

“See! It’s me!” Identity Theft Prevention Program

Project Summary

In July 2004, San Angelo Police Chief Tim R. Vasquez asked his staff what major community problems they faced. He learned that reported forgeries in San Angelo had risen over the past few years and that the numbers were continuing to increase.

Based on previous investigations and intelligence, the agency believed there was a core group of offenders committing many of the forgeries to help support their use of illegal narcotics. Further, this group was committing some of the burglaries the city was experiencing. However, instead of taking traditional high dollar items, they were stealing items such as personal checkbooks and credit cards.

The department was also aware that many cases of child abuse are directly linked to a parent or guardian using illegal narcotics. Chief Vasquez decided to address the forgery problem, hoping to directly attack that crime and positively impact related crime.

In January 2005, a Fraud Unit was created to address the forgery problem. The reactive nature of the unit made it ineffective in decreasing forgeries. It became apparent that a proactive, community-based approach to the problem was needed.

In April 2005, Chief Vasquez hosted a meeting with retailers who had reported the most forgeries during the year. These retailers showed little interest in finding a solution to the problem if it inconvenienced customers in any way. Another meeting was scheduled for the following month.

Between the meetings, the agency contacted Stephen McLaughlin, a local advertising expert. Identity theft is a hot topic nationwide and it was determined to combat the forgery problem from that perspective. The police department believed that

an identification verification campaign was needed and that the best approach would be for the customer to volunteer a form of identification without being prompted by a retailer. From this approach Mr. McLaughlin developed the slogan, "See! It's me!"

At the May meeting between the police department and the retailers, one retailer agreed to implement an identification verification program. As a result, most of the other retailers agreed as well. A commencement date of August 1 was set.

The police department took a three pronged approach to the campaign. The first prong would be public education about the coming campaign. The second prong entailed training retailers to properly identify a customer. The final prong concentrated on financial institutions, who were asked to encourage account holders to limit personal information printed on checks.

Between May and August, the police department tirelessly promoted the "See! It's me!" Identity Theft Prevention Program. It was time well spent as retailers who implemented identification verification procedures saw an immediate and substantial decrease in the number of forgeries.

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Project Description

I. Scanning

In July 2004, new San Angelo Police Chief Tim R. Vasquez asked his division commanders what major problems faced the police department and/or the community. Among the problems brought to the chief’s attention were the rising use of methamphetamine, the need for improved police-community relations, an increase in burglaries and shoplifting, and a steady rise in the number of forgeries.

Although each of these problems was important to address, Chief Vasquez focused on the rise in forgeries. Based on what the San Angelo Police Department (SAPD) had learned from previous investigations and intelligence, the department made a number of suppositions:

1. There was a core group of offenders committing many of the forgeries;
2. Many of the members of this core group of offenders were supporting an illegal drug habit;
3. Instead of taking traditional high dollar property, the offenders were stealing items such as personal checkbooks and credit cards;
4. The checks and credit cards were often being used to ‘purchase’ items that they could use to support themselves—food and other commodities—or sell or barter for cash or illegal narcotics.
5. Many cases of child abuse are directly linked to the use of illegal narcotics by a parent or guardian.

Chief Vasquez believed that by addressing the forgery problem in San Angelo—a crime that could be monitored and measured with confidence—a number of other issues would be impacted. And some of these peripheral issues involved problems the division commanders had previously identified. For example, if the number of forgeries were decreased, the total incidents of identity theft might also decrease; by making it more difficult to pass a forged check or use a stolen credit card burglars might be discouraged from stealing these items; any lasting solution to the forgery problem would probably require a joint police-community effort which would present an opportunity to improve the relationship between the agency and the citizens it served.

II. Analysis

Simply stated, the data primarily relied upon to determine the affect the department's efforts were having on this problem would be the number of forgeries reported to the department. If the number of forgeries consistently decreased over a period of time, then the department was most likely making a positive impact on this crime. If the number of reported forgeries stayed the same or increased, then other avenues would have to be explored to combat the problem.

By the end of 2004, SAPD knew that the number of forgeries reported in San Angelo had risen each of the past two years. In 2003, there were 726 reported forgeries. In 2004, there had been 730 reported forgeries. This was less than a 1% increase but it represented an average of approximately two forgeries each day of the year and, though the agency was not primarily concerned with monetary figures, this crime was costing businesses and citizens in the community money.

In January 2005, a Fraud Unit was created to address the forgery problem. The unit was reactive in nature, concentrating on investigating forgeries and making as many cases as possible against identified suspects. Unfortunately reported forgeries increased dramatically over the next three months as 254 forgeries were reported. At that pace, 1,016 forgeries would be reported in San Angelo during 2006, an increase of 28% over the previous year! The failure of the Fraud Unit made it apparent that a proactive approach to the problem was needed.

