

SECURITY

IS YOUR KEY CONTROL A CORNERSTONE OR LIABILITY?

How to create an integrated program to monitor and control your store's security.

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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 and simply stopped thinking about it.

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

WHERE DO YOU START?

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.

A good example of a company that does it right is G & S Oil, a retail marketer of Conoco and Texaco petroleum products throughout Colorado. G & S follows each of these four steps in managing key control at its seven service stations and six convenience stores.

G & S recognizes that there are four

critical pieces you must address when looking at key control:

- **THE QUANTITY OF EXISTING KEYS HAS TO BE CONTROLLABLE**

Management must know 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 it 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.

According to Jim Larkin, retail sales manager for G & S Oil, each manager at the 13 different locations is responsible for keeping an inventory of keys registered to the stores' employees. G & S employs between six to 10 workers per location. The number of keys at each location varies between four to six.

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

- **POLICIES AND PROCEDURES TO REKEY MUST EXIST**

As a retailer, there will be times when keys are outside of your control — they've either been lost or stolen. There is also the issue of keys unaccounted for because of employee turnover. Inevitably, there will be a day that keys to your operation will turn up missing. It's one thing to accidentally drop and lose a key, 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?

At G & S, a store manager doesn't have to call a locksmith to rekey all the doors every time a key is unaccounted for. Instead, G & S outfits its store managers with a master key.

"With this system, the doors can be rekeyed in a matter of seconds," says Larkin. "I have a master key for all locations and don't have to worry about not having access to a location if a problem arises after normal operating hours."

A set of policies and procedures should be developed that let your store managers know when the store should be rekeyed. Instructions on rekey pro-

cedures should be clearly and concisely documented. Whether you use interchangeable cores, call out the local locksmith or utilize some of the more technologically advanced “user rekeyable” locks, the fact remains that missing keys are a liability and a risk.

- **RECORDS MANAGEMENT IS A MUST**

What good is going to all that effort and expense to get your system under complete control — knowing all the doors, all the keys, all the keyholders — only to lose that control by not staying on top of it from that point on?

Larkin leaves the records management to G & S’s supplier, Englewood Lock & Key. It monitors all of the G & S locations as well as the number of authorized keys per store. When a location requests replacement keys, Englewood Lock & Key notifies Larkin for approval.

“This system means I don’t worry about tracking the many keys in circulation, and I can focus more on retail sales,” says Larkin.

All it takes is one event (like getting an authorized sixth key to that location) that isn’t recorded that will 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 was never before possible. Whether you have five locations or 5,000, computer technology software now makes “real time” control over all doors and keys a reality.

- **POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND ENFORCEMENT ARE CRITICAL**

You might have the most sophisticated key control program on the planet (restricted keys, rekeying avenues, real time records) and end up with nothing if your own company does not utilize the very control you sought

to provide.

Management must understand the need for rules and the enforcement of those rules. Policies should cover who is allowed to have keys for your doors and when the store’s doors should be rekeyed. Without these policies, you’ll end up exactly where you started — with an uncontrolled liability.

HOW DO YOU CREATE AN INTEGRATED PROGRAM TO MONITOR AND CONTROL 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 in the sidebar. 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 that you can use it as a checklist as you transition into the new system.

- **STEP 3** requires building your constituency — 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 decision-makers to understand the cost effectiveness of one program over another based on the agreed upon goals.

- **STEP 4** is to then 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 by monitoring and managing your day-to-day

security. However, it is important to note that vendors 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 or the enforcement to go along with it.

BEFORE YOU ACTUALLY BEGIN...

Review, one last time, the key points and objectives laid out above, together with those you documented for yourself. Does it 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 will sound cumbersome. It probably sounds like it will cost more than your budgets 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 not much more expensive than simply replacing the cylinders and keys you already have in place. And the long term effect of a properly run system is tremendous: you can actually save money while simultaneously gaining security control.

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

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