

# Red Alert

In wake of the Nairobi terrorist attack, U.S. malls and retailers are stepping up security. Here are some strategies on how to help prevent an attack or react in the event of one. *By Lyndsay McGregor*

**PICTURE THE SCENE:** It's a busy Saturday afternoon at your store. Sales associates are running ragged to ensure each customer—from the mom looking to outfit all three of her kids in new sneakers to the elderly gentleman who's not quite sure if he's ready to replace his beloved dress shoes—leaves with a shopping bag or two in tow. You hear what sounds like balloons popping, and suddenly the shopping mall turns into complete chaos. A masked gunman has opened fire. What do you do?

It's a nightmare scenario that everyone hopes never happens. But as evidenced when 63 people were killed in September by members of Somalia-based militant group Al-Shabaab storming the Westgate Mall, a high-end shopping center in Nairobi, Kenya, the scenario can be all too real. The attack thrust the safety of malls around the world into the spotlight, and the Department of Homeland Security is urging American malls to increase security in the aftermath of the carnage.

It doesn't have to be a coordinated terrorist assault. A lone madman, like in the Aurora, CO, movie multiplex, can inflict similar levels of death and destruction. But it's the mall concept in particular that makes them so vulnerable: Large numbers of people, many carrying sizeable parcels, coming and going through multiple entrances and exits... **It's the perfect cover to blend in with the crowd. For example, two women were killed at a San Francisco mall in July; an 18-year-old man wounded two at a mall in Christiansburg, VA, in April; and last Christmas two people were fatally shot in a mall in Portland, OR. And the deadliest U.S. mall shooting in history occurred in 2007 when nine people, including the gunman, died at the Westroads Mall in Omaha, NE.** That same year a Somali man with ties to al Qaeda was arrested for plotting to bomb a mall in Columbus, OH.

Nonetheless, **purse snatchings** and **flash mobs** remain top of mind with most mall security personnel. That needs to change. In *An Assessment of the Preparedness of Large Retail Malls*

*to Prevent and Respond to Terrorist Attacks*, a 2006 study funded by the National Institute of Justice and based on surveys of private mall security directors and homeland security officials, researchers reported that American shopping malls had received too little attention as potential sites for terrorist and other attacks. And while U.S. intelligence officials say there isn't specific threat information suggesting that an attack similar to Nairobi is planned for here, security experts worry about copycats. At the bare minimum, retailers should have a plan of action if a situation should arise.

## If You See Something, Say Something.

"In most cases these things aren't just random, they're planned," says Malachy Kavanagh, a spokesman for the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC), a U.S.-based trade group of mall and shopping center owners. "Shooters do surveillance on a place they want to target, and a big part of that is trying to figure out where the security is, where cameras are, if security walks certain routes, changes shifts, etc." **Bill Nesbitt, president of California's Security Management Services International (SMSI) Inc. and a specialized security analyst for more than 30 years, agrees: "Terrorists do their homework," he declares. "If there's a breakdown in security, one of the frequent things I find is there was a precursor that would have tipped you off that something was about to happen."**

The Department of Homeland Security has reached out to heads of corporate security for all American malls to familiarize retailers with what procedures should take place, and whether to lockdown or flee the area. "Retailers need to realize that it's a partnership and that they can be instrumental in preventing something like what happened in Nairobi," Kavanagh says.

Most of the outlets contacted by *Footwear Plus* confirmed >49

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they were implementing additional security precautions as a result of the events at Westgate Mall. Some of these changes include bringing off-duty police officers into the mall, putting more non-uniformed security officers into uniform, and more closely coordinating with local police departments.

Dan Jasper, a spokesperson for Mall of America in Bloomington, MN, a sprawling complex that boasts more than 400 stores and 40 million visitors annually, says, "Some [security precautions] may be noticeable to guests and others won't be." He adds, "We will continue to follow the situation, along with law enforcement, and will remain vigilant as we always do in similar situations. The safety and security of our guests, employees and tenants remains our top priority."

