

What has inventory management got to do with crime prevention?

—by Sarah Bridges

New applications of data in databases



When arson investigators in Houston needed help restoring a damaged surveillance tape to identify suspects in a fatal fire, they turned first to local experts and then to NASA. With no luck there, investigators appealed to the owner of one of the most advanced crime labs in the country: Target Corp.

Target experts fixed the tape and Houston authorities arrested their suspects, who were convicted. It was all in a day's work for Target in its large and growing role as a high-tech partner to law enforcement agencies.

In the past few years, the retailer has taken a lead role in teaching government agencies how to fight crime by applying state-of-the-art technology used in its 1,400 stores. Target's efforts has touched local, state, federal, and international agencies.

Besides running its forensics lab in Minneapolis, Target has helped coordinate national undercover investigations and worked with customs agencies on ways to make sure imported cargo is coming from reputable sources or hasn't been tampered with. It has provided local police with remote-controlled video surveillance systems to beef up neighborhood foot patrols in parts of several major cities. It has given management training to FBI and police leaders, and linked city, county, and state databases to keep track of repeat offenders.

The efforts are part of a trend in corporate donations directed at solving societal problems. "Target is pushing forward a different model of corporate giving," said Douglas G. Pinkham, president of the nonpartisan Public Affairs Council. Others are doing the same. Exxon Mobil, for example, is building hospitals in the developing world. Cargill Corp. is building schools in areas where potential employees lacked basic skills.

Target's law enforcement efforts date back at least a decade but intensified after the Sept. 11,

2001, terrorist attacks. The company has applied in-store practices, such as inventory tracking technologies, to the business of identifying and locating criminals. "In many ways, Target is actually a high-tech company masquerading as a retailer," said Nathan K. Garvis, Target's vice president of government affairs.

Some people note the possible ethical complexities inherent in Target's tight government relationships. But, it is typical for big companies, especially retailers, to coordinate with law enforcement in safeguarding their properties. Wal-Mart Stores Inc., for example, takes "one store at a time" approach, in which bicycles and other gear are given to law enforcement agencies in need, spokeswoman Sharon Weber said. "We are also very proud of our outreach program with police in some cities," she said.

"We teach kids the true consequences of shoplifting."

Target's approach is more comprehensive. Target has replaced the concept of "assets protection" in its stores with crime prevention in the community. A program called "Target and Blue" defines its approach to philanthropy and partnership with law enforcement agencies.

"The turning point occurred for me when I read about a repeat offender walking out of the courtroom because the judge didn't know he had a criminal record in a different part of the state," said chief executive Robert J. Ulrich. He assigned Garvis to figure out why one branch of law enforcement may not have access to another agency's records. He learned that city, county, state, and federal criminal record systems had different ways of entering data and couldn't routinely share information. "It struck me," Garvis said, "that following repeat criminals was really an inventory management problem." He turned to the partnerships Target had already developed with law enforcement.



Inventory tracking system using barcodes



Working with local and state jurisdictions, Target donated what boiled down to tracking technology and database translation, as well as employees to work on the project. This kind of thing has been tried before,” said Richard W. Stanek, a former Minnesota public safety commissioner. “The extra thing that Target brought was neutrality—and mediation. They physically brought the different arms of law enforcement together and helped get us talking.” For several years, a database called CriMNet has been used in Minnesota in the prosecution of the felonies. It is one of several alternatives under consideration of a national criminal database.

As the project gained footing, Target investigators began working with law enforcement agencies in sting operations and surveillance concerning crime in their stores. Target began helping law enforcement on cases that had nothing to do with its business. It wasn’t long before Target was analyzing criminal evidence for police, the FBI, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

“One of the nation’s top forensics labs is located at Target’s headquarters building in downtown Minneapolis,” said FBI Special agent Paul McCabe, who has worked with Target. “They have abilities and technology that far surpasses many law enforcement agencies in the country. Target forensics investigators spend 45 percent of their time offering pro-bono assistance to law enforcement.

The lab’s first big outside criminal case was the Houston arson–homicide in 2004. As word spread about what Target’s lab had accomplished in the case, the requests for help soon became overwhelming. “We had cops in here every day—chairs

pulled up next to my computer,” said Target forensic investigator Craig Thrane. “We finally had to make criteria for the cases we take. The only ones we do now involve violent felonies.”

Besides helping law enforcement solve crimes, Target has a prevention program called “Safe City.” It began two years ago in a police precinct in Minneapolis and has spread to dozens of other cities, including Boston, New York, and Atlanta and the Washington, D.C. area, where Target is using Safe City at two stores—at Forestville Mall and P.G. Plaza.

Modelled after a community surveillance program in England, Safe City uses video and computer equipment to help police patrol neighborhoods by remote control, coordinated with security workers at participating businesses.

Target’s latest ventures include building a forensics lab for the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, including FBI and other agency officials in their corporate leadership programs and providing various agencies with “sting trailers”—trucks filled with electronics and other merchandise to lure criminals—and containing wireless devices that send information to police.

The company also has run programs for the World Customs Organization to determine how to protect cargo through advanced technical systems and “smart boxes.”

Such close cooperation sometimes has Target employees working as de facto law enforcement officials. Chris W. Nelson, director of assets protection for the retailer, recalled one case in which he worked with federal agents for two years to break up a crime ring. He questioned informants, got to know some of the suspects and was there as a federal SWAT team surrounded one of the ring-leaders on a speedboat on a lake in Minnesota. “The suspect stopped short as he spotted me in the crowd and shouted, ‘What the [expletive] is Target doing here?!’” Nelson said. “I still love that one.” [The Washington Post, Jan. 29, 2006]

Correction, *ACSM Bulletin* 219, p. 24—Due to a printing error, some copies of this issue were printed with missing lines. The full text reads as follows:

“The advantage of using ‘saturated diving’ for undersea research is that it’s much more efficient,” said Al Kalvaitis, retired NOAA program manager associated with the Hydrolab and its successor, the Aquarius. One can conduct ten times as many observations at fifty feet than one could do diving from a boat. The disadvantage, according to Kalvaitis, is that one cannot come up without decompressing. It could take up to 16 hours to reduce the pressure in the lab to sea level pressure and “outgass” the nitrogen saturated in tissues, joints, and blood. After spending three years on public display at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, the Hydrolab was moved in the early 1990s to NOAA’s newly built Silver Spring complex.