

Preventing Shoplifting in Dixons Group Electrical Stores

Program Summary

Aim: To prevent shoplifting of merchandise from Dixons Group electrical stores.

Problem: High rates of shoplifting resulted in losses of stock and revenue.

Strategy/Intervention: Electronic tagging, store redesign, and uniformed guards were introduced to respective Dixons Group stores to reduce the incidents of shoplifting.

Location: United Kingdom.

Administering Institutions: Dixons Group.

Key Stakeholders: Dixons Group stores, customers.

Program Overview

Background: Based on principles of rational choice, shoplifting is generally characterised by an offender's analysis of a situation—Is there an opportunity to engage in crime? What are the risks associated with the act? What are the rewards? Like the act itself, prevention of shoplifting also requires an analysis of the situation. This involves an examination of when, where and how shoplifting occurs, by whom it is committed and knowledge of the items most vulnerable to theft.

Previous studies on shoplifting have found that accessibility of items and the risk of being caught are key determinants in deciding whether to shoplift. Of course, this is not so for all shoplifters and more experienced offenders may not be deterred by the probability of detection or the difficulty of the offence. Nevertheless, it provides a useful point from which to develop and implement prevention strategies centred on situational crime prevention.

In 1991 an experiment in the Dixons Group stores, which include Dixons and Currys electrical stores, was carried out to test the effectiveness of three preventive measures to prevent shoplifting—electronic tagging, store redesign and a uniformed guard. The implementation of store redesign in these stores aimed to minimise the accessibility of items (increase the perceived effort of the offence). Electronic tagging and a uniformed guard, on the other hand, were employed to increase the likelihood that offenders would be detected (increase the perceived risks of the offence).

Dixons stores predominantly sell electronic merchandise such as stereos, video recorders and televisions. Currys stores specialise in domestic appliances such as washing machines, dishwashers and refrigerators. Some types of smaller goods are also sold in both stores. The focus of the shoplifting study was to measure the effects of the three intervention strategies on specified “essential” items: smaller goods such as audio tapes, films and headphones. All Dixons Group stores participating in the study were characterised by high rates of shoplifting.

Method: Six stores fitted with respective prevention measures—electronic tagging (2 stores), store redesign (2 stores) and security guards (2 stores)— were compared to three control stores. Daily, systematic counting of specified essential items by management trainees was carried out before and after the intervention to measure the effect of these prevention strategies on shoplifting. Follow-ups were conducted three to six weeks later.

The counting method was tested by Buckle et al. (1992) who examined the validity of repeated systemic counting to measure shoplifting. The authors concluded that it “has sufficiently high validity to be used on a large scale to evaluate the success of experiments designed to prevent or reduce shoplifting”.

(Scientific methods rigour: 3)

Results: Electronic tagging, store redesign and security guards all produced different effects on levels of shoplifting. Electronic tagging caused a decrease in shoplifting that was maintained over time. There was a significant decrease in the level of shoplifting at post-test and follow-up and in comparison to the control area.

Store redesign also caused a decrease in shoplifting. However, these benefits were not maintained over time. There was a significant decrease in the level of shoplifting at post-test and compared to the control area, but these decreases was not sustained at follow-up.

Unlike electronic tagging and store redesign, the presence of a security guard had no beneficial effect on the rates of shoplifting. There was no significant decrease in activity at post-test or follow-up, and no significant differences were recorded between program and control areas.

Further Reading

Buckle, A., Farrington, D.P., Burrows, J., Speed, M. and Burns-Howell, T. 1992, “Measuring Shoplifting by Repeated Systematic Counting”, *Security Journal*, vol. 3, pp. 137–46.

Farrington, D.P., Bowen, S., Buckle, A., Burns-Howell, T., Burrows J. and Speed, M. 1993, “An Experiment on the Prevention of Shoplifting”, in R.V. Clarke (ed.), in *Crime Prevention Studies*, vol. I, Criminal Justice Press, New York.

Policy Issues

Shoplifting can be explained as an interaction between a motivated offender and an opportunity; in other words, determined offenders will engage in crime if they can. Reducing the opportunities that facilitate this type of behaviour should therefore be the focus of crime prevention policy.

The Dixons Group experiment found electronic tagging and store redesign to be effective long and short term strategies in reducing shoplifting. All prevention measures however can benefit from periodic follow-up and adjustment, especially if any increased rates of activity are experienced. For stores with electronic tagging systems, this may involve improving technology to increase detection of unauthorised merchandise being removed from the store, and for stores with particular security designs, continually enhancing store layouts to minimise accessibility of goods and maximise surveillance of potential offenders.