

CASE 10**Retail theft made hard:
On crime prevention at its most invisible**

Shoplifting is quite a common crime, costing consumers billions of dollars worldwide every year, as retailers have learned to budget in a 10 percent markup for what they euphemistically call “shrinkage.” Conventional measures to reduce shoplifting include using mirrors and CCTV cameras, installing warning signs, and hiring additional security staff. Evidently, shop design can also play a major role in preventing this crime, but this is where retailers and their designers face a strange paradox: to sell, the goods need to be displayed in a beautiful and tempting manner and to be easily accessible to prospective customers. Most retailers will reject any design intervention that they suspect could lead to a drop in legitimate sales and would rather live with “shrinkage.” Yet there is a societal cost to shoplifting that has to be taken into account: it is often an easy “first crime” for young people to attempt. If it isn’t nipped in the bud, the habit of stealing can easily lead to other, more serious crimes. And from a moral standpoint, we just cannot let this stealing go unchecked.

DOC researchers and designers were challenged to create solutions that would not decrease the attractiveness of the merchandise (and, if possible, would increase it), while preventing it from being stolen. The DOC project focused on a number of goods that get stolen a lot—the list includes small expensive items like cosmetics, but also batteries, clothing, and cans of baby formula. The designers quickly realized that the biggest thefts occurred where a black-market network existed to sell goods easily and in large quantities. They decided to concentrate on these situations, and reframed the problem as one of preventing large quantities of these particular goods from being stolen. This focus shifts the problem away from complete prevention, which indeed is very hard to achieve without making life harder for legitimate customers. Many different solutions were devised for the broad range of products. In the case of baby formula, for instance, the designers came up with a dispensing mechanism that only allows you to take out one can at a time—preventing a thief from sweeping an armful into a bag. The wheels of the dispenser are filled with sand which makes a gentle but persistent sound, warning shop attendants to take a look when that sound is heard for a longer period of time. Similarly, for clothing, a hanger was developed that is clipped to the rail of the clothing