

Local

Stores arming for perennial battle

Shoplifting a Christmas tradition

By FRANK CHRISTLIEB
Battalion Reporter

Shoplifting is a problem that has many possible solutions, but it is one that is nearly impossible to solve. That is, merchants can take several precautions against shoplifters and their diverse methods, but no matter how dedicated the efforts, shoplifting goes undetected or unpunished for one reason or another in many cases.

The shoplifting problem has faced nearly all merchants at one time or another, no matter what size stores they may have or what types of merchandise they may sell.

In fact, an article in the Nov. 27 issue of the Montgomery County Daily Courier states:

"According to crime statistics released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, shoplifting is the biggest monetary crime in the United States, accounting for 14 percent of all store bankruptcies."

Bryan-College Station merchants have their share of shoplifting, even though most stores are taking steps toward preventing its occurrence.

Lt. Bobby Riggs of the Bryan Police Department said he is giving shoplifting seminars to Bryan merchants to inform them of different ways to protect against shoplifters.

He said he also tells them about methods used by professional and amateur shoplifters.

"Employees should be courteous and acknowledge customers as soon as possible," Riggs advised.

Several area merchants said they agree that this is one of the best ways to safeguard against shoplifters. One source said if a customer enters a

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store with the intention of shoplifting, there is less chance that he will be greeted and offered assistance an employee.

This, he said, is because a customer will then know that he has been seen by an employee, and he will not feel comfortable enough to shoplift at leisure.

Riggs said employees should watch for loiterers and suspicious people, since they are possible shoplifters.

Merchants can take other precau-

tions in order to prevent shoplifting, Riggs said.

For instance, he said, most stores limit the number of clothing items which can be taken into a dressing room at one time. He said it is best to place a limit on the number of items because if there isn't one, employees cannot possibly keep a count of all customers and how many items they bring into dressing rooms.

Another protective measure taken by some stores, Riggs said, is the rotation of clothing hangers on racks. He said if hangers are placed so every other one faces one direction and the next one faces the other way, customers will not be able to take too many items at once.

This, he said, will prevent shoplifters from taking several items and putting them into a bag or otherwise concealing them in an attempt to steal.

Riggs said merchants can also use different types of surveillance equipment and security to watch for shoplifters.

He said these include convex mirrors, one-way mirrors, binoculars, cameras and an object which looks like a vent, but is actually a type of peephole through which employees can watch for shoplifters.

A source at Skaggs Alpha-Beta said the store uses plainclothesmen and one-way mirrors, which appear to be regular mirrors on one side and "windows" on the other side through which the store can be seen. These mirrors are placed on the walls throughout different parts of the store.

John Holly, assistant manager of Weiner's in College Station, said, "Increased observation cuts down on the number of shoplifters in our store."

Holly said plainclothesmen and employees watch the store closely, and because of this, shoplifting has not been a bad problem for the store.

Shoplifters have many different methods, Riggs said, and these methods can be simple or complex.

He said large purses, large coats or clothing, boxes, shopping bags and "booster boxes" are a few of the devices used by shoplifters.

Riggs explained that "booster boxes," used by professional shoplifters, are gift-wrapped boxes which have one end cut to form a flap. He said the shoplifter finds the items he wants to steal, opens the flap and puts the items in the box.

One merchant said shoplifters may use handbags with secret compartments, as well as coats with several pockets inside.

This merchant said shoplifting is greatest during the busiest times of the year, such as during the Christmas season and during January and February.

Holly said shoplifting seems to be greatest during the "predominantly gift-giving seasons" and estimated that 75-80 percent of shoplifting takes place during the Christmas season.

The most frequent shoplifters, Riggs said, are probably housewives. He said housewives do more family shopping, so they are the people who have more chances to shoplift.

Riggs said juveniles and young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 rank two and three respectively in frequency of shoplifting.

There is a general consensus among area merchants that shoplifting cannot be totally stopped, even with all of the preventive measures that are being taken.

One source said the problem is "so... scattered out" that it cannot be

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accurately pinpointed as to who is actually responsible.

He said the fact that only a small percentage of shoplifters are caught also makes the problem hard to overcome completely.

Another merchant said it is hard to stop shoplifters unless they are actually seen concealing an item. He said if an employee is not sure of a suspect's intent to steal, he should not attempt to detain him.

But, he said, "They know and you know that if you don't see them get it, they can beat you at it."

Riggs explained this is a big problem in defeating shoplifting because if after a person has been detained for shoplifting it cannot be proven that he has shoplifted, embarrassment and even a lawsuit against the business may result.

In his opinion, he said, it is best to wait for a suspect to get through the check-out line before attempting to stop him.

Riggs said this way, a person will not be able to say, "I was going to pay for it," having already gone through the check-out.

The policy of each store usually determines what action is taken against a shoplifting suspect, Riggs said.

Several of the people interviewed agreed shoplifters have nothing to gain by stealing items from stores.

One merchant said, "It just doesn't pay for someone to shoplift." Riggs said even though shoplifters usually have money to pay for the

items they steal, they steal them anyway.

Riggs said penalties for shoplifting can be anything from a Class C misdemeanor to a third degree felony.

Shoplifting of under \$5 worth of merchandise is a Class C misdemeanor, and shoplifting of \$5-\$20 and \$20-\$200 worth are Class B and Class A misdemeanors respectively. Any shoplifting of over \$200 worth of merchandise is a third degree felony.

Penalties for all of these offenses range from \$200 fines to \$5,000 fines and/or from 180 days to ten years in the Texas Department of Corrections.


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