III. Response

Although some private citizens reported that they were the victim of forgeries, the vast majority of reported forgeries were filed by businesses. Knowing this, in April 2005 Chief Vasquez hosted a meeting with the retailers who had reported the most forgeries to that point of the year. In Texas, a forgery involving money is a felony so the support of the District Attorney's Office was sought and received prior to the meeting.

Representatives from six retailers attended the meeting and Chief Vasquez outlined the problem to the retailers. Though everyone agreed that forgeries were a growing problem in San Angelo, none of the retailers showed an interest in finding a solution if it inconvenienced their customers in any way. Another meeting was scheduled for the following month.

Between the meetings, Chief Vasquez and his staff examined various options which included:

1. Asking retailers to install a video surveillance system. This was not pursued as retailers would view the idea as not being cost effective and would resist it.

2. Asking retailers to emphasize the Check-Print Program. This program had been in existence for years and requires a customer's thumb print as an identifier. This option was dismissed as being too invasive regarding privacy from the public's perspective.
3. The department considered refusing to investigate reported forgeries from businesses that did not take steps to protect themselves or their customers from forgeries. This option was rejected as being nearly indefensible in the courtroom of public opinion.
4. Asking retailers to implement some sort of identification verification program for customers who paid for items using a check or a credit card. This was the option that, overall, presented the fewest number of problems to put into practice. However, there would be two major problems to overcome. First, retailers would have to be willing to 'inconvenience' their customers long enough to verify a form of identification. Second, customers would have to be willing to be 'inconvenienced' just long enough for a retailer to verify a form of identification.

It is no secret that identity theft is a hot topic nationwide. SAPD decided to combat the forgery problem from that perspective, believing it would be easier to "sell" both retailers and the public on the need for action. SAPD's Community Services Division contacted Stephen McLaughlin, a local advertising expert. Mr. McLaughlin felt that the best approach would be for the customer to volunteer a form of identification without being prompted by a retailer. This involved the premise that an individual is

responsible for helping to protect him/herself from identification theft. With this approach in mind Mr. McLaughlin developed the slogan, “See! It’s me!”

In addition to the slogan, Mr. McLaughlin designed four representative caricatures of shoppers holding up a generic identification card at a cash register. The caricatures would be symbolic of San Angelo shoppers and would be featured on materials used in the program. These materials included window stickers, table tents, brochures, and even advertising billboards.

Funding this identification verification campaign was also an issue. Though the department had some funding to put into the campaign, more was needed to produce the kind of campaign needed to keep “See! It’s me!” in the forefront of the public’s attention for what the department believed would be a number of months.

Prior to the May meeting, the police department-District Attorney’s Office coalition was expanded. Angelo State University’s Small Business Development Center and the San Angelo Chamber of Commerce was asked to help promote “See! It’s me!” As a group, these organizations could pool their resources and experience to reach more people and businesses than they could hope to reach individually. It turned out to be a powerful alliance.

As the May meeting between the police department and the retailers began another stalemate seemed to develop as the retailers again refused to implement any program that might be viewed as inconveniencing a customer. Finally Chief Vasquez outlined the concept of “See! It’s me!” After hearing the chief out, Wal-Mart’s representative agreed to implement an identification verification program. This broke the

deadlock and most of the other retailers followed Wal-Mart's lead. A commencement date of August 1 was set.

As developed by the police department the "See! It's me!" Identity Theft Prevention Program involved a three step approach:

1. Public Education: The goal was to get the public to accept the idea that they would be protecting themselves from identity theft whenever they showed their identification to a retailer when writing a check or using a credit card. This involved an education campaign which included television and radio public service announcements, appearances on radio and television shows, and even billboard advertisements near key business districts. And the media—through press releases and press conferences—was used to put the dangers of identity theft and the "See! It's me!" Program in front of the public as often as possible.
2. Training Retailers: Retailers needed to learn how to properly verify a customer's identification. Training was made available through seminars sponsored by members of the coalition. Chief Vasquez conducted training for large groups of retailers; Community Services officers conducted training for small groups of businesses people or even individual businesses. Every opportunity to speak at a forum was, and still is, taken advantage of. To assist retailers supplies were made available, free of charge. To help advertise participation in the "See! It's me!" Program window stickers featuring the caricatures designed by Stephen McLaughlin were made available. Materials, in the form of table tents, were made available to help employees properly

verify a customer's identification. There were four different table tents—each featuring one of the campaign's caricatures. The side displayed toward the customer simply acted as a reminder to the consumer to display identification when writing a check or using a credit card. The side facing the retailer reminded the clerk of three crucial steps in identifying a customer: 1) verify that the photograph on the identification card matched the individual who was displaying the card; 2) Verify that the name on the identification card matched the name on the check or credit card; and 3) Ensure that the customer's signature on the check or credit card receipt matched the signature on the identification card.

