

## Design out shoplifting

*reviewing the dark side of shopping*

### Background

Retail businesses, especially retail outlets, are currently reporting increased incidents of shoplifting linked to the recession. The most recent British Retail Consortium Crime Survey for 2007/8 placed customer theft as one of the three most important concerns. Indeed, customer theft accounted for the majority of crime losses; 64 per cent of offences by value<sup>1</sup>.

This brief asks how strong design can contribute to the reduction of opportunities for shop theft.

### The Problem

Shoplifting (customer shop theft) is an on-going and significant problem for the retail industry, both nationally and globally, with studies showing that, in the global context, items most likely to be stolen by shoplifters include: cosmetics, perfume and skincare, razor blades, alcohol, women's-wear, designer goods, fashion accessories, DVDs/CDs, video games and small electronic items<sup>2</sup>. There is often a clear gender divide regarding who steals what. In the UK it has been found that women target clothes, groceries, perfumery, toiletries and health products whilst men target items for the electronic black market such as TVs, CDs, hairdryers, electrical toothbrushes, and DIY and hardware items such as power tools<sup>3</sup>.

Studies that feature interviews with shoplifters report that many find it very easy to steal. The following are some of the contributing factors:

#### \* Poor store and packaging design

Weaknesses in these two areas, coupled with poor security design, are significant factors<sup>4</sup>. Specific issues include:

- blind spots where goods can be concealed; areas where thieves can be inconspicuous – caused for

- example by high shelves or poor location of goods or Point of Sale/promotional display stands
- poor store layout that locates goods where they cannot easily be overseen by staff
- poor packaging – i.e. design that makes it easy for thieves to get items out of the packaging and store
- CCTV that is poorly specified and which generates low quality images that cannot support a prosecution even if the offender is apprehended<sup>5</sup>
- alarm systems that do not work
- tags that can easily be removed

#### \* Poor management

- Inadequate management of the store and its staff also have some bearing on shoplifting such as:
- few sales staff incentives – staff are often not continually motivated to look for suspicious behaviour much less respond to it when noticed
  - security officers, who may not be properly tasked, supervised or motivated. For example, interviews with security personnel reveal that security measures do not work properly because staff do not use them very well

#### \* Poor procedures

Research has shown that security staff sometimes consider the procedures set out for them a hindrance to doing their job, and this lack of 'user-friendliness' is a key issue in the under performance of security measures<sup>6</sup>. Take for example guards who are required to follow suspected shoplifters. In a recent interview with a store security manager Martin Gill discovered this is not something security personnel prioritise because they are required to be visible at the entrance to the store, and risk being accused of time wasting if their 'suspicions' turn out to be unjustified. Is this a problem that can be addressed using design?

Given there is so much apparent opportunity, it is little wonder thieves say that it is easy to shoplift.

<sup>1</sup> British Retail Consortium (2008) Retail Crime Survey. London: BRC

<sup>2</sup> Bamfield, J. (2008) Global Retail Theft Barometer. Nottingham: Centre for Retail Research. Available at: [http://www.retailresearch.org/downloads/PDF/female\\_offenders.pdf](http://www.retailresearch.org/downloads/PDF/female_offenders.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> British Retail Consortium (2008) Retail Crime Survey. London: BRC

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Gill, M. (2005) Reducing the Capacity to Offend: Restricting Resources for Offending. In Tilley, N. (ed.) Handbook Of Crime Prevention And Community Safety. Cullompton: Willan. Hayes, R. (2006) Shoplifting. In Gill, M. (2006) Introduction. The Handbook of Security. London: Palgrave, MacMillan.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Spriggs, A. and Gill, M. (2006) CCTV and the Fight Against Retail Crime: Lessons from a National Evaluation in the UK. *Security Journal*, 19.4. pp 241-51.

<sup>6</sup> Sasse, A., Ashden, D., Lawrence, D., Coles-Kemp, L., Flechias, I. and Kearney, P. (2008) *Human Vulnerabilities in Security Systems*. Cyber Security Knowledge Transfer Network. Human Factors Working Group, White Paper.

