

Shoppers' Safety & Security Tips for Black Friday

We're entering the 2014 Holiday Season, and for many this season begins in earnest on Black Friday – November 28 – when myriads of shoppers will be out early after Thanksgiving to locate tantalizing bargains in brick-and-mortar stores. There are approximately 109,500 malls and shopping centers nationwide, and each and every one is considered to be a “soft target” from the perspective of a terrorist or other type of attacker. US shopping malls and other retail venues are working with government officials, including the FBI, to reinforce security and refine their emergency plans. Some will be holding security exercises, emergency drills, and practice evacuations in order to bolster training and their preparedness for handling a variety of emergencies, including those of active shooters, flash mobs, and even attacks involving the use of chemical, biological and radiological weapons.



In light of the grim potential risks that unfortunately underlie the holiday shopping season that is upon us, as well as our everyday activities, it behooves every shopper to remain vigilant and mentally prepared to respond quickly and effectively in emergency situations, for their personal safety and that of their loved ones.

Towards this end, we offer here some of the government's and the security industry's emergency-preparedness tips:

- ✓ Just as you should while travelling in an airliner, you should *plan your escape* in the event of a life-threatening emergency while in a mall or retail store. Because the panic and chaos of a mass evacuation can make it difficult to think clearly, always make a mental note of the exits whenever you enter a venue: that means knowing the nearest exits and quickest routes to get there, so that you can be prepared and know where to go, while under pressure. The door that you came in through may not be the nearest exit!

Working in concert with the FBI and DHS, many malls have practiced evacuation drills that involve having shoppers exit the main floor via the closest store. The store's employees have been trained in techniques of quickly closing and locking down access



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doors, thereby creating a relatively safe place of refuge where shoppers and store employees can wait out an emergency and/or exit out the back of the store, under direction, through a service corridor or storage area, if it is safe to do so.

- ✓ In the event that a crisis situation arises, which calls for mass evacuation and/or sheltering-in-place, panic may set in and create its own threats to life and limb, such as stampedes and the resultant crush of crowds looking for an out. *In the event that you are caught up in a stampede*, you need to protect your head and chest. Poised like a boxer, keep your forearms out in front of you: fists in front of your face and forearms parallel to your chest. Try and stay on your feet; walls can help you to maintain your balance and lead you to an exit. If you do tumble, make every effort to quickly get back up. If you can't get to your feet, curl up into a tight ball, protecting your face, head and midsection. If you drop your purse, cellphone, wallet, or something else, it's likely best to leave these items behind: your first priority is to exit the area and get to safety as quickly as possible.
- ✓ Driven by social media, *flash mobs* have made headlines of late and the phrase has joined the modern vernacular. While many flash mob incidents have proven to be largely innocent exercises in attention-grabbing antics and self-promotion, others have been malicious and potentially dangerous attacks on retail establishments, from which the mob's unruly participants steal armloads of merchandise in a flash.

If you happen to get caught up in a shoplifting flash mob, you should protect yourself in ways similar to the stampede response: use your hands and arms to protect your head and chest, and try to get away from the mob and out of its path, as its members will likely attempt to rush out the door as energetically as they had rushed in. Members of the flash mob may be physically aggressive and possibly armed, so keep your distance and stay out of their way! After the suspected shoplifters have left the store, you can help the police and the store owner by making a note of their descriptions and what direction they headed in.

Here are some practical physical and personal security tips that will help you to protect yourself, your belongings and your family members not only throughout the entire holiday season but in your everyday travels as well:

- ✓ When out shopping, always walk with confidence and pay attention to your surroundings. Communicate the message that you're calm and confident. Rather than shop alone, take along a friend or family member, if you can.



