

Shoplifting / Germany

stalking shop

Sophie Lovell reports from Munich

Overburdened by the pressure of a platinum account that still doesn't meet the demands of your couture cravings? Can't scrape together the readies for your latest 'must-have' of the season? Then why not steal it? Everybody else does. And if you work in the retail outlet itself...well, it's apparently one of the perks of the job.

It is estimated that DM 15 billion worth of goods are stolen or 'disappear' annually in Germany. 'Shrinkage'-the retail business term for 'stock that went walkies'-of four per cent or more is standard, and the problem is not confined to Germany. Hi-tech surveillance systems may offer some deterrent, but given that over half of the missing goods are departing in the company of the shop's own staff, and that nobody pays any attention to the beeping of electronic tagging devices anymore, retailers in a market that offers only narrow profit margins have a real problem.

Enter 11 Freunde, a group of lawyers, extreme athletes, and general creative geniuses drawn together by businessman Alfred Fuchsgruber.

The 'friends' are not, as the name might suggest, a dissident Quaker group, but a group of sharpminded individuals who are tackling the shrinkage problem at the human interface level - with remarkable success. Through workshops and seminars they address the chain of command and loyalty systems within a company, and also employ a radical form of retail therapy: putting the staff in touch with their 'inner thief' by taking them on shoplifting sprees.

The principle is simple. 11 Freunde take department managers out shoplifting in order to physically and emotionally experience what it is like to steal. The idea is that the participants, as ex-thieves, are then able to recognise the characteristic body language of shoplifters. According to Freund Georg Schwartz, they also experience the massive adrenalin rush and fear that comes with shoplifting. 'They see how frightening it is to steal and that the shoplifters are much more

scared than they are. 'This, then, raises their confidence in feeling able to tackle shoplifters head on.

Fears of developing a new breed of vigilante shop assistants, ready to confront semi-automatic-wielding 17-year-olds intent on acquiring a new Stussy summer wardrobe, are smoothly countered by a confidence born of the Munich experience. 'More than half of our team are lawyers,' says Schwartz. 'There is always a lawyer at the workshops to explain how far you should go. We're not trying to replace the shop detectives.' Far more delicate, however, is the question of theft by staff. Often the very fact that the workshops are taking place makes it clear that management is tightening up. 11 Freunde conduct interviews with the help of their in-house psychologist and, as a result, suggest ways of improving staff/management communication, and issues of responsibility, such as who should be allowed the keys to the stockroom. (Presumably, in this part of their business, the term 'friend' is not always deemed appropriate.) On the other hand, making it clear to staff what constitutes a perk and what does not is part of good management, and 11 Freunde say that this is what they aim to achieve.

Retailers are obviously delighted with the result. Fashion chainstore Hallhuber's shrinkage dropped from seven per cent to less than one per cent after the 11 Freunde's workshops. Other happy customers include Hennes & Mauritz and underwear retailers Palmers. Since setting up in March 1999 in Munich, 11 Freunde now has a branch office in Vienna and is planning offices in Barcelona, London, Milan and Paris within the near future.

Look out also for their upcoming seminar series: 'The Sensuality of Mass Products'. Does this mean love-ins amongst the off-the-peg suits? S & M in H & M? We're predicting there will be lots of takers.

11 Freunde: www.elf-freunde.de