## Other factors

The 2000 Retail Crime Survey identifies that where the age of the offender is known, 16 per cent are found to be younger than 18<sup>7</sup>. When surveyed without fear of prosecution by the Centre for Retail Research (Young People and Shop Theft), young people say their reasons for shoplifting include lack of money (50 per cent), wanting the goods (40 per cent), bullied into theft (25 per cent), boredom (26 per cent) and excitement (21 per cent). Items they most commonly stole are familiar and include; CDs (68 per cent), jewellery (60 per cent), computer games (56 per cent) and clothes (51 per cent)<sup>8</sup>.

Studies of convicted offenders show that there is a clear relationship between shoplifting and drug dependency. 65 per cent of those arrested for shoplifting tested positive for drugs or admitted stealing to support their habit<sup>9</sup>. A 2005 survey also identifies that the average weekly expenditure of a drug addict is approximately £129 (£308 for heroin and crack users), and that shoplifting to exchange goods for cash to buy drugs, is fairly common place<sup>10</sup>.

Indeed, Martin Gill recently produced a film exclusively for a major retailer, showing how staff can help prevent shop theft and engaged the services of a former shoplifter. He revealed a drug habit that required him to steal £600 goods every day to feed a £200 a day addiction problem. Shop thieves typically sell goods for between a third (when they go via a fence) to a half (when they sell direct to end users) of the price on the label. He stole every day for two years and in that time he was caught just four times.

Shop theft can be regarded as 'gateway' one that can lead young people who are convicted, to a 'career' criminal path<sup>11</sup>. So, new and ingenious ways to design against shoplifting may also help to implement measures that prevent some vulnerable young people from being criminalised, living in a depressing crime cycle and victimising others.

It is important to recognise that there are victims of shop theft. Small shops often operating on tight margins can be adversely affected by losses from crime to the point of not being able to operate at all. This results in a loss of service to the community, especially amongst those who are

7 British Retail Consortium (2000) Retail Crime Survey. London: BRC.

8 Centre for Retail Research: Young People and Shop Theft. Available at: [http://www.retailresearch.org/crime\\_and\\_fraud/young\\_people\\_and\\_shop\\_theft.php](http://www.retailresearch.org/crime_and_fraud/young_people_and_shop_theft.php)

9 British Retail Consortium Website. Available at: <http://www.brc.org.uk/policycontent04.asp?iCat=48&iSubCat=451&Policy=Retail+Crime&SubPolicy=Overview>.

10 Centre for Retail Research: Drugs and Shop Theft 2005. Available at [http://www.retailresearch.org/crime\\_and\\_fraud/2007\\_drugs\\_and\\_retail\\_crime.php](http://www.retailresearch.org/crime_and_fraud/2007_drugs_and_retail_crime.php)

11 British Retail Consortium Website. Available at: <http://www.brc.org.uk/policycontent04.asp?iCat=48&iSubCat=451&Policy=Retail+Crime&SubPolicy=Overview>.

less able to travel elsewhere, and larger retailers will inevitably pass on the costs of shop theft to customers in higher prices, with those least able to afford it as the most impacted.

## Understanding Context/Thinking Thief

It is important to understand how shop thieves steal. The creative design process of thinking like a thief described by Paul Ekblom as "think thief" (1997)<sup>12</sup> and Lorraine Gamman as the "criminal gaze" (2008)<sup>13</sup>, may be useful to you in regard to development of design research and design proposals. Martin Gill (2007)<sup>14</sup> has put this theory into practice and taken shop thieves back to the scenes of their offences and, with the permission and engagement of retailers, asked offenders to recreate their offences as a means of learning how offenders make decisions. He asked what influences those decisions – such as the threat posed by staff and security measures – as a way of thinking more constructively about preventing shop theft. He concluded there were six key decision points, and that there is the potential for design issues to influence offenders' decisions at these six key points. They should be considered by designers and can be summarised as:

- **Why do I choose that store to steal from?** What makes the store attractive to potential thieves and how can it be made less conducive to theft?
- **On entering the store, does this look easy?** We have already broken down the sorts of issues that make theft look easy, such as the immediate perception of the design of the environment – the store layout – how can design make this look more threatening to thieves while retaining an appeal to shoppers and retailers?
- **On searching for goods to steal, can I avoid attracting attention?** Thieves say that they generally wander around the store unobtrusively while they weigh up the risks. How can designers make offenders feel that shop theft is unwise?
- **On stealing the goods, can I avoid being seen?** How can design make the act of shop theft more visible?

