Open your eyes to the reality of robbery and threat of theft in your shop.

By Paul Goodman, CPA

> It is estimated that more than $20 billion is stolen by shoplifters each year. Even more is stolen by employees in the way of products, supplies and cash. That’s a lot of money taken out of the pockets of...

Lucky for you, retail florists are not high on the list of most criminals, thanks to your small size (shoplifters like crowds) and product selection (perishable products don’t have a high street value, and most florists don’t carry a big gift line).

But that doesn’t mean you’re immune, especially as the recession leaves many unemployed and desperate for cash — even when it’s as little as $70. That’s how much was taken from Bloomtastic this summer, when a man held two employees at knifepoint and took the cash. The Upper Arlington, Ohio-based flower shop is in a seemingly safe, busy strip mall, surrounded by other retailers. Although neither of the two employees at the shop was hurt, the incident robbed them of their peace of mind, said co-owner Heather Waits. “It just really shakes you up,” she said. “And you start to second guess motives of shoppers, because we think this guy had come in before to check us out.”

Her employees did the right thing — gave him the money, locked the door after he left and called the police immediately — but Waits is spending more time educating them on prevention and response and wants more florists to do the same. “I don’t think most florists think it could happen to them. It can.”

The preventative measures for robbery, shoplifting and employee theft do differ, but each start with education. Let’s look at each one individually.

**Robbery Prevention**

Robbery doesn’t occur as often as other crimes against businesses, but the potential for loss can be much greater from a single incident. Also, robbery involves force or threat of force and can result in serious injury or death.
Many of the following measures can also deter less violent shoplifters.

- Greet every person who enters the business in a friendly manner. Personal contact can discourage a would-be criminal.
- Check the layout of your store, eliminating blind spots that may hide a robbery in progress.
- Provide information about your security systems to employees only on a “need-to-know” basis.
- Instruct employees to report any suspicious activity or person immediately and write down the information for future reference.
- Place cash registers in the front section of the store where you can see customers entering and leaving.
- Keep small amounts of cash in the register to reduce losses. Use a drop safe into which large bills and excess cash are dropped by employees and cannot be retrieved by them.
- Make bank deposits often and during business hours. Don’t establish a pattern, take different routes at different times.
- Ask local law enforcement what to do in the event of a robbery. Make your address visible so emergency vehicles can easily find your business.
- Join or start a neighborhood watch program. Many local law enforcement agencies have departments and/or literature to educate local businesses.
- If confronted by a robber, cooperate. Merchandise and cash can always be replaced — people can’t!

**Shoplifting Prevention**

These five-finger discount artists come from every age, race, sex and social and economic background. According to the National Crime Prevention Council, about 25 percent of all those caught shoplifting are between the ages of 13 and 17. Their reasons for stealing range from boredom to peer pressure to having the latest clothing or gadget. Adult shoplifters often are first-time offenders who steal as an escape from, or in retaliation to, pressure and stress out of their control.

**Let them know.** As simple as it sounds, a sign on your door that says you prosecute shoplifters will turn many away. It’s easier for them to go somewhere else.

**Walk around the shop,** look for hidden areas. Either rearrange fixtures to eliminate blind spots or install mirrors that allow you to see that corner. Add lighting to any spot that’s too dark to monitor well.

**Install cameras.** A better, but more expensive alternative to mirrors is a closed-circuit TV camera installed where it is easy to see. If you don’t want to spend the money, put up fake cameras, with red lights so they appear to be on.

**Protect the valuables.** Put small, expensive items, such as collectibles, in a locked display case or fixture. Make it difficult for thieves to get their hands on the merchandise.

**Employee Theft Prevention**

Statistics show that your employees are 15 times more likely to steal from you than your customers. Whether they’re stealing flowers, a vase or cash, it’s money out of your pocket.

Start preventing it by letting your employees know that you will not tolerate theft. It’s grounds for dismissal and prosecution.

Flowers are the most common items stolen. Owners unknowingly encourage stealing by taking flowers home themselves. While you have, in fact, paid for the bouquet, the employee who thinks she works as hard as anyone else might figure she deserves the same perks.

Giving generous discounts on products helps prevent theft — 30 to 50 percent discounts are not uncommon, nor undeserved, and should be applied to owners and managers as well. All discounted purchases should be paid for with cash or deducted from payroll and rung up by someone other than the employee doing the buying.

**Paul Goodman,** CPA, a 35-year floral industry veteran, is founder of Floral Finance Business Services, based in Tulsa, Okla., editor of Floral Finance, and author of The Profit Minded Florist. pglgoodman@aol.com.

**You’ve Been Shoplifted — Now What?**

Should employees confront suspected shoplifters once they’ve exited, when they can’t claim, “I was about to pay for this?”

The climate for the post-exit confrontation — long favored by businesses — is changing, according to some retail experts and floral industry sources, who say it’s not worth the risk. Shoplifters are becoming more aggressive, according to a 2009 security survey from the National Retail Federation (NRF).

Joe LaRocca, NRF’s senior asset protection officer who covers crime and safety on his blog, cited a 2009 incident at Best Buy when employees (ignoring the company’s policy not to pursue shoplifters who’ve exited the store) tackled a suspected shoplifter in the parking lot. While struggling outside, the suspect began flailing a knife around wildly. A store manager trying to calm the situation was cut and the suspect escaped.

“Having your staff confront someone outside is just dangerous,” said Georgianne Viniccombe of Monday Morning Flowers and Balloon Co. in Princeton, N.J. and Yardley, Pa., and she doubts it’s productive. “No one would ever cooperate with you and give you their name, let alone wait there while you phone the police.”

Wholesaler Eric Levy is OK with the outside confrontation, as long as there’s a back-up. “Safety in numbers,” he said. Better yet, he said: follow the shoplifter to their car, get their license plate number and give it to the police to handle.

Vigilant observation also helps as you can call the police when you first suspect a crime is in progress so they’ll arrive before any chase ensues, said Katie Miller, vice president at Dillon Floral Corporation, in Bloomsburg, Pa.

All three sources strongly endorse surveillance cameras as a deterrent and reliable source of valuable information for the authorities.

“Cameras are a valuable investment,” Miller said, noting that affordable prices make them a bargain for the “amount of peace of mind” provided.

Amanda Long