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Technology vs. Human Connection

Bill McCurry



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Minimum wage and theft are the most emotional issues for most readers, according to my phone and email. If that's accurate, I'm going to need a new phone because this column combines both.

The National Retail Federation's (NRF) Big Show was awash in technology to help retailers cut personnel costs and reduce "shrinkage." Some of this technology appears counterproductive—or is it?

Most independent garden centers can't justify the automated self-checkouts common in large box stores worldwide. Even with the increases in minimum wage, for garden centers the payback won't be enough to justify the over \$100,000 cost.

Self-Service Checkout leads to higher "shrinkage" than an attentive, friendly cashier. Dr. Emmeline Taylor at the University of London (England) coined

SWIPERS—"Seemingly Well-Intentioned Patrons Engaged in Routine Shoplifting."

How and why these well-intentioned customers convert into shoplifters can teach garden centers how to cut their losses. The Atlantic (March 2018) story, "The Banana Trick and Other Acts of Self-Checkout Thievery," reports a Reddit discussion around a post: "There is NO MORAL ISSUE with stealing from a store that forces you to use their self-checkout, period. THEY ARE CHARGING YOU TO WORK AT THEIR STORE." The author of the post identifies the customers' action as stealing. In their logic, it is totally justified because the store is using customer labor to run the checkout. Another Reddit poster encourages theft from self-service checkouts because stores have cut back on employees. So, through their cutting back, the store is stealing employee wages. Therefore, shoppers should steal store profits until the cashiers are back. Isn't social media a wonderful thing?

These comments aren't made in isolation. Thieves justify their crime because the employer is "cheating on taxes, underpaying/overworking employees and/or gouging and cheating customers." Do you have a pick-up area where customers can load their vehicles with bagged or baled products? Without immediate staffing, the misguided SWIPERS customer may feel the products should be free because there's no one to promptly help them.

Barbara Staib, director of communication for the National Association for Shoplifting Prevention, says thievery is lessened when real people interact with real people, partly because thieves might feel they could get caught by another human. The automated cashier process "gives the false impression of anonymity." Possibly the shopper who might shoplift will feel a slight connection to the human cashier, slowing down their impulse to steal. Non-

intrusive personalization is also believed to reduce theft. The customer known by store employees, greeted by name or recognized by the automated checkout system, may feel emotionally closer to the store. They're reminded they're known, and therefore, more vulnerable to being caught.

There's a solution called StopLift that uses cameras and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to watch both self-service and staffed checkout areas, helping to detect customers or employees shorting or under-ringing a sale.

The side benefit of StopLift is that it double checks what both clerks and automated self-service checkout are doing. Besides spotting "scan avoidance" at self-service, it also picks up what the human clerk overlooked or rang in error. "Sweethearting" is the new label for a complicit cashier who under rings or passes over a product purchased by a friend. Regardless of the rationale or intention, technology can monitor what goes into the POS and the variance (if any) to the price that should have been charged. On an hourly basis, the store knows the accuracy and speed of throughput of each cashier, identifying the best cashiers to be scheduled for the busiest times.

Are you intentionally—or unintentionally—giving your customers/employees a rationale to steal? It's their perception of how you act that may justify their actions. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.