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COUNTER INTELLIGENCE TO CURB COUNTER ATTACKS

‘Smart’ incident verification could reduce personal alarm ‘blacklisting’

Retailers are optimistic that senior police officers across the UK could be close to endorsing a new technology that dramatically reduces false alarm call outs and the automatic store ‘blacklisting’ that follows two bogus 999 calls.

Positive talks between the Co-operative Group, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the providers of the technology, SSS Management Services, could end the blanket practice of removing police response from rogue alarm systems at often high risk stores because officers would have visual or audio evidence of attacks on staff and property.

The three month withdrawal of police response was introduced as a guideline by ACPO as a wake-up call to retailers and the security industry to upgrade faulty and out-of-date alarm equipment, but many stores fear for the health and safety of their staff if, during that time, they were confronted by violent or aggressive customers or shoplifters.

Violent crime is a real and perceived threat to front line shop workers, many of whom may be part time or students earning extra money. The British Retail Consortium’s figures for 2006 point to a 13 per cent increase in reports of violent robbery at UK’s stores, and one in five smaller retailers believing that they will lose staff because of increased violent crime or anti social behaviour.

Perceived violence and aggressive behaviour is also cause for concern. A survey by UK Retail Recruitment said 95 per cent of staff had experienced increased bad manners and 59 per cent had been on the receiving end of shouting and swearing. USDAW, the National shop workers Union, is staging its annual ‘Freedom from Fear’ Day on July 11 in response to its own statistics that during every minute of every working day a shop worker somewhere in the UK is verbally abused or physically attacked.

It is this perceived and real threat that may prompt staff to hit the personal alarm or panic buttons under the counter and thus run the risk of blacklisting if police arrive and the incident has blown over.

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Currently, police operate a policy on personal alarms whereby response is withdrawn after two false activations within a rolling 12 month period. It usually costs the retailer between £1500 and £2000 to upgrade, but then they must provide written confirmation that the fault has been remedied within the three months to get the police support back.

Retailers now believe they have arrived at a solution that will avoid blacklisting and falls into line with ACPO and Home Office thinking on crime and anti-social behaviour.

Managed systems operating visual or audio confirmation of an incident via an Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) could provide the answer. In stores, when the alarm is raised the ARC can talk directly to the shop assistant to see if help is really needed and also record the incident so that when police arrive at the scene they have independent proof even if the perpetrator has left the store or the situation was diffused in another way.

The Co-operative Group was recently singled out for praise by ACPO for its ARC audio verification response and Phillip Willsmer, the Group's Operations Manager for Asset and Profit Protection, is now seeking urgent talks with ACPO representatives to encourage all stores to move toward managed systems.

“We started the trial three months ago through SSS Managed Services and the telephone line and monitoring system is proving a real success in terms of reduced false alarms and assisted in the Group retaining police response in every location. During the three-month trial there have been numerous activations which have been filtered by the Receiving Centre and the Police have attended the four genuine incidents that occurred which proves beyond doubt the real benefits of this system.”

“This was because the talk back technology enables the ARC to talk to employees at the time of the incident and make sure they are all right. It has made a real difference because we can now provide officers with verification to assist in securing prosecutions in some of our higher risk stores where we might previously have been in danger of losing our police cover. It also means, where appropriate, that the ARC can broadcast messages to the offenders letting them know that they are being monitored,” he adds.

Mr Willsmer is now seeking talks with Ken Meanwell of ACPO's Crime Prevention Initiative who in a recent speech endorsed this approach.

In his speech to the National Security Inspectorate, Mr Meanwell spoke of cases where police have sent unarmed officers to armed situations or armed officers were sent unnecessarily. Visual, or other confirmation of personal attack, is important to guarantee police response and interventions by ARCs

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calling back to make sure staff had not let alarms off by mistake was also a way forward, he said.

SSS Managed Services, which operates the managed service behind the Co-operative Group roll-out, is about to publish an industry report on false alarms which highlights the waste of officer time and costs to the retail sector. The company, which can provide both audio and visual identification and verification to assist retailers and police, also wants to engage with ACPO and individual police forces to explore joint initiatives that promote managed services which will reduce wasted time and protect front line staff.

“The report will clearly highlight the disproportionate number of false call outs to overstretched officers and we need to explore solutions that have a clear and beneficial advantage to all parties,” says Philip George, sales and marketing director at SSS Managed Services.

“Although the report calls upon the security industry to address the ongoing issues surrounding false alarms, there is a need in the interim for officers to respond to call outs where there are genuine incidents, even if a store has lost the normal response levels. We endorse the Co-operative Group’s call for closer working as this sensible approach of verification satisfies both sides of the argument and helps to keep store employees safe,” he adds.

“We will be talking to ACPO as well as individual forces because it would appear that there are no common guidelines in relation to processes for false alarm call outs depending upon whether they are intruder and personal alarms. We want to engage with them to provide the evidence they need to either audibly or visually verify an incident as this provides the proof for them and assurance for the retailer.”

A spokeswoman for ACPO said the organisation would look at proposals brought to its attention.

SSS Managed Services is the UK’s leading provider of total security management services to the retail industry. The company offers a totally transparent, single point of control and clarity for services ranging from procurement to alarm monitoring. SSS manages security provision to more than two million square metres of retail space for leading retailers including Argos, BHS, Carphone Warehouse, The Co-op, Homebase, Superdrug, Savers, Halfords, Toys r Us, The Body Shop, Somerfield, Otto, Goldsmiths and Jones the Bootmaker.

For further press information, contact John Wilson at Free Range Heads on 07766 660790 or john@freerangeheads.co.uk

For more information about SSS Managed Services and for future updates visit:
<http://www.sss-protec.co.uk>

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SSS Management Services Ltd Shannon House, 245 Coldharbour Lane, Aylesford, Kent ME20 7NS Tel: 01622 798200 www.sss-support.co.uk

