

Training for the Worst-case Scenario

Strategies to counteract the rise of violent incidents in retail

By LIZ PARKS

In March, a headline appeared in a Virginia newspaper that no one ever wants to see: A Burlington Coat Factory loss prevention associate had been killed trying to stop a shoplifter who, at press time, was still at large.

It was the latest in a growing number of violent incidents in retail and the second fatality of a loss prevention associate in less than a year.

Trying to fathom the unfathomable, Robert Moraca, vice president of loss prevention for the National Retail Federation, says this latest loss contributes to “a heightened concern among all loss prevention/asset protection professionals concerning society’s increased disregard for authority.”

AN “UPSURGE” IN AGGRESSION

There was a time, Moraca points out, when shoplifters — even organized retail criminals — would try to steal unobtrusively: “Get in and get out quickly and quietly.”

But that isn’t the case these days. “We’re seeing an upsurge in more aggressive retail criminals across all vertical markets,” Moraca says. “This, added to the increased abuse of prescription and non-prescriptive opiates, poses a constant challenge to the risk of our loss prevention/asset protection professionals and our law enforcement partners alike.”

The Monday after Christmas last year, there were more than a dozen retail disruption incidents including mass mall evacuations. Mall security guards were assaulted or threatened, shoppers were hurt and some were trampled.

Moraca says retailers are telling him about “shoplifters who come into their stores, take what they want, punch clerks, use pepper spray, even stun guns on guards who approached them.”

Last April in Georgia, a 25-year-old Walmart loss prevention officer died after being shot in the stomach when he

tried to keep a man from wheeling out three unpaid-for flat screen televisions.

Data from the most recent NRF Loss Prevention Survey released last October further documents the reality: Almost every retail respondent, 97 percent, reported that shoplifters and ORC criminals have become more aggressive in the past 12 months.

About one in six retailers felt that the level of aggression was “much higher than the previous year.”

OFFERING DIGNITY

While there is no way to totally prevent violence, Moraca believes that it could be possible to defuse a potentially violent encounter — with the proper training.

Acting on that belief, NRF has been working with conflict prevention and management solutions provider Vistelar to create a version of the firm’s Verbal Defense and Influence training program customized to meet the specific needs of retailers and their loss prevention/asset

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protection departments. The partnership is scheduled to launch June 26 at NRF's PROTECT 2017 conference in Washington, D.C.

Moraca says the training "will help loss prevention/asset protection personnel learn how to tone down escalations when they approach someone who turns belligerent."

Vistelar is developing a training manual, "Conflict Management for Loss Prevention/Asset Protection Professionals" in conjunction with NRF, as well as a companion online training program, that will be launched prior to NRF PROTECT.

The training focuses on "addressing the entire spectrum of human conflict, ranging from non-escalation to de-escalation to physical alternatives," says Vistelar's Bill Singleton.

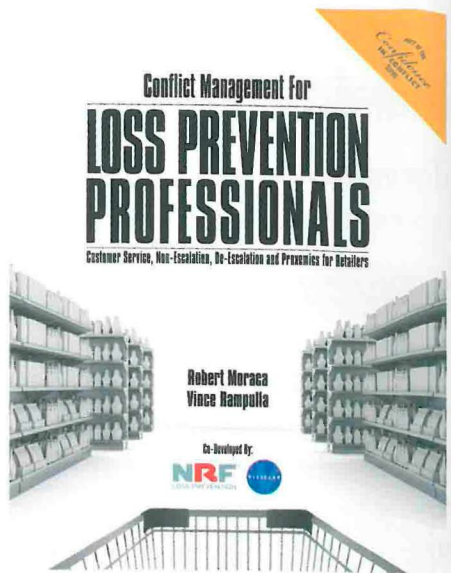
To effectively manage conflict, it's critical to start by "treating people with dignity by showing respect, even if you don't agree with them," he says. "Applying this principle has proven to be more effective in preventing and de-escalating conflict."

ACTIONABLE SKILLS

Singleton says the live trainings take a "fire drill versus a fire talk" approach.

"In schools, you never see teachers just give students a map of the route they are going to take in case of a fire. Instead, teachers get the students up and they practice a fire drill so they will remember what to do when a fire actually happens. We take the same approach to training conflict management skills."

Another key part of live training is teaching proxemic skills, which means training students to be aware of their



"physical presence, distance, relative positioning and hand placement," he says.

"In our loss prevention/asset protection pilot training, we've seen students literally walk to within 12 inches of a shoplifter," he says. "That's not just unsafe for the loss prevention/asset protection professional. It significantly increases the likelihood for escalation."

To further enhance successful conflict management, the trainings teach three key techniques: redirection, persuasion and crisis intervention.

"With redirection," Singleton says, "you're guiding someone off a belligerent path. You're not being a bully but you're trying to offer options that they might be receptive to."

With persuasion, "we teach a simple five-step sequence that gives the other person a chance to cooperate with a request."

Crisis interventions are a series of tactics for dealing with individuals with emotional disturbances or mental disorders who are displaying at-risk behaviors.

"These de-escalation tactics don't always work," Singleton explains. "We call this 'When words alone fail.' You must know your options when a situation heads south. Sometimes it's best to just let the shoplifter leave and call the police." **STORES**

Liz Parks is a Union City, N.J.-based writer with extensive experience reporting on retail, pharmacy and technology issues.