

Return Fraud and Abuse: How to Protect Profits

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Fraudulent and abusive returners—camouflaged in the T-shirt and jeans uniform of the average shopper—are launching a multi-front attack on the retail industry. These secret operatives are draining \$9 to \$17 billion annually (National Retail Federation) from retailers' coffers and costing the average household of four more than \$200 per year. As executives and employees, we've been alerted to the enemy's presence, but we've lacked an effective counterattack—until now.

Approximately 8 percent of all returns in the North America are fraudulent, indicating an assault of staggering proportions. Discovering that their current return policies do nothing to stop most fraud and abuse has led many retailers to seek new protection tactics. While our adversary's arsenal contains many fraud and abuse schemes, new consumer-based return authorization systems allow retailers to distinguish and deter perpetrators before they have the opportunity to initiate a fraudulent or abusive return.

Return Fraud and Abuse Schemes

Although fraudulent and abusive return procedures are myriad, some schemes are more commonly used than others. Understanding these schemes, despite their ever-evolving nature, is the first step toward choosing the best defense.

Renting/Wardrobing

Renting/wardrobing begins with a legitimate merchandise purchase. The item is then used once or twice and returned as if it were new. The classic example is the purchase of an expensive cocktail dress for a wedding, reunion, or other special event. The consumer simply tucks the tags into the garment in an inconspicuous manner, dazzles partygoers with her finery, and then returns the dress for a full refund the following day, in essence having "rented" it for free. This technique has spread to other valuable merchandise. When consumers buy durable goods, such as a digital camera to video a graduation, a big screen television to watch the Super Bowl, or a trendy watch to accessorize a job interview suit, and then return the items after using them, they are violating a retailer's traditional return policies. Unfortunately, the widespread notion that this is an acceptable behavior has only exacerbated its effects.

Receipt Fraud

Sales receipts can be used to defraud a retailer, and criminals have devised numerous avenues for obtaining them. Some thieves forge receipts, using computers and color printers. Sophisticated practitioners actually may obtain the retailer's paper stock from store contacts or paper suppliers in order to enhance the appearance of the counterfeit receipt. Others simply find receipts in store trash receptacles, shopping carts, or discarded shopping bags. Internet-savvy individuals may visit questionable web sites that purchase or re-create legitimate receipts and sell them to criminals who need a receipt for a particular item.

Regardless of how the receipt is acquired, it can be used for a novel type of fraud called *shoplisting* because it works much like a shopping list. The individual enters a store

with the receipt in hand and proceeds with one of two scenarios: 1) Pick up the item[s] listed on the paper and head to the returns counter, or 2) shoplift the item[s] and come back at another time to conduct the fraudulent return. Shoplifting enables the petty thief to eliminate the middleman, someone who will buy the stolen merchandise. Instead, this individual is essentially selling the product back to its owner, the retail store. This method has become the province of the less criminally inclined because it has shed its dark alley aura through some quick computer work and a daylight trip to the store.

Price Arbitrage

Criminals with working capital—called *go money*—can engage in several types of price manipulation. One example occurs when an individual purchases two similar items with different retail prices. By repackaging the cheaper item in the expensive item's box and returning it for a full refund, the fraudulent returner has basically stolen the better item. This is particularly effective with electronics because cheap units often resemble expensive ones. Selling the more expensive item online, even at a discount, adds dollars to the criminal's pocketbook.

Other forms of price arbitrage include switching boxes in the store to purchase a higher-priced item for less or purchasing an item at a discount and returning it for a full price refund. Regardless of the fraudulent returner's approach, the retailer pays the difference.

One magazine article describes a price arbitrage scheme committed by one group at Wal-Mart stores that cost the retailer a total of \$1.5 million across 19 states. The group switched the bar codes from low-priced items to high-priced items before the purchase. Then the group removed the phony bar code and returned the item to obtain the full price as store credit, cash, or a gift card.

Check Fraud

Abusers who practice theft for a living are drawn to the world of bank accounts, preferably a false one . . . or perhaps yours. They purchase merchandise with an illegitimate check or with one backed by insufficient funds and then return the merchandise before the check clears the bank. Here the retailer is simply handing over its profits to the unscrupulous among us. One retailer reported that recent investigations uncovered check fraud rings that wrote a suspected \$100,000 in bad checks to that retailer and more than \$450,000 to other retailers.

Returning Stolen Merchandise

Profiting from stolen merchandise, one of the many ways to defraud retailers, has many faces. Small-time criminals may steal merchandise themselves or buy it directly from the thief. They then return it to the store for a full cash refund, either with a forged, found, or purchased receipt or without a receipt at all, depending on the store's return policy. More complex forms of this scheme entail stealing entire truckloads of merchandise and distributing them to a ring of criminals who will return the items to different retail outlets in a large geographic area. In essence, the store is buying the merchandise twice, first from the manufacturer and secondly from the thief.

