Facilitator — October / November 2011

A Cornerstone OR A Liability?

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Assessing your organization's approach to Key Control

Have you ever thought about how your retail organization handles the distribution and record keeping for its mechanical keys? If you have, what did you conclude? That the current system is a cornerstone of your security program or a liability? If you're like most, you might have reached the decision that it was just too stressful to think about.

Whether you have hundreds or thousands of restaurants, the issue of key control must be addressed or it will likely impair the effectiveness of all your other security operations.

Getting Started
By reading this far, you already have started. Now let's take it to the next level by breaking the problem down into its simplest components.

1. The quantity of existing keys has to be controllable.
Management must be aware of the number of keys being used at each location. Five cannot turn into six without your knowledge. It's that sixth key that was reproduced at the kiosk in the mall, the neighborhood hardware store or even by your own locksmith who forgot to document the event that will cause you problems.

You have to have a system with a proven track record of restricted keys—keys that have only one way of being duplicated— with your authority.

If you cannot control the number of authorized keys to that front door, your security program's first line of defense is virtually useless.

2. Policies and procedures to rekey must exist.
As a restaurateur, there will be times when keys are outside of your control, especially if they've been lost or stolen. There is also the issue of keys that are left unaccounted for because of employee turnover.

Inevitably, keys to your operation will turn up missing one day. It's one thing to have dropped a key over the side of a boat to the bottom of a lake, and something else to suspect it is still in the hands of an angry ex-employee. What is your store's policy when employees leave?

Develop a set of policies and procedures that let your restaurant managers know when the store should be rekeyed. Instructions on rekey procedures should be clearly and concisely documented. Whether you use interchangeable cores, call the local locksmith or utilize some of the more technologically advanced "user rekeyable" locks, the fact remains: missing keys are a liability and a risk. A regulated program to rekey doors made vulnerable when a key goes missing could prove to be a necessity.

3. Records management is a must.
What good is going to all the effort and expense to get your system under complete control (knowing all the doors, all the keys and all the keyholders) only to lose that control by not staying on top of it?

All it takes is one unrecorded event (like getting an authorized sixth key to that location) to start the degradation of the system you worked so hard to implement. You might remember next week that there are now six keys, but it is unlikely you'll remember it next year and it's guaranteed your successor won't either.

In the last few years, significant technological advances have been made in the area of real-time records management. Computer technology, coupled with the Internet, has provided capability for record keeping that never before was possible. Whether you have five locations or 5,000 locations, computer technology software now makes “real-time” control over all doors and keys a reality.

4. Policies, procedures and enforcement are critical to the success of the program.
You might have the most sophisticated key control program on the planet, with restricted keys, rekeying avenues and real-time records, and still end up with nothing if your own company does not embrace the need for the very control you sought to provide. Management must understand the need for rules and the enforcement of those rules.

Policies should be enacted that cover who is allowed to have keys for your doors and when the store’s doors should be rekeyed. Without these policies in place, you’ll end up exactly where you started – with an uncontrolled liability.

Create an Integrated Program
How do you begin to create an integrated program to monitor—in real time—and control key location, key holders and keys?

Step 1 to obtaining control begins with an objective assessment of your security program. Measure the effectiveness of your program by taking the test on page 28. Ask yourself if your current program has the four critical elements (restricted keys, rekey practice, records management and policies/procedures). Determine the vulnerabilities and risks inherent in your current program.

Step 2 is to make the decision to fix it. Document your reasoning so you can use it as a checklist as you transition into the new system.

Step 3 requires building your constituency, because you will need it. Don’t kid yourself—this change will meet resistance. Human nature resists change or anything that is designed to regulate access. You need your management to endorse what will be necessary to achieve the result. You’ll need the company’s budgeting decisionmakers to understand the cost effectiveness of one program over another based on the agreed upon goals.

Step 4 is to begin evaluating key control programs on the market today. When you research and interview vendors about your particular needs, look for a vendor who approaches key control as an integrated program—not just cylinders, keys and software. This particular vendor will relate to what needs to be done on all levels, including the nuances of day-to-day procedures at your own operation. This vendor can sometimes even drive it for you—monitoring and managing your day-to-day security.

However, it is important to note that they cannot simply do it for you. There is no way to avoid the need for your company’s “buy in” and commitment. The most sophisticated program is of no value if managerial hierarchy does not endorse the need for the policy and thus the enforcement to go along with it.

Before you actually begin, compare the key points and objectives laid out above with those you documented for yourself.

Does your plan contain the four critical components of an effective, long-term system? Then begin with the intention of completing the task in its entirety.

To some, this plan will sound cumbersome and seem like a lot of work. It probably even sounds like it will cost more than your budgets would ever permit.

The fact is, any total overhaul will seem expensive. But those who have done it—with the right vendor/partner—will often find it to be nearly as affordable as simply replacing the cylinders and keys you already have in place. And the long-term effect of a properly run system is tremendous savings—not to mention the increased security. There are means today by which you can actually save money while gaining security control.

Remember, it only takes one event—stolen merchandise, vandalism or one tragedy somewhere in the course of normal business operations—to more than justify the effort.

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