or do they continue shopping? Where is that merchandise going? A shoplifter will usually take the merchandise to another location in the store to conceal it. Again, if it goes in any direction other than where the checkouts are located, I would keep an eye on it until I'm certain this person isn't a thief.

Most of this is just good old common sense. But if you stay on the lookout for these specifics on "who' and "what" to look for, you'll begin to notice that not all your customers are who they appear to be. In all of the above examples of what to look for, a normal customer may exhibit some of these tendencies. It is usually a combination of several that will tell you there is a potential shoplifter in your midst.