

Controlling Theft

I hate to approach this subject but let's face it, sometime in your illustrious career as an ice cream person you are going to have staff steal from you. You may think you have the best kids out there, but there is quite a bit of naivety in the world business world if you think you are immune. In fact, the owners/operators who assume there is no stealing generally are the ones that are being hardest hit.

I served as a State Police Officer for 13 years before going into the Ice Cream Business. I let my kids know that upon our first orientation day. I had my police buddies drop by for a sundae and some war stories, and that still wasn't enough to help me through a crime free stint as a store owner.

2 incidents which happened in our stores illustrated the fact that the theft may be easy to detect, but the thief is harder to track down.

The first incident happened when one of my night managers closed for the evening and apparently didn't push the days taking envelope down far enough into the drop safe, and a corner of the envelope was able to be grabbed and fished back up. It was a slow day, but still, \$550 is \$550. Now I had a list of suspects:

- The night manager
- The assistant manager
- One of the 2 high schooler's working that night
- The next day shift manager
- And potentially any staff member who may have visited the store before the theft was detected.

Yes I called the police and yes they did their question and answer show, but as I knew very well, no evidence, no arrest. It seemed every one at the store was shocked that it happened and I was more disappointed than anything else, that one of these kids who I had opened my store to was turning on me.

This was a one off experience and although I think I know who it may have been, I positive. Lets just say she never got the hours she really wanted from then on and she eventually left under her own steam.

Another incident was completely the opposite. We had a kiosk in a large shopping mall and our morning girl was allegedly ringing up our first 10 or 15 customers under the "No Sale" key and pocketing the first dollars of the day. My neighbor in the next kiosk alerted this to me, and although I knew it was happening, I had no solid proof and no camera's to record the theft. Again, she happened to be late for a second time in a week and she was let go for unreliability. Be very careful in accusing staff members without proper evidence or you may find yourself at the wrong end of a legal battle.

So, it is imperative that you have a Theft Clause in your police and procedure handbook. These kids need to know from the get go that stealing will not be tolerated and any offenders will be reported to the police.

Be careful to define what theft is:

- Stealing cash
- Stealing stock (Cups/Pens/Napkins etc)
- Stealing time (Coming in late or not working when you are not monitoring them)
- Eating condiments while preparing them
- Intentional over portioning
- Give free product away
- Giving unauthorized discounts to their friends or family
- The list can go on and on.

Some hints that may help you fight the good fight are as follows:

- Offer the police a discount so that their attendance is more frequent in the store
- Carry out a monthly inventory of your paper goods and food items. This should be done for accounting purposes anyway, but if for no other reason, these kids need to see you counting.
- Throw away any mistakes or Oops menu items. If you offer the staff members any mistaken orders, you will be surprised how the mistakes will escalate
- Include some financial details in your regular training meetings, for example food costs or labor costs. It's important for your staff to understand that the \$1200 you just took over the counter today doesn't go straight into your pocket.
- Install a camera system and check it regularly from home. When you are talking to staff members on the phone, be sure to mention something happening in the store so they are aware you are monitoring them.
- Have a locked and Anonymous suggestion box that staff can report any misconduct that they see happening.
- Pay a friend or relative \$5 to be a secret shopper and have them report on in store activities while they are there.

There are many ways to monitor and control theft, but you must be vigilant. Keeping a head of the game will keep your staff on their toes.