



Where Safety and Security Meet

How retailers can avoid a crash course in storefront safety

by LEN LEWIS

It was a warm, sunny spring day in New York City; Times Square was jammed with the usual throng of tourists and businesspeople. Then the vibrant but peaceful scene was shattered when a car jumped the sidewalk and rammed into anyone in front of it.

In the end, the Honda Accord crashed into barriers — but not before 22 people were injured and an 18-year-old woman was dead in an increasingly common scenario.

Vehicles crash into stores 60 times daily in the United States, according to the Storefront Safety Council, causing some 500 fatalities and massive property damage. The cost of these incidents to the insurance industry has been indicated at hundreds of millions of dollars per year — and the cost is rising.

“I’m constantly preaching about safety and teaching young architects and engineers to do the same,” says Rob Reiter, co-founder of the Storefront Safety Council, which has collected data on nearly 10,000 storefront crash incidents over the past five years. The association is aware of more than \$100 million in claims paid in 2015 and 2016.

‘CRASH AND GRAB’

With most attention focused on such issues as shoplifting, organized retail crime and credit or debit card fraud, the question rises whether vehicle crashes are top of mind.

“I think retailers are paying more attention for several reasons,” Reiter says.

“First is the high visibility of terrorist attacks where vehicles have been used as weapons,” he says. “This is a big deal for any retailer or mall owner. You’ve got to protect your property, customers and employees.”

“Terrorism is only one factor; another issue is theft of a vehicle for what’s termed a ‘crash and grab.’”

“That’s a big deal due to the high value of what’s being stolen,” Reiter says. People crash into computer stores and cell phone stores because they represent instant cash. Check-cashing retailers get hit a lot, he says, but so do designer retailers.

“Convenience stores get hit all the time by people who are stealing the ATMs, and check-cashing places are vulnerable because many are open 24 hours a day.”

Citing a national c-store chain with 7,000 standalone U.S. stores that he says

are hit “13 times a day,” he notes other accidental factors.

“We can’t tell how many people are crashing into them to steal the ATMs. If you add up c-stores, gas stations, drug stores and others, crashes are happening dozens of times per night.” Areas like Dallas and Cleveland are among the hardest hit, he says.

“It’s at a point where cities are saying you can’t install an ATM unless you move it away from the front of the building in order to protect it.”

MILLIONS IN DAMAGE

The thinking among some retailers had been that they were better off doing nothing, rather than install security measures that failed. But lawyers say just the opposite, Reiter says, since big judgments are coming in against businesses that have failed to take action — a \$32 million judgement against Cumberland Farms in Massachusetts was eventually reduced to \$20 million.

Sometimes the incident just involves a broken window and insurance will take care of it. Other times, there’s more structural damage and someone

gets hurt. If the driver has no insurance, Reiter says businesses could be looking at a bill ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000.

“In the past I’ve estimated that damage is somewhere around \$500 million a year,” he says. “It hasn’t been high on the radar because the driver’s insurance covers a certain amount, with the store owners’ and landowners’ insurance covering an additional amount.”

U.S. professional sports leagues require that their stadiums upgrade facilities to protect crowds against deliberate attacks, installing crash barriers, fences, gates and bollards.

“In the U.S., the trend is to what’s called a K12 crash rated barrier, which is tested by running a 1,000-pound vehicle into a barrier at 50 miles per hour,” Reiter says. “That’s what the leagues are requiring in stadiums.”

The Utah Jazz and the Milwaukee Bucks are rebuilding stadiums, he says. “AT&T Park in San Francisco is putting in measures right now — high-security measures to protect the crowds and facilities. And of course, human security goes along with it.”

STATE AND LOCAL REGULATIONS

Cities and states are getting involved; local ordinances have been passed in California and Alabama with more on the way. In January, California passed legislation that allowed insurance companies to offer a

discount to policy holders with proper safety barriers installed.

The law also requires the building commission to come up with a standard to implement for state building codes, Reiter says. “And although the law has been passed, putting building codes in place can be a four-year process.”

Orange County, Fla., has passed an ordinance requiring child care providers to install safety barriers at exposed locations; the cities of Artesia and Malibu in California, not wanting to wait for state regulations to take effect, now require safety barriers at various locations.

Reiter points to convenience stores Wawa and Cumberland Farms as successful examples of storefront safety.

“C-stores by their nature have people coming in and getting out quickly,” he says. They’ve redesigned their parking lots with safety in mind, eliminating curbs as much as possible for easy access.

“But they are also putting in bollards usually two for each parking space — so everyone in the store and on the sidewalk are protected from approaching vehicles.”

PREVENTION

While some companies have shown reluctance to create what looks like an armed camp rather than a retail store, Reiter says bollards “basically become

background noise It’s a lot cheaper to prevent potential problems than pay the cost of not doing something.

“Over the years, retailers just put a wheel stop at the end of the parking spot and thought they were doing something good. But rather than preventing accidents, too many people trip over them,” he says, “and a car can go over a wheel stop in the blink of an eye.”

Pointing out the abilities of good design to create a storefront that “doesn’t look like an armed camp,” Reiter says, “the truth is that there are more lawyers in this business than architects, and these big judgments will continue. If you can show that someone has had 25 crashes in the last five years and in the 26th someone was killed, it’s hard for a retailer to say we didn’t know about the danger.

“At the end of the day lives get saved when people do the right things sooner rather than later. Waiting until you are required to do something is a business choice, but not a good one,” he says.

“We’re at the meeting point of safety and security. If you’re taking care of one you’re probably taking care of the other. If you neglect these things they will always come back to bite you.” **STORES**

Len Lewis is a veteran journalist and author covering the retail industry in the U.S., Canada, Europe and South America.