

Combatting food theft

In the food industry, the opportunities for theft are many, whether they involve giving away food and drinks without getting authorisation, taking food home or consuming food on the premises.



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“In an industry where margins are tight, food costs are always a concern. If too much food goes missing or ends up in the waste bin, businesses quickly begin to feel the pinch,” explains [Sally J’Arlette Joy](#), CEO of Sandwich Baron.

Three factors in theft

According to research by criminologists, three factors underpin employee theft. The first is ‘opportunity’ or the circumstances that make it possible to engage in theft. The second is motivation. In other words, if employees feel underpaid and overworked, they are more inclined to engage in theft. The third factor is rationalisation, which is the attempt to justify certain behaviours or attitudes with logical reasoning.

Some employees may steal to reduce financial pressure, some may view it as the ‘norm’, while others, who feel they are unfairly treated, may see it as a way of getting back at their employers.

Whatever the reason, there are various ways to pilfer food. Many of them are highly creative and happen at the point of sale, in the kitchen or throughout the dispatching process. Some are individual acts, while others are committed in collusion with other employees or external people.

Internal controls essential

To combat theft, it is important to institute consistency and accountability at every level of the operation. This can be done by implementing well-designed internal controls. Not only will these reduce the chance of theft, they will contribute to the overall success of the store by providing standard operating procedures for each phase of the business.

Where immediate action is required, one of the quickest ways to deal with rampant theft is to install surveillance cameras at the premises. This may not be a good way to boost staff morale, but if theft occurs on an ongoing basis, it is one of the quickest and easiest ways to counter it.

Another proactive step towards reducing theft is to monitor inventory regularly. This is not a popular task but critical for controlling food costs and boosting profitability. It is a task many managers do half-heartedly or do not do often enough.

For the inventory-taking process to be successful, it needs to be structured properly. This means inventories need to be taken regularly and at the same time of day – either before the outlet opens or after it closes. Ideally, they should also be taken before a delivery arrives so that the new stock can be added to the count.

Two people should be given the task of taking inventory each time to allow them to compare results. Importantly, having the same people take inventory allows them to become more skilled and quicker at the task.

Scales are an important tool for businesses in the food industry. It is best to invest in a good and reliable scale to check stock sent by the suppliers and weigh portions. Guessing the weight of food is not advisable as the likelihood of making an inaccurate judgement is high.

11 tips to combat theft

Several other controls can be put into place to prevent a loss of inventory. Here are 11 tips for the owners of restaurants and other eateries to consider:

1. Keep fridges and storerooms locked
2. Keep less stock on the premises. It is more manageable and easier to count
3. Put labels on shelves and freezers to identify where everything is
4. Conduct thorough reference checks before taking on new staff
5. Make sure there is only one access point to the premises
6. Check fridges regularly for little packages of food that have been tucked away at the back
7. Check meals that are going out to customers to ensure nothing is being held back
8. Make sure to conduct training on controls. This is often overlooked even though it is so important
9. Check bins for food items that have been stored away for later removal
10. If the business is large enough, it might be worthwhile to consider employing someone to control the stocks
11. Conduct spot checks at home time