A *Washington Post* article detailed a scheme in which shoplifters returned merchandise without a receipt, obtained store credit, and sold the store credit online for 76 cents on the dollar.

Employee Fraud

Employees have the necessary insider information to conduct endless retail frauds. Acting alone or in collusion, they are uniquely positioned to cause significant financial damage in a relatively short period. Some employees act as facilitators, leaving back doors open or making loading docks accessible; some provide sales receipt paper stock; some actually execute the return transaction for their co-conspirators. The insidious nature of employee fraud can be debilitating if left unchecked.

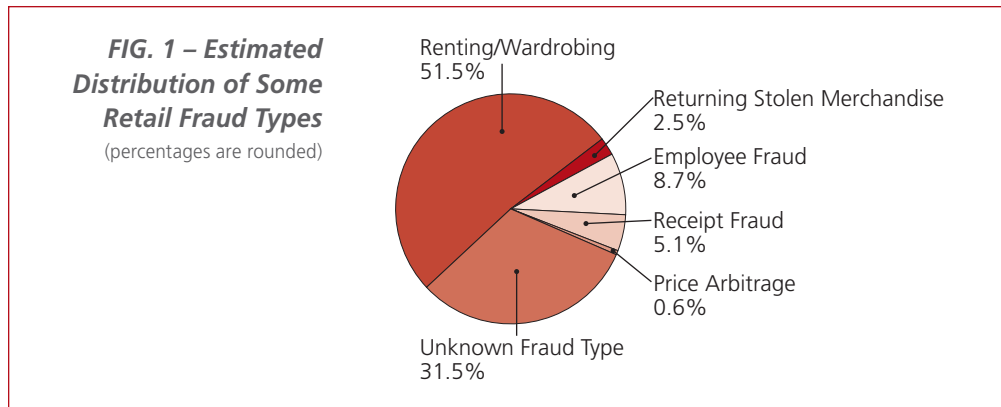
Return Fraud and Abuse Schemes

- Wardrobing/renting
- Receipt fraud
- Price arbitrage
- Check fraud
- Returning stolen merchandise
- Employee fraud

Many Fronts of Return Fraud and Abuse

The chart below (Fig. 1) illustrates The Retail Equation's estimate of the frequency of various types of return fraud and abuse. The numbers are based on our experience with a number of large retail clients.

Renting/wardrobing, with nearly 52 percent of total, is the most aggressive attack on retailers' profit margins. But each fraudulent or abusive return, regardless of its form, contributes to the substantial losses retailers sustain annually. The widespread nature of return fraud and abuse reinforces the need for a focused defense strategy.



Traditional Return Policy vs. Consumer-Based Systems

Most traditional return policies do not consider who is making a return. Simple facts, such as the presence of a receipt, the age of the receipt, and the word of the consumer that the product is unused, are sufficient for a return. Some of the more advanced traditional systems check the validity of the receipt by using receipt reconciliation. Verifying the authenticity of the receipt, however, reduces the problem of receipt forgery, which is estimated to be a smaller fraction of all return fraud and abuse. Unfortunately, traditional systems do little or nothing to stop the fraud and abuse schemes described in this article; hence, the emergence of consumer-based systems.

A consumer-based system tracks each consumer's behavior and identifies aberrant patterns to flag likely fraud and abuse. Fraudulent and abusive returners make many returns, and the system detects them before they inflict too much damage. This system typically allows a retailer to extend a more liberal return policy to the majority of consumers but use a more focused policy for problem consumers.

Profitability is Connected to Return Rate

Clearly, returns cause the retailer to lose the profit margin earned on the original sale. The monetary drain, however, does not end there. Additional losses accrue when you factor in the time employees spend processing returns, evaluating the item's resale potential, and restocking the returns. When an item must be discounted or, even worse, discarded after a return, it further compounds the company's losses. Then, of course, there are the administrative expenses of accounting for returns and managing the entire return system. For mass merchandisers and nationwide chains, the industry-wide costs can reach hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

As a result of the aforementioned expenses, our experience indicates that an individual consumer with a long-term pattern of return rates greater than 20 to 30 percent negatively affects operating profit. The tables on the next page (Fig. 2 & 3) illustrate our computation of these losses at four return rate levels when assuming a 40 percent gross margin and a \$100 item retail price for 20 items.

FIG 2. – Profit/Loss Calculations for Original Sale (without Returns)

Gross Sales	Gross Profit/(Loss) on Original Sale	Operating Expenses to Make Original Sale	Operating Profit/(Loss) on Sale
\$2,000	\$800	(\$550)	\$250

FIG 3. – Profit/Loss Calculations for Returns

Return Rate	Net Sales (After Returns)	Adjustment to Gross Profit/(Loss) (After Returns)	Additional Operating Expenses Incurred from Returns ¹	Contribution to Operating Profit/(Loss) After Returns Considered
100%	\$0	(\$800)	(\$450)	(\$1,000)
50%	\$1,000	(\$400)	(\$225)	(\$375)
20%	\$1,600	(\$160)	(\$90)	\$0
0%	\$2,000	\$0	\$0	\$250

¹ Expenses to process returns include sales staff time, markdowns, damaged goods, back office expenses, and other operating expenses related to processing returns.