12 Ekblom, P. (1997). *Gearing up Against Crime: A Dynamic Framework to Help Designers Keep Up with the Adaptive Criminal in a Changing World*. *International Journal of Risk Security and Crime Prevention*, 2(4): 249-265. Also see:

– Ekblom, P. and Tilley, N. (2000). *Going Equipped: Criminology, Situational Crime Prevention and the Resourceful Offender*. *British Journal of Criminology*. 40:376-398.

– Ekblom, P. (2007). Making Offenders Richer. In G. Farrell, K. Bowers, S. Johnson and M. Townsley (Eds.), *Imagination for Crime Prevention: Essays in Honour of Ken Pease*. *Crime Prevention Studies 21: Monsey, N.Y.*: Criminal Justice Press/Devon, UK: Willan Publishing.

– Ekblom, P. (2000). *Less Crime, By Design*. Available at: [www.e-doca.net/Resources/Lectures/Lessper cent20Crimeper cent20byper cent20Design.htm](http://www.e-doca.net/Resources/Lectures/Lessper cent20Crimeper cent20byper cent20Design.htm)

13 Gamman, L. (2008). *A Wry Look at Design & Crime - The Dark Side of Creativity* (video clip). *The Criminal Gaze* (video clip). Available at <http://www.designagainstcrime.com/index.php?q=lecturesandpresentations>. Also Gamman L. and Raen M. (in press) *The Art of Crime*, in Croypley (ed.) *The Dark Side of Creativity Reader*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

14 Gill, M. (2007) *Shop thieves on shop theft: Lessons for retailers*. Leicester: Perpetuity Research and Consultancy International.

- **On getting away, can I be sure no one is following me and no one will apprehend me?** Thieves say the getaway is crucial, a priority consideration, although it is clear that retailers have not given the same priority to this issue. How can design respond?
- **On selling the stolen goods, how will I get my money and avoid being traced?** Is there a design-led strategy that could increase the risk of being caught? If thieves believe they will get caught they are much less likely to commit offences.

Convicted shoplifters, including prolific offenders, often view stealing from small and large shops as their “job”, and develop various shoplifting techniques and resell items to live. See an account of how thieves do it by a shoplifter, Shirley Pitts. Downloadable on: <http://www.goneshopping.org.uk/archive.html>.

But who is likely to become a thief? Customers, staff and thieves are not always separate people. Some retail staff, when working in stores, have been found to steal items of much greater value than those taken by ordinary shoplifters. Indeed in North America surveys have consistently shown (somewhat in contrast to the rest of the world) that staff theft accounts for a greater percentage of loss than customer theft. Often staff work with outsiders to steal goods, and although there is only a limited amount of evidence on this, what there is suggests that it is rife. For example, Bamfield (2008) found that 1 in 10 of employee-related thefts were believed to involve collusion with outsiders.<sup>15</sup>

Recent figures on retail performance suggest that theft from retail outlets is likely to become worse not least because the economic climate is having an impact on stealing. This is no less than was predicted by the most recent British Retail Consortium Crime Survey which stated, quoting the then Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, that: “Our modeling indicates that an economic downturn would place significant upward pressure on acquisitive crime and therefore on overall crime figures”<sup>16</sup>. It further observed: “although this year’s survey has noted a downward trend, retailers are already reporting a rise in offences and are expecting crime to rise significantly as the situation worsens”<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> For a fuller discussion of staff theft and collusion, see Gill, M.L. and Goldstraw-White, J.E. (in press) *Theft and Fraud by Employees in F. Brookman, M. Maguire, H. Pierpoint, and T.H. Bennett. Handbook of Crime*. Uffculme, Devon: Willan.

