

# Need Something at the Shop? Ask Auntie to pinch it...

Middle-aged and middle class. If only all your customers fitted into this category then shoplifting would cease to be a concern. "Not so", say experienced retailers, loss prevention professionals and academic researchers.

"Conservative, middle aged people steal more than any other group. They make kids look like amateurs, which, of course, they are," says Rita Scala, one of a new group of professionals who are hired by small retailers to catch shoplifters for staff theft.

MAMs is the acronym used by security firm Loss Prevention to describe middle-aged, middle class thieves. Paul O'Brien from Sydney-based Loss Prevention Pty Ltd



says that MAMs account for more losses than any other group. "Many retailers tend to watch kids and soon become adept at identifying the body language that precedes theft. They regularly lift their heads from the merchandise and move their eyes around the shop. But", says O'Brien, "because a MAM is in our own peer group we tend not to, or prefer not to, look."

MAMs can go on stealing from the same store for years. They often begin innocently, sometimes discovering that they left a shop without paying for a magazine or greeting card. The behaviour can quickly escalate. Most MAMs keep their activities to themselves but some become very professional and as with kids they work in pairs. Rita Scala from Loss Prevention's Stop Thief division cites the case

of two well-dressed women from "a leafy northern Sydney suburb". Working as a team they chose stores with security sensors at the entrance.

"One of them would conceal stock in her clothes and bag while the other acted as a decoy. They would leave the store together and if the alarm went off the one with the goods would continue walking while the other would re-enter the store feigning annoyance."

Ms Scala says that shoplifting tips publicised on the Internet and in universities have lessened the effectiveness of door sensor systems.

She also warns shops not to use mirrors. "Mirrors work to the shoplifters advantage. They let the shoplifter know where **you** are", she says. Despite the difficulties with catching MAMs both Ms Scala and Mr O'Brien say that MAMs are not difficult to deter. "A MAM's greatest fear is the embarrassment," says Scala. "Often they have been stealing for so long that they don't see themselves as thieves. When we do catch them they rationalise their behaviour." The perceived high income of the store owner is often given as way of explanation. Another reason given is the length of time the person has been a store patron. Ms Scala says that despite the psychological reason theft requires opportunity.

Mr O'Brien points to comments made by shoplifters about various security systems and says that some security camera systems are the best cost-effective defence against MAMs and all shoplifters. "But," he warns "some camera systems are useless while others actually encourage theft. Thieves must be able to see themselves on a screen placed in a



particular position in the store. Cameras on their own don't work. Nor do monitors that switch from camera to camera. Thieves use these to their advantage as they do with mirrors."

O'Brien recommends a "self-observance" system with an "appropriately positioned monitor in the store".

Retailers who have the appropriate system report one of two behaviour patterns. Either the floor traffic decreases but income remains the same as before the system was installed. "Less work for the same money," says Highton retailer Lee Hathaway. Or store traffic remains stable and income increases. John McInlay from Springwood News says that income per customer has increased by 3% since his self-observance camera system was installed. This figure seems to bear out claims made by retail industry groups that small retailers are losing between 2 and 5% of gross income.

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