A spokesperson for Freehold Raceway Mall in New Jersey declined to reveal specifics in order to preserve the effectiveness of its security measures, but did say that the mall had previously installed license plate readers over parking entrances and exits in an effort to deter terrorism. Meanwhile Bryan Mueller, director of retail at Ohio's Lucky Shoes, which has two locations at strip malls and another in a shopping mall, says he's been told the centers are ramping up their undercover security. "This allows them to keep a silent eye on actions unfolding in the mall," he says.

## Be Prepared

There are several steps that could be taken to better equip shopping malls, or any commercial location, for emergency situations, whether terrorist attack or natural disasters. **The primary challenge is to maintain a sense of openness while simultaneously employing a high level of security, such as surveillance cameras, guards and**

**adequate lighting. Nesbitt recommends exhausting the least expensive solutions first in order to get the most productivity out of more expensive remedies like surveillance systems. "Security is a very situational discipline, which means one size does not fit all," he explains, noting that a store that's located in a high crime area will obviously have greater security issues than one that's in a pristine neighborhood. "If I were to take two strip malls across the street from one another, and one has garbage rolling around the parking lot, cracked store windows, burned out lights, and across the street there's a well-lit mall with neatly trimmed shrubbery, which mall is more likely to be targeted? That's right: The unkempt one, because it looks like nobody cares. It sends a message of who's paying attention and who's not." A concept Nesbitt champions is CPTED, or Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. CPTED theories are based on four principles: natural access control, natural surveillance, territoriality and maintenance. Securing the overall design of the property, particularly near primary access points, is crucial.**

**Nesbitt also advises that security is a team sport, and that mall security directors should involve as many people as possible. "A security officer every 10 feet is very expensive, and that expense will pass on to the tenants in their leases," he says. "But what people aren't taking into consideration is getting the tenants and their employees involved and teaching them how to be observant." He points to mall janitors as an example. "They are responsible for suspicious areas of the mall. Who's going to notice if some-**

**thing doesn't look right more than them?"**

Kavanagh recommends putting more security officers in non-uniform. "Blending them in in plain clothes would make it much more difficult to spot a routine and that gives security a leg up as far as watching people and not standing out. It's effective," he says.

Dave Astobiza, co-owner of Northern California's 12-store Sole Desire chain, who closed his two shopping mall locations recently because he felt like the malls were becoming "a hangout" and, therefore, unsafe, would have preferred a more visible security presence. "The security was never strong in our malls and many of our employees never felt safe, especially with the long hours," he says. "If people saw much more security, in general, maybe they would think twice."

One way to possibly make security more visible is to speak to local police about the possibility of moving a substation onto the premises. A vacant store might look better as a pop-up police station. But how much security is too much? When the ICSC surveyed mall shoppers about their views on walking through security lines with metal detectors and other security machines, the results were not surprising. "Consumers want to go about their day unimpeded. Shoppers recognize a uniform in a crowd and are comfortable with that," Kavanagh offers. "What they're less comfortable with is if you have to resort to people going through metal detectors."

Likewise, blanketing a shopping mall in surveillance cameras can create their share of problems. While it increases the chances of capturing a criminal on video (it took the FBI only three days to release images of last summer's Boston Marathon bombers taken by a department store's cameras), it generates an overwhelming amount of film to sift through. Moreover, according to the Surveillance Studies Center at Queen's University in Ontario, urban surveillance systems have not been proven to deter criminals.

## Ask the Experts

Not exactly sure how to keep your store safe? Then ask the experts. State and federal law enforcement do make resources available to private businesses to identify how they might be vulnerable and develop procedures to improve security. For example, the Pennsylvania State Police offers businesses free inspections by its Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Team. The team will visit the site, identify potential security problems and provide a confidential report with recommendations on improvements. Kavanagh also recommends conducting evacuation drills at least once a year in conjunction with local police and fire departments.

Measures like these would not only help prepare malls against attacks, but the risk assessments, emergency plans and drills could also alleviate the impact of random acts of violence, fires and natural disasters. As Kavanagh advises, it's better to be safe than sorry. "Very simply, shoppers won't shop where they don't feel safe," he says. "There are so many alternatives today, whether it's another store, the Internet or catalogs. **It doesn't make sense to not increase security."**



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