



Shoplifting

The term 'shoplifting' describes theft by customers from retail businesses through taking goods without paying for them. Whilst shoplifters come in many different shapes and sizes a simple way of separating shoplifters is to use two categories, professionals and amateurs. Both groups steal from retail businesses, however, the methods that can be used to prevent theft vary for each group.

Here are some descriptions of both types as well as hints that can help to prevent them from stealing from your store.

Professionals

- Usually highly skilled and hard to spot
- Tend to concentrate on high-demand, easily resold consumer goods
- May case a store well in advance of the actual theft.

Amateur shoplifters

- May seem like any other customer
- Theft may not be planned but may occur on the spur of the moment
- May be driven by an urgent physical need, such as addictions
- Often clumsy or erratic in their behaviour
- May be easier than other types of shoplifters to detect
- May steal on a dare or simply for kicks
- Often expect store owners and courts to go easy on them
- May enter stores in groups in an attempt to intimidate team members.

While both groups may be quite skilled at shoplifting, professional shoplifters steal to make a living and may use force or intimidation.

The non-professional shoplifter may be easier to spot.

Shoplifting – signs of shoplifting



Signs of shoplifting

Thieves come in all ages, races and from various backgrounds. However, there are some signs that should signal a red flag for retailers. Fortunately, most shoplifters are amateurs.

While the following characteristics don't necessarily mean a customer is a shoplifter, retailers should keep a close eye on shoppers who exhibit the following:

- Spends more time watching the cashier or salesperson than actually shopping.
- Wears bulky, heavy clothing during warm weather or coats when unnecessary.
- Walks with short or unnatural steps, which may indicate that they are concealing stolen items.
- Takes several items into a dressing room and only leaves with one item or none.
- The customer's eyes are not looking at what their hands are doing; instead they are looking out for staff! So if the eyes don't match the action...beware!
- Seems nervous and may pick up random items with no interest.
- Frequently enters store and never makes a purchase.

Many shoplifters work in groups of two or more, and learn to take advantage of busy stores during peak hours or they may hit at times when employees are less alert, such as opening, closing and shift changes. Some of the following are methods used to steal from retailers:

- A large group enters the store at one time. A member of the group causes a disturbance or asks for assistance to distract sales staff whilst the others shoplift.
- Items can be concealed in clothing, handbags, prams, umbrellas, reused shopping bags, or inside purchased merchandise.
- Bold shoplifters may grab an item and run out of the store.
- Paying a cheaper price for products through price label switching for one of a lesser value, and incorrect amount of money given to the cashier.
- Return of stolen goods without a receipt for either cash or a credit voucher.

There are a number of reasons why people steal products from retail stores. Some of these reasons include psychiatric or pathological reasons, for excitement, peer pressure, lack of money, to support their family or lifestyle, embarrassment associated with purchasing an item, unable to purchase a product due to laws e.g. alcohol and aerosol spray paint cans, to support an addiction e.g. drugs or gambling, and revenge.

The below table¹ expands on the previous two categories of shoplifters, and details some of the motivations that may cause people to shoplift.

Category of shop thief	Frequency	Motivation	Response when apprehended	Percentage
Impulse	Often only once or twice	Not planned	Exhibited shock, shame and guilt	15.4
Occasional	3 to 10 times in last year	Enjoyed the challenge	Admitted guilt but downplayed the seriousness of the act	15.0
Episodic	Periodic episodes	Exhibited emotional psychological problems	Compliant; usually requires treatment to alter behaviour	1.7
Amateur	Regular (often weekly)	Economically rewarding	Admitted guilt but usually downplayed previous acts	56.4
Semi-professional	Frequently (at least once a week)	Took more expensive items; only type who did so for resale purposes	Likely to have a "prepared story"; and to claim unfair treatment if the story is rejected	11.7

¹ Nelson, D., & Perrone, S. (2000). Understanding and Controlling Retail Theft.

Shoplifting – commonly stolen items



Commonly stolen items

Goods and items that are frequently stolen are known as 'hot products'. Hot products generally include items such as mobile phones, jewellery and other fashion accessories, electronic goods, personal care items, cash and food.

Hot products have characteristics that are captured in the acronym CRAVED:

- Concealable – and/or not easily identified as not belonging to the thief.
- Removable – not fixed and secured down (for physical objects).
- Available – widely available and easy to find, as well as new products that hit the market.
- Valuable – in terms of monetary gain or psychological gain such as social status.
- Enjoyable – either from personal use, from the money gained when it is sold (see disposable below), or again from psychological gain.
- Disposable – the product can be sold on for monetary or other gain – there is a ready black market.

Shoplifting – preventing shoplifting



Preventing shoplifting

The most effective deterrent against all forms of customer theft is excellent customer service. This is true both for amateur and professional thieves, it is just much harder to steal when you are being served well. In fact when shoplifters have been caught and questioned about their shoplifting, they admit that they actively look for stores with poor service.

Here's what you can do

- **Staffing:** Schedule an adequate number of employees to work at one time.
- **Greetings:** Ensure every customer that enters the store is greeted. This lets the customer know you are aware of their presence.
- **Be attentive:** Staff must make themselves available to all customers and never leave the store unattended.
- **Receipts:** Each customer must receive a receipt for every purchase. Receipts must be required for refunds. Discard any old receipts immediately.
- **Stay focused:** Don't allow customers to distract the sales people while another person is being served.
- **Bag check:** Implement a policy and procedure for backpacks and bags brought in by customers.
- **Service calls:** If you notice suspicious activities, alert other employees immediately. In larger stores consider implementing a security code to alert staff of possible shoplifters.
- **Helping hand:** If you are suspicious of a customer ask if he/she is finding everything okay. Mention that you'll be nearby should he/she need your help. Make the potential shoplifter feel watched. If they are an honest person they will actually be pleased with the service.