<sup>16</sup> British Retail Consortium (2007-2008) *Retail Crime Survey*. London: BRC, p42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## The brief

*Can the design of shop furniture, products, packaging, retail space large and small, display areas, security procedures, retail management and the myriad of other factors in this environment – even the experience of shopping itself – reduce shoplifting and improve ambiance without turning a small newsagent or a large department store into Alcatraz?*

Some pointers – these are not definitive and should be used only to stimulate your own approach:

- Is there a way to build security into products, store bags, trolleys or baskets to prevent shoplifting (and bag theft) and to integrate anti-theft shopping into the customer experience, rather than simply relying on tags? Think about the way in which the customers carry their own belongings around shops. Is this an area for investigation? What are the social implications of new approaches to countering shoplifting and how will new techniques and services that could be created affect the way we shop?
- Alternatively, can a store environment be developed to improve staff performance in countering shoplifting? What incentives might inspire staff to be more aware of shop thieves and what might deter them from shoplifting themselves?
- How could packaging be improved to prevent shoplifting? Thieves say they like things that are easy to hide. Can packaging design make this more difficult without it becoming oversized (the costs of defeating crime should be considered in terms of issues relating to sustainability)? Thieves do not like anything that attracts attention, so could packaging be made ‘noisy’ when it is removed?
- Could the shopping experience itself be re-designed? Think of all the touchpoints involved in the process of shopping from product handling to trying out products or trying on clothes, for example. Where are the vulnerable points in this process and how could design prevent theft from changing rooms, tag switching or the many other ways that a theft is executed?
- How could new ways to review overstock management and stock tracking help to ensure staff do not have incentives to steal? Many current approaches fail because they are not ‘designed in’ to the working experience of those who are operational, can these issues be identified and addressed?

Your design proposal should demonstrate new thinking around shop theft without compromising the shopping experience, and show awareness of the ways in which professional shoplifters have already learned to by pass security systems. At the same time, it should not be so expensive to implement it would be unattractive to the retail industry.

It may be helpful to your design analysis to review the needs of users and abusers when planning your design approach. Interviews with convicted shoplifters reveal that many individuals find shoplifting easy for a variety of reasons: security tags can be easily subverted; secure packaging can

be discarded; it's easy to steal when stores are at their busiest; store and staffing policies mean in reality that there are too few motivated staff willing to take action; they perceive security guards on the door are too unfit to catch them, or too unobservant to detect them. All these concerns, as well as the requirements of legitimate users of shopping spaces, may give some clues to where design research and design proposals might make a difference to finding new answers to the problem of shoplifting.

Remember that people are at the centre of this project so ensure that talking to key stakeholders is at the heart of your research: both those you are designing for and those that you are designing to foil (the latter you may have to approach through some of the resources provided e.g. films, research papers, books etc). Remember that whatever you propose should not undermine or compromise the shopping experience.

### Things to think about

There are many new and existing technologies (some used in other contexts) that could be introduced, or adapted to deliver on anti-theft strategies but most small businesses cannot afford to buy them or see little value in doing so. So more ingenuity and imagination is needed to develop design led strategies and responses that are accessible to the small shopkeeper, as well as major retail outlets. Designers may find it helpful to look at technology, including low-tech solutions, linked to the design of:

- Fixtures, fittings and packaging; are there ways of making the large store or small shop environments more secure, linked to the design of store furniture or other items without an over-reliance on security guards, spy cameras and clumsy tagging?
- Is there a way to rethink tagging, and redesign it, linked to new packaging design ideas?
- Technologies are emerging all the time, and becoming less expensive. Perhaps anti-shoplifting emphasis could be delivered by focusing on how people can shop more efficiently, with less temptation and opportunity to steal.

When developing your proposal, it is essential that you consider the following:

- Who is the person (people) or organisation you are designing for?
- What type of theft are you aiming to reduce?
- How do such thefts occur?
- Where is it located?
- What are the main needs and priorities of any service you wish to deliver?
- What are the behaviours that you want to promote and prevent?
- What is the environment in which your proposal will be experienced/engaged with?
- What solutions already exist in the area you have chosen to address? What is good and bad about them?

- How does your proposal relate to the aims and objectives of stakeholders in this field. Who do you consider them to be?

