

# Free advice for the accidental shoplifter

Distracted mothers and others could find themselves with a criminal record

I'M a shoplifter. Well, at least I would have been had I been caught. Luckily, I wasn't. Of course, I never intended to walk out of the store with goods I hadn't paid for. But it happened — twice.

The first time I had been interrupted en route to the till by a friend with distressing news. During the conversation, without thinking, I dropped the small clothing item I'd been holding into my handbag. After discovering it at home hours later, I returned to the store, apologised and paid for it. The stunned cashier took my money and thanked me for my honesty.

The second incident involved a trolley, an infant and a sleep-deprived new mother. I'd thrown a few items of baby clothing into my trolley, already laden with goods bought from other stores nearby. The interruption this time was an urgent nappy change. I pushed my trolley out the store and headed for the toilets.

Fortunately just metres out, I realised my error, and hightailed it back through the doors, just as the security guard was preparing to give chase.

It doesn't bear thinking what could have happened if I hadn't reacted as quickly as I did.

These mistakes can happen to anyone. In fact, a retail executive told me he'd done exactly the same when distracted by a child. Like me, he realised his mistake before it was too late.

It's why I related so readily to an emotionally charged e-mail from the devastated husband of a woman arrested recently for shoplifting at a leading retail store.

The mother of two young children, who appeared in court this week, faces a criminal record if found guilty.

Her situation is not that different to mine and, based on her version of



**BATTLING FOR YOU: MEGAN POWER**

ocean for a big organisation like yours, but at least I will sleep better knowing that my family and I will never again have any dealings with your organisation."

If this customer is found guilty, the retailer will feel vindicated. If she's acquitted, the ramifications could be most unpleasant for the organisation. It's certainly been traumatic for the consumer.

The case, along with my own experience, got me wondering how retailers sift the absent-minded, harassed or preoccupied from the truly criminal?

How many shoplifters are caught red-handed each year and how many of these lead to convictions? These are not questions retailers are keen to answer.

Pick n Pay declined to disclose its shoplifting figures or strategies, citing "competitor-sensitive reasons".

All that operations director Neal Quirk would say was that the retailer encouraged shoppers to be vigilant and to ensure all items were accounted for on till slips when leaving the store.

The Shoprite Group was equally brief, saying only that the group's shrinkage (stock loss) was "well below the international industry

events (admittedly one-sided), I'm not convinced she's a thief. But that's up to a magistrate to decide.

In his e-mail, addressed to the retailer, the upset husband wrote: "I will be defending the integrity of my wife in the courts and will not allow

**If you use a trolley infant seat, make sure there's nothing in it but your baby when you leave the store**

her to be labelled a petty shoplifter due to an oversight on your part.

"On conclusion of this case I will settle all outstanding accounts and sever any further relations with your establishment.

"I know, this might be a drop in the

norm of 2.5%" and that it was not experiencing a "significant increase in incidents". It also boasted "high rates of successful arrests".

Woolworths was more helpful, although even it side-stepped my question on figures. Group director of



**GIFTED ATHLETES:** Participants arrive for the Hong Kong heats of the Santa Claus Winter Games at a shopping mall this week. Events in the annual competition in Gaellivare, Sweden, include present throwing and Christmas tree decorating. Hong Kong won the title in 2009. Picture: REUTERS

retail operations Glenn Gilzean said it understood that "mistakes can happen especially when customers are distracted by children".

But, he said, in the main, where a shopper attempted to leave the store without paying for concealed goods, the matter would "likely" be referred to the authorities for further investigation.

He said the majority of incidents led to convictions because Woolworths ensured only cases with strong evidence were referred to the authorities.

Executive director of the National Clothing Retail Federation of SA, Michael Lawrence, said there were many "visible deterrents" to shoplifting, including security guards, cameras and alarm scanners, which served as cautions to shoppers

who might "carelessly or inadvertently" remove goods without paying.

So how can consumers, particularly those prone to distraction, best protect themselves? No retailers responded in any detail — with the exception of Edcon, whose stores include Edgars, Jet, CNA, and Boardmans. It offered the following:

- Don't put items in your handbag — always use a basket or trolley;
- If using a pram, resist the urge to hang items on it or put anything inside it;
- Don't enter stores with too much other shopping; rather offload regularly to your car; and
- If you're apprehended, insist on dealing with the most senior person in the store.

And for what it's worth, a few from

my experience:

- Make sure that obscured bag of charcoal/boxed wine is removed from beneath your trolley at the checkout;
- If you've taken a call or bumped

into friends while shopping, make a point of refocusing; and

- If you use a trolley infant seat, check there's nothing in it but your baby when you leave.

**Sunday Smile**  
AT Olympus for replacing reader Rietjie van Vuuren's camera stolen after an SAA luggage blunder (Power Report, October 23). "Our CEO thought it would be good to do something for one of our customers," said brand manager Michael Raddall. Hope you're taking note, SAA.



**Sunday Snarl**  
AT Nando's in Northmead, Benoni, for refusing to swap chicken burgers for vegetarian ones in a family pack. Suresh Rajcoomar was told the computer wouldn't allow it, despite it being a menu option. It took a complaint to customer care and a return trip to the store to get the burgers.