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- ✓ Park in well-lit areas and always keep your car doors locked, and your windows rolled up. Always secure your vehicle regardless of how short your stay is. Avoid parking next to vans, trucks or other large vehicles that restrict your view, and block others' view of you.
- ✓ When walking through parking lots or parking garages, stay in well-lit areas, identify the locations of emergency "blue light" call boxes, and note potential areas of safety or refuge, while watching out for moving vehicles.
- ✓ Remember vehicles may follow you to your parking space in order to grab your parking spot. Be extra cautious of vans, particularly those with the sliding side door following or parked next to you: situations such as these have resulted in quick grab-and-go thefts of purchases, and some incidents have turned violent. If you notice a car following you, turn and walk in the other direction. Don't stop and don't walk up too close to a vehicle if a stranger asks for directions or tries to engage you in conversation. Trust your instincts: If you feel uncomfortable in a place or situation, leave that area.
- ✓ Report any unattended bag or package, suspicious persons and vehicles, and security-related incidents, such as instances of theft, vandalism, and assault, to someone in a position to take action, such as a police officer, security guard, or store employee.
- ✓ Don't be distracted by talking or texting on your handheld device, especially when walking through a parking lot or parking garage. Carry your purse or handbag close to your body, not dangling by the straps, and keep a firm grip on it: however, bear in mind that in some situations your personal safety may depend on *not* clinging to it. Don't leave your handbag or purse unattended in a shopping cart. Carry your wallet in an inside coat or front trouser pocket: these preventative measures will discourage pickpockets as well as potentially dangerous robbers. Consider carrying a shriek alarm or whistle.
- ✓ When shopping with children take a picture of your child(ren) before you leave home so you have a updated picture showing exactly what they are wearing, thereby proving a clear and accurate description. Make a plan in the event that you get separated from them; agree on a meeting place that's safe and easy for everyone in your group to find again, and make sure that the kids know that they may ask store clerks, mall personnel, or uniformed security personnel if they need help.



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- ✓ Keep your cell phone with you in case of an emergency. Store "In Case of Emergency" (ICE) contact phone numbers in your cell phone so that the hospital or police can contact your family or friends if necessary
- ✓ Only use ATMs that are in well-lit and busy areas. Do not divulge your ATM PIN to anyone. Be aware if someone is too close to you when it is your turn to use the ATM. Move to another ATM rather than risk letting a stranger "shoulder surf" so as to acquire your PIN. Never throw ATM receipts away at the ATM location, as account numbers on these slips of paper may expose you to identity theft. Don't take out your credit card or checkbook before being asked for it by the sales clerk. The person in line behind you can capture your account information by shoulder surfing this way, too.
- ✓ Using credit or debit cards obviates the need to carry large amounts of cash, which, if observed by crooks, could mark you as a target for robbery. Never flash money or leave cash out in the open, or leave your purse or billfold in plain view or in the pocket of a jacket hanging on a door, barstool or chair back. Don't let your guard down when you interrupt your shopping to grab a lunch or a dinner. Thieves and pickpockets enjoy a tactical advantage in crowded bars and food courts, where they can strike without warning and then quickly disappear into the crowd.
- ✓ Don't limit your mobility or your situational awareness by buying more than you can comfortably carry. Shoppers overburdened with bags and packages are especially vulnerable when navigating between stores and parked vehicles. Take a friend or family member along who can assist you. If you can, use a designated "package taker," i.e., someone who can take bags of already purchased items to your vehicle or other designated area and stay with your purchases while you continue to shop while freed of cumbersome bags and packages. Absent this option, break your shopping spree into a number of separate and easily manageable purchases and trips to and from your vehicle. While doing so, don't hesitate to ask the store's uniformed security officer to accompany you to your vehicle if you feel threatened or otherwise at risk.
- ✓ Seek safety in numbers and avoid leaving stores at their closing times. Have your keys ready in hand when approaching your vehicle. Check the back seat, and inspect around, and under, the car, before unlocking a door. Again, in a busy and crowded parking garage or lot, you are likely to be followed back to your vehicle by another shopper who wants your parking spot: make sure that you don't back into that driver! If you are set upon by an assailant or would-be carjacker, throw your car keys away from your vehicle.



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- ✓ Do not leave packages that are visible through the vehicle's windows. Secure all packages and valuables in the trunk, or hidden behind the back seat if there is no trunk. Ideally, take your purchases directly home.

Once again, I hope that you have found these tips and reminders to be useful, especially if you plan on taking advantage of the bargains that will be offered on Black Friday. As is often the case where personal safety and security are concerned, simple common sense and situational awareness very often can make the difference between a happy outcome and a less-than-desirable one!

Please do not hesitate to contact me, the Area Vice President or the Branch Manager serving your Securitas account, if we can answer any questions or, in any way, further promote Securitas' partnership with you. Thank you.

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