Even at a 20 percent return rate, the retailer sees zero operating profit. In addition, as a retailer’s gross margins fall, the break-even return rate also falls. The obvious implication is that profitability is directly connected to return rate.

Countering Return Fraud

Return policies once were a point of differentiation—Nordstrom would take back any item at any time in any condition while a mom-and-pop operation said all sales were final—but with return fraud reaching nearly 8 percent of returned merchandise dollars, return policies need to be scrutinized. Curbing return fraud can be critical to cutting expenses and improving net sales and the bottom line. The question is no longer *if*, but how.

The responsibility of managing the return policy for a retailer may not always be clearly defined. Different teams within the organization, each having separate goals, may share part of the burden. Centralizing the return authorization function within a consumer-based system, however, can assist in organizing the management of a return policy. Such a system can assist in quick ad-hoc analyses of the impact of any proposed changes on the consumer.

Computer technology can track consumer return behavior, using objective criteria. Working from a centralized location to deny returns to systematic fraudsters is now possible. For example, The Retail Equation uses a consumer ID or an identifying number from the original purchase receipt to collect information on each consumer. By eliminating the dependence on a store associate to manually enter information, the system records more accurate data. Using the data collected, statistical fraud detection models are developed to identify common patterns of fraud and abuse. The models are consistently applied to every consumer, which eliminates the variables of sales staff subjectivity and potential discrimination. Retailers can focus on specific fraudulent returners to stop the financial drain.

When reviewing the common return fraud and abuse schemes, most retailers discover that their current return policies do nothing to prevent them. For example, a consumer who purchases clothes every Sunday and returns them the following Sunday every week for a year is not violating most return policies. Retailers who wish to fight costly fraud must focus on the consumer’s return patterns, i.e., pinpointing the abusive consumer to prevent the fraudulent return transaction.

Allaying Concerns about a Consumer-Focused Strategy

Management may voice concerns about replacing a traditional return policy with a consumer-level return authorization system. They may argue that tracking individual

consumers rather than using blanket return procedures may drive consumers away. However, our research shows that approximately 75 percent of all shoppers never return purchases. Of the remaining 25 percent that do return items, only 1 to 2 percent are netted for fraud or abuse because an effective return authorization system denies returns to only the worst offenders. The other 98 to 99 percent of consumers are unaffected. In contrast, most traditional return policies can adversely affect up to 15 percent of all return consumers.

The final question retailers pose is: "What happens to a consumer's shopping behavior following a denial?" Using a controlled sample that analyzed shopping patterns before and after a denial on the same consumers, we found two significant facts:

- (1) The shopping patterns of 35 to 40 percent of consumers who experience a return denial are not affected afterward.
- (2) Within 60 days of a denial, on average, net sales for all denied consumers resume their pre-denial levels.

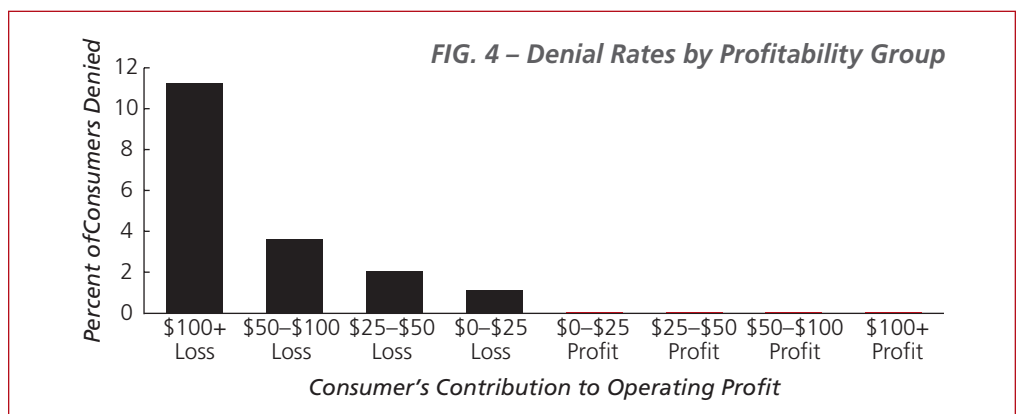
Thus, while denying a consumer may generate some short-term effects, eventually the consumer is rehabilitated into a more profitable consumer, which is the desired end result. Another concern involves the privacy of the consumer's data; retailers think consumers might be leery of handing over personal information to facilitate a return. Retailers can allay these fears by instituting a formal privacy policy and setting up a call center that allows consumers to obtain a copy of their activity report and to dispute inaccuracies, similar to a credit reporting agency.

