



LINE OF FIRE

Louise Hobroh outlines the importance of using smart technology to provide a safer retail environment

Although all industries face the threat of aggression and the need to manage incidents, ones with employees in public-facing roles such as retail endure a high incidence of aggression or violent acts from angry customers. However, violence, abuse and anti-social behaviour are still on the increase. Evidence of this can be seen in the latest Retail Trust survey of more than 1,000 workers in the UK, which has revealed that nine out of ten (90 percent) have been the

target of abusive behaviour from customers, and more than two thirds (70 percent) have been dealing with an increase in verbal and physical assaults in the last two years.

Anecdotally, an electrical goods' store worker who participated in the Retail Trust survey commented that there is a widespread lack of understanding from the public when it comes to the wellbeing of staff. Customers are prone to insulting workers when their expectations are not met, putting employees in the line of fire. It is clear that more needs to be done to

Surveillance technology can help protect staff



protect staff and other shoppers. Retailers should invest in smart technology from surveillance cameras, to access control mechanisms, network audio systems and wearable devices to provide more 'eyes and ears' on the ground. Also, the presence of such systems serves to deter unacceptable behaviour and criminal acts and collect evidence in the event of an incident. Together, these smart technologies can help to create an environment that is safe and secure.

There are certain factors that can negatively impact the customer experience such as overcrowding in stores, low stock and long waits due to queuing. These instances can increase the chances of customers behaving disorderly out of frustration. The key to managing this is to anticipate issues before they arise and clearly communicating information to keep customers informed.

Smart technology can help to alleviate these issues and improve the customers' time in store, both in real-time and in the future. This includes network video cameras equipped with integrated analytics like people counting, which can be combined with other technologies – such as audio solutions – to enable a smooth shopping experience for the customer.

Particularly around certain times of year like Black Friday sales and Christmas, retail teams are faced with the challenge of managing an increased number of customers. This can lead to long queues, which contribute to customer frustration and the likelihood of an incident. Cameras with people counting analytics can gather occupancy data in real time. The numbers can be interpreted graphically with either green or red alerts to allow or block entering the store and be displayed on screens placed at entrances. Complementary audio can be used to play pre-recorded audio announcements or instructions based on occupancy levels. Additionally, using people-counting analytics in cameras to measure capacity can alert staff to attend different areas. For example, if a long queue is forming then employees can be directed to open more till points to shorten waiting times. If a customer is waiting in a specific area and looking for help, then video cameras can detect them, and a local audio message played to reassure the customer that a staff member is on its way.

Data collected from network cameras can also be used in forward planning for store optimisation to improve the customer experience. Heat mapping the customer journey around the store and measuring dwell time at different points can help ensure that items are merchandised well and easy for customers to find. Stock availability can also be a frustration for customers. To combat this, artificial intelligence (AI) analytics over camera can be used to monitor shelf availability and alert a need for replenishment.

From expensive food to luxury items, there are many items in retail stores that can be attractive to thieves – both intruders or shoplifters. Surveillance technology employed both inside and outside the store premises can protect staff and prevent theft, especially when paired with network audio.

For intruders looking to access the property outside of opening hours, horn speakers can be used in conjunction with cameras for

perimeter defence. When a potential threat is detected after hours, the alarms are transmitted back to a central control room. Once alerted, the operators can then assess the threat level and respond with live audio challenge where necessary.

When retail staff are present on-site and feel threatened, they can contact the central control room using an alert button, which allows them to talk directly to an operator and receive immediate assistance. This assistance can range from an audio message that store behaviour is being monitored, to directing further security staff over to the area where threatening activity is taking place and for them to intervene. Also, with sound detection, breaking glass or aggression can be automatically identified and assistance notified.

Although shoplifting tends to be done stealthily, altercations can arise if the perpetrator is confronted. Using smart technology to spot or deter this activity early can help avoid an incident. For example, intelligent video analysis can help to prevent loss through shoplifting at the checkout zone. Cameras with analytics recognise if a product in view is not scanned, or mismatches between the product shape and what its barcode says it should be.

BODY-WORN CAMERAS DETER UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR AND CRIMINAL ACTS

With the increased availability of open-platform body worn cameras and smaller, lighter and more discreet sensors, wearable surveillance technology is becoming much more suited to the needs of the retail industry.

When someone is inclined to threaten staff and realises they are being recorded by a wearable camera, they're more likely to calm down or walk away due to fear of the consequences of aggressive behaviour. This impact of body worn cameras has long been recognised by law enforcement. When combined with traditional video surveillance, they provide valuable additional insight for incident analysis.

These benefits translate well to the retail sector, especially in small shops with less staff and security resources who face even more incidents. In 2021 The Association of Convenience Stores (ACS) revealed that the last five years had seen a shocking rise in attacks on shop workers with 89 percent of individuals working in local shops having reported experiencing some form of abuse. In these environments where the employees are in close proximity to customers, body worn cameras add value by potentially preventing an incident or providing an unbiased account if an event occurs.

If an incident does occur, having a first-hand audio and video recording can help establish the cause and identify suspects. It can even help assess fault when there isn't a reliable third-party account of the incident. There are already existing instances from other industries whereby body worn camera footage enabled offenders to be brought to justice in court. For example, in 2020 a man was sentenced by Westminster Magistrates Court to 12 weeks imprisonment

following the physical assault of two Transport for London (TfL) Transport, Support and Enforcement Officers. Body worn camera footage – alongside CCTV – was used as evidence of how the passenger was behaving aggressively towards the customer service station staff.

In addition to this, compliance also plays a key role in ensuring the health and safety of staff, and that processes and protocols are maintained. This protects the retail industry against expensive liability claims. Body worn camera solutions provide proof that employees are conducting their work in a safe and proper manner, and that the surrounding working environment does not pose a threat. The video and audio recordings offer undisputed evidence of how situations were handled as they happened.

CUSTOMERS ARE PRONE TO INSULTING WORKERS WHEN THEIR EXPECTATIONS AREN'T MET

For example, store audits can be tricky given they cover every detail within operations, loss prevention, customer experience, health and safety and more. Wearable cameras make it easier to document any incidents that occur and protect retail stores from compensation claims.

Body worn cameras record incidents as they appear to the camera wearer, and as they sound to everyone involved in the situation. Solutions available today can deliver sharp audio and tamper-free video that is suitable for use during investigations and in court.

Reports are continuing to demonstrate the growing instances of verbal and physical assaults towards retail staff. It is crucial the industry is equipped to address this issue by discouraging negative behaviour from customers, diffusing situations when they are taking place and ensuring that offenders are held accountable when unwanted and criminal behaviour is reported.

VISIBLE DETERRENTS

There is a wide variety of surveillance system technology available to tackle retail worker safety. Network surveillance cameras have the potential to be visible deterrents whether they are worn on staff or placed in and around stores and integrated with audio to remind customers that their behaviour is being monitored. Combining smart technologies can greatly support the management of stores and reduce the factors that frustrate customers. For incidents that require further investigation body worn camera footage can help provide trustworthy evidence of what has taken place.

Smart technology will only improve further as time goes by and with that will come even more ways to support retailers in protecting staff, merchandise and properties ●

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Body worn cameras are smaller, lighter and more discreet, making them ideal for retail

