

Anarchists and artists in Aisle 6

As more people see stores as stages for their personal statements or outlandish antics, LP professionals are facing new challenges maintaining in-store security. *By Stefan Dubowski*



PHOTO COURTESY OF NATALIE REIS

Some people might say Natalie Reis's activities in certain Montreal stores are nothing more than vandalism. Others might say it's art. Either way, her projects — and others by people just like her — are forcing retail LP professionals to rethink the way they approach the connection between store security and good customer relations.

Reis is a visual artist whose work comprises paintings, illustrations and public displays. Sometimes, those public displays take place within a retail environment, such as the times when she might, say, go into a supermarket and attach the images she has created to canned goods. "Dropping art in a sea of simple, bland labels is a way to disturb the linear, mechanical process of purchasing goods," she explains.

Reis is a member of Shopdrop Montreal, an artists' collective that asks consumers to take it upon themselves to "edit and contribute to our artistic landscape." Far from being intrusive, Reis says shopdropping, as it's called, is an artistic statement with cultural significance: "A surprise encounter with art and design... reaches the general public, rather than the usual well-informed elite who regularly make their way to galleries and museums."

Coined by U.S. artist Ryan Walker-Hughes in 2004, "shopdropping" refers to any action in which someone brings something into a store as a way of making an artistic or political statement. "Shopdropping strives to take back a share of the visual space we encounter on daily basis," writes Walker-Hughes at ShopDropping.net. "Similar to the way street art stakes a claim to public space for self-expression, my shopdropping project subverts commercial space for artistic use in an attempt to disrupt the mundane commercial process with a purely artistic moment."

The word is also helpful in describing a host of similar occurrences that retailers big and small have had to deal with for quite some time now: the insertion of religious or promotional pamphlets into books and magazines for sale, the surreptitious addition of independent musicians' CDs or concert flyers to music racks, the application of anti-consumer stickers to select pieces of merchandise. (An early and famous example of this kind of activity involved a group of activists that

set out to make a point about sexism by swapping the voice hardware of Barbie dolls with those in G.I. Joe figures and putting the dolls back on store shelves.)

Regardless of whether your store's staff and customers see these types of actions as art or annoyance, shopdropping can raise difficult questions for retailers. How should you react? Will customers consider the items affected by shopdroppers as interesting cultural commentaries or damaged goods? How will the presence of altered items affect the store's reputation? How should security staff respond if they catch a shopdropper in action?

To be sure, no one is suggesting that such activities as covering up canned goods with artistic labels or, as some shoppers at stores in the San Francisco area experienced last year, placing homemade "anarchist action figures" (complete with gas mask and Molotov cocktails) in toy aisles are meant to cause any actual harm to customers or store employees. But in an age of product recalls and media reports about tainted merchandise (recall a recent incident at a grocery store in Guelph, Ont., where sewing needles were found inserted into packages of meat), it's easy to see how consumers would be concerned about anything out of the ordinary in a retail environment.

According to loss prevention experts, the ways in which stores deal with these types of incidents could spell the difference between positive public relations and potentially alienating customers. "Do you end up spurring on more problems with a heavy-handed approach? That's something you have to be aware of," says Fred Tarasoff, an LP consultant in Castlegar, B.C. "But you do have to take some action."

"How to get kicked out of..."

Making the issue even more complicated is the fact that these random acts of art or activism aren't the only sources of disruption that retailers now have to contend with. Aside from shopdroppers, retailers are now routinely dealing with people pulling pranks specifically designed to get the perpetrators kicked out of stores, all for the purpose of filming the incident and sharing it online.

Visit YouTube and enter "how to get kicked out of" into the search field to find dozens of videos documenting these antics, everything from climbing shelves to wearing silly costumes to asking store staff extremely embarrassing questions. In one popular video, visitors to a large electronics retailer head to the car audio section, put their own music on one of the stereos, crank up the volume and turn the display area into an impromptu dance floor before a store employee turns down the volume.

By no means are these antics a new thing. For years, youngsters have turned to their local stores for a bit of fun and mayhem, whether it's knocking over displays or commandeering the PA system. Still, while the pranks themselves haven't changed, the context has. Today's pranksters not only record their adventures; they also upload the videos to the Web, where practically anyone can view them, paving the

way for a global game of one-upmanship to see whose outrageous stunt can attract the most attention.

Between the artists and the pranksters, it can be tempting for LP professionals to take a heavy-handed approach when perpetrators are caught in the act, especially if there is reason to believe the antics are a distraction from other, more serious crimes taking place. But in these economic times, when retailers can scarcely afford any kind of negative PR, that may not always be the best way to go. Indeed, since most of these acts are committed by customers with the means to connect to thousands more online, adopting a tough, no-tolerance policy could incite boycotts or encourage retaliation from other pranksters. On the other hand, simply doing nothing could alienate those customers who prefer a relatively quiet shopping experience.

What to do? Claude Sarrazin, president of Montreal's Groupe Sirco, which provides training and loss prevention consulting, says retailers shouldn't discount the savvy approach. For instance, if your store finds itself a hotbed of skateboarding action, you could consider setting up a designated area specifically for skateboarding. If all went according to plan, you could then record the skateboarders, post the videos on YouTube, and try to transform a security annoyance into a potential marketing tool.

But for a simpler solution, Tarasoff suggests the signage route. "If you said something like, 'We have the right to confiscate recording devices,' even if you don't, that's an angle that might work," he says, adding that many stores already display signs indicating that they have the right to check a visitor's bag.

Approaching artists

While these types of tactics may work against pranks, shopdropping might require a different method. "I certainly think it's less of a concern than the pranks," Tarasoff says. "If it's an artistic expression, I would prefer to have a wall somewhere in the store where someone who is artistic could express themselves."

Sarrazin wonders if the artists would go for that, however. After all, their success depends on surprising people with art in unusual places, and retailers that embrace shopdropping could be inviting accusations of co-opting art for commercial purposes. "It all depends on the reaction you expect to have," he says.

Regardless of what policy you decide to adopt, don't expect shopdropping to go away anytime soon. In fact, shopdropping appears poised to become a legitimate part of Canada's art scene; at press time, Shopdrop Montreal was preparing a presentation for Biennale Montreal 2009, an artist showcase taking place in May.

In her own experiences, Reis says some store visitors find shopdropping interesting, while others find it upsetting, and she has found retailers sometimes get angry, "probably because it is so far out of context from their daily routine." But in the end, she suggests the benefits of what she does outweigh the potential problems.

"Many times, I think that we underestimate the general public; they are capable of understanding the concept behind shopdropping," she says. "Our intentions are not to hurt retailers... Shopdropping is intended to stimulate consumer interaction within a communal environment."

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