Deterrence

A consumer-based authorization system can also deter potential fraudulent returners. Once return abusers realize that the retailer will not tolerate abusive or fraudulent return behavior, they will search for a softer target. In fact, return rates have dropped following installation of a prevention system but before the issuance of any denials. Would-be criminals simply go elsewhere when they recognize that they cannot perpetrate fraud and abuse schemes.

Efficacy

The true test of a return authorization system is the number of unprofitable consumers to whom it denies returns compared to the number of profitable consumers it allows to make returns. The chart below (Fig. 4) illustrates a study of one large retailer following system implementation.



Note that as the consumer population approaches profitability for the retailer, there are fewer and fewer incidences of return denial, so that eventually only unprofitable consumers are denied their abusive or fraudulent returns. Reducing the number of unprofitable consumers leads to an improvement in a retailer's operating profits.

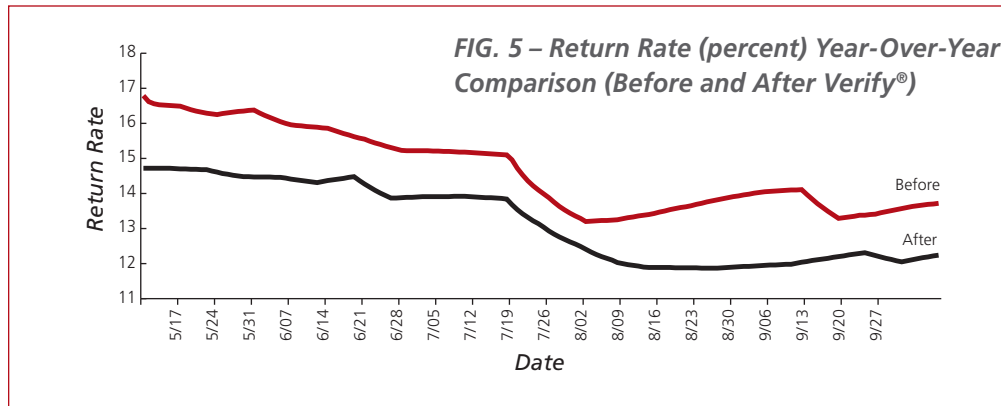
Top Ten Signals of Return Fraud

Return policies are affecting your competitive position if your . . .

- 1 Return rate is above the average return rate for your direct competitors.
- 2 Shrink rate is larger than the average shrink rate for your direct competitors.
- 3 Return rate has increased in two of the last three years.
- 4 Return policies are based on subjective intuition and do not measure the impact on consumers.
- 5 Return policies are arbitrary with respect to a consumer's loyalty or profitability.
- 6 Return policy has not been reviewed in the last 12 months.
- 7 Return policy has not changed significantly in the last three years.
- 8 Return policies are not enforced uniformly throughout the stores.
- 9 Average markdown rates following a return are increasing.
- 10 Percentage of returned merchandise you are able to resell has declined.

Benefits for Retailers and Consumers

Many retailers are moving toward a consumer-based return system as a way to dramatically improve their bottom line. According to our internal studies, just a small improvement in the average retailer's return rate, e.g., falling from 10 to 9 percent, could mean an improvement in operating margins of between 4 and 6 percent. One retailer in particular demonstrated more than a 10 percent drop in return rates year-over-year using a consumer-based system (see Fig. 5).



Another study revealed a 15 percent reduction in shrink rates at a large retailer in the six months following implementation of our system. Arguably, few areas of retail diligence can bring such rapid financial improvement to the bottom line.

Return authorization provides additional benefits for retailers by allowing them to:

- Model consumer return behavior
- Change return policies according to the competitive environment
- Protect against fraudulent and abusive returns
- Deter employee-assisted inventory shrinkage
- Consistently apply operational procedures
- Utilize data to make informed decisions

A fact-based return authorization system helps consumers as well as retailers. Consumers benefit from the objectivity of the system. They know the store's return policy is free from personal bias or preference. Furthermore, consumers enjoy more lenient return policies at retailers that target only fraudulent and abusive returns.

Strategy for the Future

Of course, management teams want to know the metrics derived from studies of a consumer-based return authorization system. They are:

- Decline in the return rate and total return dollars
- Increase in net sales and operating profit
- Decrease in inventory shrinkage

These metrics continue to show material, favorable movement in the battle against return fraud. In short, a protection system makes it possible to defeat return fraudsters who are decimating retailers' profit margins. 📊

The Retail Equation, Inc.

specializes in retail transaction optimization solutions, using statistical modeling and analytics to predict consumer behavior.



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