

Brockton food market goes high tech to battle losses

Computer detects mistakes made at the cash registers

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BROCKTON — When store manager Brian Vicente saw a commercial for a “sweethearting” detection system last year, he decided to give it a try at his store.

The software promised to catch any employee who neglected to scan items at their checkout lines, he said.

When he had the technology installed at Vicente’s Tropical Supermarket in Campello, he said he was stunned at the amount of food that left the store unpaid.

Two cashiers were caught stealing groceries on the video, he said. Meanwhile, he added, several other cashiers did not realize how many items at their checkouts bypassed the scanner.

Those who did so intentionally were disciplined and the store immediately launched a training program to improve cashiers’ performances, he said.

“There were far more mistakes than I expected,” he said. “I showed our cashiers the video of what they were doing, and they were surprised.”

The practice of sweethearting – when cashiers pretend to scan merchandise for favored customers, thus not charging them for it – occurs in many retail establishments.

In some cases, cashiers sweetheart for friends or relatives looking for free or discounted items.

In other cases, employees who are distracted or dealing with long lines or impatient shoppers make the mistake of skipping the scanner, according to many retail and loss prevention experts.

The practice racks up more than \$13 billion in annual losses worldwide, with more than 18 percent of all checkout clerks in the United States doing it at one time or another during their employment, according to a 2012 survey by the National Retail Federation.

Typically, around the holiday season, those numbers go up.

At Vicente, the problem has cost the supermarket roughly \$75,000 a year, the owner said.

Stopping the theft isn’t easy.

In most cases, retailers already deploy various techniques to combat sweethearting, such as video surveillance and pre-employment screening, but some of those techniques are not as effective in curbing the problem, said Malay Kundu, who researched theft from retailers while attending Harvard Business School.

He later found StopLift Checkout Vision Systems, which is now being used in the Campello supermarket at 689 Main St.

“Less than 1 percent of store video is actually viewed,” Kundu said. “Thus, retailers have had no means of detecting theft.”

“Retailers are being hammered by the economy and losing more to employee theft. This new technology is giving them a foolproof means of reducing their losses.”

The technology works in tandem with a store’s existing camera. The system, which is deployed in hundreds of stores nationwide, detects a number of sweethearting behaviors.

Some of the more common behaviors are: employees covering a products’ bar code, stacking items on top of one another, scanning only the item on the bottom and bagging items directly, said Sherry Alpert, who represents StopLift.

As soon as a sweethearting incident occurs, the software, which constantly monitors the security video, flags suspicious transactions and reports the incident to a manager, identifying the cashier or customer, the date and time of the theft and an estimate of how much had been lost, Alpert said.

In establishments where the system has been deployed, retailers report that the losses from sweethearting have decreased drastically, she added.

Vicente’s, which specializes in Cape Verdean, Spanish, Portuguese and Haitian produce and catering, employs 20 cashiers and is the first ethnic supermarket in the region to use the technology, she said.

On a recent afternoon, dozens of people bustled inside the market, picking at various produce. The incessant beep of the cash register was heard above the din of conversations between patrons and employees.

Cashiers quickly scanned items while customers waited.

Since having the cameras installed there, Vicente, whose father Manuel is owner, said he’s noticed a turnaround.

Despite a couple of cases of theft, he noted that the majority of unscanned items were due to negligence, a fact that he’s accepted with some measure of relief.

“The good thing about it is that once we catch all those mistakes, we correct them,” he said.

He regularly observes on the video the performance of each cashier and later reviews the footage with each employee, often to mixed reactions, he said.

“A lot of them were shocked, some took it positively, a few of them were in denial,” he said of the cashiers who were shown the videos.

“Some didn’t want to admit it, but in the end they all said that it was not going to happen again.

“We just let them know we’re watching them, but mostly we use it for them to get better.”

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