

Minding the store

As manager of security and loss prevention for Mac's Convenience Stores, Sean Sportun is helping to reduce crime in his stores. With smart thinking and an original approach, he is promoting good relationships with youth and police, using resources from social media to spray paint. By Mary Del Ciano

2013 SECURITY DIRECTOR OF THE YEAR

After a string of 32 robberies in a five-month period at Mac's Convenience Stores in Thunder Bay, Ont., Sean Sportun knew something needed to be done. Something different.

The Manager of Security and Loss Prevention for Mac's Convenience Stores in Central Canada had exhausted all of the typical crime prevention principles and techniques, including increased lighting and surveillance, the installation of fences to remove escape routes, and the removal of all advertising from windows to increase visibility, with little success. He met with police, city councillors and the Mayor of Thunder Bay to discuss the issue, but no one had a solution to the problem or the resources to solve these crimes.

Sportun, who is also vice-chair of Toronto Crime Stoppers, wondered what he could do to help. After brainstorming with his security team, he came up with the idea of using social media. The concept is simple — post images and videos from the actual robbery (taken from the store's surveillance cameras) on Twitter and Facebook, and appeal to the public to call Crime Stoppers anonymously with information that will assist the police in identifying and apprehending the suspects. The idea fit right in with the company's approach to security — the vision of crime prevention through community engagement.

Sportun's out-of-the-box thinking and willingness to try a new approach impressed *Canadian Security's* Editorial Advisory Board, the panel of judges who selected Sportun as this year's Security Director of the Year, sponsored by Anixter Canada. Judges appreciated that Sportun had a vision and found the means to see it through. "The number of successful initiatives and programs that Sean has accomplished is truly astonishing," says

Jason Caissie, vice-president of operations for the Profile Group of Companies, and a member of the advisory board. "It can be difficult in a role like Sean's to take the time to solve problems creatively and with new tactics, but he has done it again and again."

But in this case it was a unique approach not taken before in the retail industry, and one that Sportun wasn't sure would work. How would the community respond? Would law enforcement have any issues with this? How about upper management and their legal counsel? It was clear early on that he would have to get input from every stakeholder, and involve them in the concept, for this to be a success.

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After consulting with the company's legal counsel to find out what criteria needed to be met to satisfy any privacy concerns, and getting buy-in from upper management, as well as input from the law enforcement community, Sportun was ready to launch the Mac's Crime Busters campaign in Thunder Bay in February 2012.

Then, in March, when three robberies happened within 48 hours at Mac's Convenience Stores in Thunder Bay, he began posting images, videos and descriptions of the suspect on the Mac's Crime Busters Facebook page and Twitter account, and within 24 hours, the person was apprehended as a result of people calling Crime Stoppers.

Following that success, the company decided to launch the program province-wide in May 2012.

Eventually, Mac's added YouTube to its social media platform, posting actual videos from robberies, as well as creating 30-second public service announcements about the suspects.

Not only are these images and videos being pushed out through social media (and shared with the police and the media), but they are also posted on each store's digital media screens.

“If you consider that we have approximately 1,150 customers come through each of our stores every day, and you times that by 570 stores [in Ontario], that is 655,500 people that we can get a message to,” Sportun says. “It’s making our store less attractive to the criminal element.”

And the numbers speak for themselves. At time of print, Mac’s had posted 143 suspects online and had 100 apprehensions and 112 cases cleared as a direct result of people seeing these images and calling Crime Stoppers.

Robberies, in fact, are at an all-time low at the company’s stores in Ontario. Incidents are down 35 per cent — or 48 incidents — from fiscal year 2012. According to Sportun, they’ve dropped from 139 robberies in fiscal year 2012 to 91 in 2013. In fiscal year 2012, the total loss related to store robberies was \$54,243.42, compared to \$32,788.75 in 2013. In Thunder Bay, they went from 32 robberies last year to only six this year.

“Thirty-five per cent decrease in incidents in a year is substantial,” he says. “Seeing those numbers decline is proof in

the pudding that our social media campaign is working.”

Following this success, Mac’s launched the campaign in Western Canada, and is currently in talks with its counterparts in Quebec.

“Social media is the quickest and easiest way to get information into the hands of people.”

