

Store's interior design may be best front against shoplifting, study says

October 19 2006

Getting the goods on a thief may not be necessary if a store's interior is designed to deter shoplifting in the first place, a new University of Florida study finds.

Making stores attractive and alluring to shoppers has long been the aim of retail designers rather than preventing theft, but a store's interior layout often influences shoplifters in whether to steal there, said Caroline Cardone, who did the research for her master's thesis in UF's interior design department.

"Shoplifters enter a store, scan the space and quickly judge whether it's unprotected, understaffed or offers a quick escape," she said. "Once they recognize a store's vulnerability, they'll take advantage of it again and again."

Some common patterns emerged in Cardone's analysis of data collected by the Loss Prevention Research Council, a multidisciplinary team of UF researchers, which included interviews with 20 apprehended shoplifters in Orlando, Dania, Fla., and Chicago.

The criminals often sought stores with chaotic, overpacked aisles or crowded, cramped spaces because they offered good camouflage, she said.

Wide, clear aisles, a clean, well-maintained interior and a logically planned store make it less likely for thieves to escape detection, Cardone

said. Aisles should be visible from the checkout lane, and the cashier's view of the store should not be blocked by high shelves overstuffed with merchandise, she said.

"Such design tactics will help contribute to the perception of the store being orderly and well-monitored, which seems to make shoplifters feel more vulnerable," said Cardone, who will present her findings Tuesday at a two-day retail design workshop at UF.

Thieves reported seeking "blind spots" hidden from the view of employees and closed-circuit television cameras where they would take products they had picked up in other parts of the store and stuff them into a sock or pocket, Cardone said. Often these were easily concealable items such as batteries, film and tooth-whitening products that could easily be resold on the street, sometimes to support a drug habit, she said.

Some stores place these sought-after goods behind counters or in locked cases, frustrating legitimate customers who must go out of their way to ask for them, which hurts sales, Cardone said. A less threatening approach might be to station employees in the aisles in direct sight of these coveted items, perhaps at a "customer service station" by the cosmetics counter or pharmacy, where they can answer questions from customers while watching for suspicious activity, she said.

"One CVS pharmacy had a regular employee camped out in the aisle with a folding table and her job was to market cosmetics to people," she said. "It makes a lot of sense to have an employee in cosmetics talk about the benefits of the products. By the same token, you don't dare steal anything with this person standing 2 feet in front of you."

Stationing a store "greeter" near the exit and lengthening the amount of space between the cashier and front entrance also increases the odds that

shoplifters will be caught, she said.

Alternate exits create stealing opportunities, as many large mass-merchant chains find with attached garden areas that sell plants and garden accessories, Cardone said.

“The offender simply brings the stolen goods to the garden area, tosses them over the fence and leaves the store,” she said. “Either the thief retrieves the merchandise later or an accomplice is waiting on the other side to catch it.”

Electronics store Best Buy’s practice of placing cameras, iPods and other electronic products on counters with flexible cords allows customers to touch and test the products without walking away with them, Cardone said. “The best displays are able to both protect and market the product,” she said.

Few studies examine how a store interior design affects shoplifting despite the crime’s high toll, which in 2004 totaled an estimated \$10 billion in losses, Cardone said. “Retailers have tried everything to minimize shoplifting – stringent apprehension policies, high-tech protection devices and increased security measures – but none have solved the problem,” she said.

Joshua Bamfield, director of the Centre for Retail Research in Nottingham, England, praised Cardone’s research. “This kind of thorough research into the ways retailers can cut losses by thinking carefully about their stores’ layout and design is exactly the type of study corporations need to help combat the menace of shop crime,” he said.

Source: University of Florida

Citation: Store's interior design may be best front against shoplifting, study says (2006, October 19) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-10-interior-front-shoplifting.html>

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