

Be Prepared to Pivot This 2020 Holiday Season

By Kris Vece, LPQ

It's no secret that this is an unusual time and that many functions within retail, loss prevention especially, will be different. We face a volatile holiday season as increasingly cautious consumers and retailers both worry about illness, civil unrest, unemployment rates, the broader economy, and more. With COVID-19 restrictions alone, we know that many stores may still need to limit capacity, leading to more consumer time spent waiting just to enter the store. Nearby restaurants with limited seating will make it more challenging for consumers to shop all day, and former holiday staples, like mall Santas, will be rare. While there is much that we can't control this year, we can always work toward being more prepared.

To better understand and address current concerns, Protos Security surveyed its retail clients about their plans and challenges for the 2020 holiday season. All respondents expect to continue the COVID-19 safety measures they already have in place such as requiring masks, enforcing social distancing, and frequent cleaning. The top concern among retailers was less traffic to physical stores, regardless of the specific contributing factor (or combination of factors). So what can retailers and their loss prevention teams do to mitigate risks this holiday season?

Track Trends for the Pandemic and Civil Unrest

Loss prevention can't control locations where the virus will spread more rapidly or predict exactly where future incidents will spur civil unrest, but we can empower ourselves to respond proactively by staying informed through the available information. Being aware of trends and hotspot areas will enable us to be ready in the event that retail locations in a specific area may need to close again, as well as in the event that additional loss prevention

staff and/or security officers are needed, either to fill in for others feeling unwell or to provide backup in the event of nearby protests.

Even locations spared from being past epicenters of the virus or from previous protesting can experience rapid changes in one (or both) concerns. This was demonstrated as the virus spread through various countries and even various states within the US, creating new and often unforeseen epicenters. There are numerous sources for tracking national to local COVID-19 trends, so the most important factors are ensuring the use of a reliable and consistent source of information that is kept as up to date as possible.

Civil unrest can often be more complex to track, and it can be even tougher to determine what might escalate to a level of rioting and looting. Discussions around civil unrest frequently pick up a following online and echo through various social media channels. Retailers and loss prevention can begin to manage this risk by monitoring social media to establish an awareness of the conversations and continue to track the ones that are escalating toward action in areas where retail locations may be vulnerable.

Ensure Adequate Loss Prevention Staffing and Updated Trainings

Now more than ever, it is essential to make sure that your

security provider has sufficient loss prevention staffing and the appropriate options in place to make last-minute changes, such as increasing coverage when needed. Loss prevention personnel and security officers need to continue to show up on time, take precautions to remain healthy, continue to comply with the newer safety guidelines, and be

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– Kris Vece, LPQ, Protos Security, Vice President of Strategic Accounts



adaptable with newer responsibilities in their roles, such as providing hand sanitizer and enforcing social distancing.

Moving beyond the basics, like arriving healthy and as scheduled, timely training adjustments and staff for such a critical safety-related role are essential in uncertain times. If the situation evolves and further safety measures need to be taken, your security provider needs to be able to adapt with you. Essential training now must cover the new normal procedures, and topics such as conflict resolution are more important than ever. With stress levels already heightened from a difficult year, along with growing pandemic fatigue as safety precautions continue and now the addition of holiday stressors, retail locations may continue seeing increasingly agitated consumers.

Avoid Neglecting Prepandemic Plans

The year's newer risks have taken the spotlight, but our enduring risks still deserve attention. Threats like active-shooter incidents can easily feel like prepandemic problems, but these incidents have not stopped. In fact, holiday shoppers are at a unique risk during a time when many other activities that would have drawn large crowds are canceled or postponed. Unfortunately, this means that holiday shoppers can become the best access to large crowds for potential active shooters.

Active-shooter scenarios are just one example—it is important to check existing emergency and continuity plans for various threats. Even the best prepared plans may need to be altered for a pandemic environment, and we may need to be prepared for a culmination of different factors creating more complexity than we would have anticipated in prior years.

As always, shrinkage will continue to be a challenge, especially after being at an all-time high for fiscal year 2019. According to the National Retail Federation's National Retail Security Survey 2020, retailers attributed the majority of that to in-store loss, but we already know that 2020 will be an unusual year. While fewer people in physical stores do not guarantee less in-store shrinkage for 2020, we may have

to pay more attention this year to a potentially increased risk with online sales. Based on the increasing need for cyber security, we know that shrinkage and other theft doesn't stop when people are behind screens.

Moving Forward

With any emergency, it's essential to prepare by having plans in place ahead of time. The pandemic is a reminder that even the threats we tend to view as highly unlikely

can not only occur but also escalate faster than we'd expect. Retail and loss prevention leaders need to be more prepared than ever this holiday season while balancing stagnant or only slightly expanded budgets, according to the National Retail Security Survey.

Luckily, we've learned a lot over the past few months on how to provide a safe shopping experience, navigate rapidly evolving risks, and keep the industry moving forward. Our upcoming challenges—new and old—will be best navigated if we're working together to share best practices and create a safer consumer and employee environment in spite of the year's challenges.

For questions or more information about the Protos Security retail client survey, contact marketing@protossecurity.com. ■

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About Kristine Vece, LPQ

As Protos Security's vice president of strategic accounts, Vece is responsible for all aspects of sales and client relations. Through relationship-building and a focus on excellence, she has earned a reputation as a loss prevention expert. She is an active member of the Loss Prevention Foundation, International Association of Interviewers, ASIS, and the New Jersey Food Council.

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