### Outcome & Submission Guidance

The delivery must include a written outline together with visualisation of your device/product, service or environment that addresses the issue. You should communicate, through any medium you see relevant, by providing the following:

#### Statement

This is your big idea. It is essential and should be provided whether or not you are proposing a device, product, service or environment. It should be no more than 500 words.

#### Evidence of Research

You should include information about whom you consulted and how this led to your strategy or proposal. This can be delivered in a sketchbook/report form and/or be a mixture of visuals and words

#### Realisation

This is how your proposal tackles the issues and can be presented in the form most appropriate to your chosen solution. For example the options might be:

- A3 boards (max. 4) showing design development and final designs. If you submit a product solution, one board must show all elevations of it to provide an understanding of the assembly
- a written outline together with visualisation of your service idea submission on CD (PC or MAC) or DVD. Please list clear details for loading and any other information that will enable the content to be easily viewed; please test your discs prior to submission and check that they are virus-free. Any discs that cannot be opened will not be judged. Director and Flash applications should be saved as Projectors for the relevant platform (PC or MAC) and clearly labelled as such
- any models or mock ups should be submitted as photographs or printouts mounted on A3 board (this can be in addition to the design boards). Do not submit 3D work at this stage
- all work (except the sketchbook) should be submitted on lightweight card and everything should carry the RSA label on the back
- **do not** submit work in plastic sleeves or on foam board, metal, wood, Perspex, or in boxes. These requirements are in the interests of students to ensure the safety of their work whilst in storage and transit and to ensure that it can be displayed for judging.

## **Advice about Methodology**

A strong account of how to deliver design against crime in terms of practice-led design processes can be found on <http://www.designagainstcrime.com>. It has been created based on design projects which have been delivered through practice rather than theory and about how this might be done. It features the Evolved Twin Track Model of the DAC Iterative Design Process (Gamman and Thorpe 2007, revised 2009) and describes i. What is Design Against Crime? ii. Why user-centred design. iii. Mis-users and abusers too, what is unique about DACRC's methodology; and iv. Conclusions on how best to design against crime. See: <http://www.designagainstcrime.com/index.php?q=designmethodology>.

Some of the individual design "methods" described by this DAC approach to methodology are also independently listed on the Design Council website which offers a general account of various design methods that can be drawn upon to deliver design against crime that you may also want to engage with.

See: <http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/en/About-Design/Design-Methods/>  
Also see Alison Black on User Centred Design: <http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/en/About-Design/Design-Techniques/User-centred-design-/>

## **Crime Frameworks**

A number of useful crime frameworks have been created by Professor Paul Ekblom to help designers bring further critical rigour to the design process, and to help you critically think through crime problems. They are located at: <http://www.designagainstcrime.com/index.php?q=crimeframeworks>

## Schedule

### **Dates for submission of entry forms, fees and work**

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## Thursday 19 November 2009

### **Deadline for Entry Form(s)/Fee(s) for all projects**

(including *Directions Plus*)

NB: *Working Late* has an earlier deadline: **Friday 4 September 2009**

Entry Forms/Fees should be sent under separate cover

– **not** with your entry – to:

RSA Design Directions Registrations

8 John Adam Street

London WC2N 6EZ

UK

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## Monday 16 November – Friday 11 December 2009

### **Submission period for all project entries**

(except *Design Directions Plus*\* and *Working Late*\*\*)

Entries will be accepted at Brooks Transport Services Ltd on any weekday within the dates stated between 08:00-18:00, excluding weekends and bank holidays. Entries arriving after 18:00 on Friday 11 December 2009 may not be accepted

NB: Different arrangements apply to *Working Late*\*\*

Please remember that all entries (except *Working Late*) should be sent or delivered to:

Brooks Transport Services Ltd

Unit 2/15

Second Avenue

Bluebridge Industrial Estate

Halstead

Essex CO9 2SU

UK

All Entry Forms/Fees should be sent or delivered to:

RSA Design Directions Registrations

8 John Adam Street

London WC2N 6EZ

UK

\**Design Directions Plus* – Submission date for entries for these projects is:

Friday 8 January 2010

\*\**Working Late* – entries need to be submitted to the RSA (**not** Brooks) by:

Friday 18 September 2009