— Sean Sportun, Mac’s

“I hold out Sean’s efforts as one of the leaders, if not the top leader, in the world of what a business can do for community responsibility,” says Scott Mills, the social media advisor for Crime Stoppers.

Crime Stoppers has been using social media to get anonymous tips to prevent and solve crime since the late nineties, but, says Mills, “Sean is definitely the leader in the world at engaging a national retailer to actually do this. And what better retailer to do it with than a convenience store?”

Mills calls Sportun’s approach to security “visionary,” and he’s not the only one taking notice of his out-of-the-box thinking. Word of the Mac’s Crime Busters campaign and the success it has seen is spreading. Sportun is often asked to speak about using social media as a crime

The Mac’s vision

The security department at Mac’s operates through a vision of “crime prevention through community engagement.” The social media campaign is only part of this approach. The company has also launched a street art mural program — an idea that was born in Thunder Bay.

One particular store had seen seven robberies in a five-month period. This store was also a target for graffiti in the back alley. Typical crime prevention tactics didn’t help the problem so Sean Sportun was forced to think outside of the box. He contacted a local graffiti artist to paint a community mural, which also includes the number for Crime Stoppers, on the back of the store in the alley, and since May 2012, when the mural was painted, there hasn’t been one incident at that store. The community was involved in the concept, and has developed an appreciation for

the local art. Another mural was painted at one of Mac’s more problematic Toronto locations, and they are hoping for similar results.

Crime Stoppers’ social media advisor Scott Mills applauds this unique approach.


“These murals are not being vandalized afterwards. And now you’ve got a billboard for Crime Stoppers out there that the very kids you’re trying to reach...are a part of making.”

Another component of the company’s vision of “crime prevention through community engagement” is its positive ticketing campaign, which they’ve had in place since 2007. Mac’s provides coupons for free beverages to



Mac’s owl mascot is the centrepiece of a community mural in Toronto.

the police to give to youth when they see them doing something positive within their community.

“The more we can engage the community, the more that we can make the community a safer place,” says Sportun. 

prevention tool. People want to know how they can use it in their organizations, and Sportun is not shy about sharing his approach. He has given interested parties his business plan, detailing what he needed to do from top to bottom to get the buy-in from the executives, including the legal requirements that his legal team gave him (though he advises others to take it to their own legal teams). He shares everything from creating the social media pages and the type of information he has to post on it, to the signs he has to put in the stores notifying customers that this program is in effect and that images captured from security cameras of someone committing a crime will be used to help identify the suspect.

“It’s not something that I will keep private. The more people that are doing it, the bad guys have a less chance of victimizing a greater number of retailers if we can all work together,” he says. “Social media is the way of the future. It’s the quickest and easiest way to get information into the hands of people when you’re looking for assistance...So it’s a great tool.”

What started as an attempt to solve crime in Mac’s stores has evolved into more of a crime prevention strategy — thwarting, not only crime within Mac’s, but in the community as a whole. The retail giant not only posts Mac’s-related crimes on social media and within the stores, but they also post information about crimes that could put the community at risk, as well as Amber Alerts.

“We constantly post and promote crime prevention initiatives across the province and in Western Canada,” says Sportun. “If something happened at a retail store and it’s in the media, we’ll link that to our page, because eventually these criminals will end up in our stores, so why not work with other retailers to get these people off the street.”


It’s about creating partnerships, he says — with the community, with the media and with law enforcement. It’s about being proactive and not sitting by while Mac’s, other retailers and the community are being victimized.

“We are going to get those images out there. We are going to work with the media. We are going to work with the police to make it uncomfortable for criminals to come into our stores, to want to victimize us and our employees.”

Employee, customer and community safety is the ultimate goal, he says.

“Anything that we can do to make that happen, whether it be with social media or other initiatives that we may think of down the road, we will exhaust every industry best practice as it relates to security, to keep our employees and our customers safe.”

To follow Mac’s Crime Busters on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, visit: www.facebook.com/macscrimbusters, www.twitter.com/macscrimbuster and www.youtube.com/macscrimbusters.

Sportun will receive the Security Director of the Year Award, sponsored by *Canadian Security* magazine and Anixter Canada, at a gala event held in Toronto in October. 

Mary Del Ciano is a freelance writer based in Stouffville, Ont.

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