3. **Work with Financial Institutions:** Local banks and credit unions were asked to encourage account holders to limit personal information printed on checks. If account holders would print only the initials of their first name and their last name it would make it much more difficult for a thief to steal the identity of an individual with the very little information that would be available. Also the words "See Photo ID" were the only other things encouraged to be printed on a personal check. This would prompt a retailer to ask for a customer's identification. The financial institutions supported the "See! It's me!" Program enthusiastically.

Not only did financial institutions encourage account holders to limit the personal information they made available on checks but they also enthusiastically supported the campaign financially, helping to defray the costs to the police department and other members of the coalition. Other financial assistance was received from the Wal-Mart

Foundation, who sponsored a large billboard as part of the public education aspect of the campaign.

Between May and August, the police department tirelessly promoted the “See! It’s me!” Program. To the surprise of the police department, both local Wal-Mart stores initiated an identification verification program in July, a month before the planned commencement date. This actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Not only did Wal-Mart experience a marked decrease in forgeries, giving the program instant credibility, but the public’s reaction to “See! It’s me!” could be gauged through these large retail stores. As it turned out, no complaints were brought to the attention of the police department.

Wal-Mart’s early results were encouraging. During the first six months of 2005, Wal-Mart Super Center averaged 6.7 forgeries per month. In July, that number was cut to 3—over a 50% decrease. Wal-Mart North had averaged 5.7 forgeries per month during the first six months of the year. In July, they reported four forgeries, a decrease of nearly 30%.

With August’s arrival, SAPD continued to monitor the early results of the “See! It’s me!” Program. It quickly became apparent which businesses had seriously implemented identification verification procedures and which had not. Both Wal-Mart stores continued to experience drops in reported forgeries while a large grocery store and a chain of regional convenience stores experienced more reported forgeries! In part, the increased number of forgeries were attributed to displacement—forgers began frequenting businesses that were not verifying identifications, something the retailers had been warned might occur.

As August faded into September, both Wal-Mart stores continued to experience decreases in forgeries! However, a local drive-in restaurant (who refused to attend the police department-retailer meetings despite numerous invitations) experienced a significant increase in forgeries. Eventually the business refused to accept personal checks from customers. And the local convenience store chain had still not seen any real reduction in forgeries despite their insistence that they had implemented identification verification procedures.

The next few months continued to bear out the early pattern. Those businesses that had seriously implemented identification verification procedures saw *significant* drops in their forgery rates while those who did not—either because they refused to or they did not *actually* do so—experienced, at best, no reduction in forgeries; sometimes even an increased number of forgeries.

IV. Assessment

By the end of the year the “See! It’s me!” Program had proven effective when a business implemented an identification verification procedure. The first two businesses listed below implemented an identification verification procedure. The third business said that it did but when the police department followed up, there was no procedure being used consistently. The fourth business never showed any interest in participating in the program.

1. Wal-Mart Super Center
 - a. First six months of 2005: 40 (6.7 per month)
 - b. Last six months of 2005: 08 (1.3 per month)

2. Wal-Mart North
 - a. First six months of 2005: 34 (5.6 per month)
 - b. Last six months of 2005: 11 (1.8 per month)
3. Town and Country Convenience Stores
 - a. First seven months of 2005: 48 (6.9 per month)
 - b. Last five months of 2005: 44 (8.8 per month)
4. Sonic Drive In
 - a. First seven months of 2005: 21 (3.0 per month)
 - b. Last five months of 2005: 14 (2.8 per month)

In San Angelo, during the last half of 2005, forgeries dropped 5% over the first half rate city-wide. Although this may not appear to be a significant drop, the number of businesses participating in the “See! It’s me!” Program was not large. The drop signified that the program did positively impact the number of forgeries being committed and that “See! It’s me!” should be expanded in 2006.

In 2006, SAPD’s Crime Prevention Section has continued to emphasize the program, visiting—in some cases revisiting—businesses to help them understand and implement the program while continuing to inform the public about identity theft and their role in preventing it. As time goes by, city-wide identification verification will become more institutionalized in the thoughts of the community; something unheard of just one year ago. Once identification verification is institutionalized, the community will accept it as part of everyday life.

During 2005 there were a total of 869 forgeries reported in San Angelo; an average of 72.4 per month. During the first five months of 2006, there have been 238

forgeries reported in San Angelo; an average of 47.6 per month. This represents a drop of 34% in forgeries in just one year! Coincidence? The San Angelo Police Department attributes the decrease to the “See! It’s me!” Identity Theft Prevention Program and the cooperation between the department, its coalition partners, local businesses, financial institutions, and the general public.

A secondary goal of the program was to decrease the number of identification related items (debit/credit card, social security cards, personal check) stolen during burglaries. During the first seven months of 2005, an average of 32.4 identification related items were stolen. During the last seven months of the year an average of 31.8 identification related items were stolen. This represents less than a 2 percent decrease. The question remains to be answered whether this decrease is the beginning of a trend that will continue as more businesses adopt identification verification procedures or whether the decrease is so insignificant that it will eventually be balanced out by a slight increase. It should be noted that the average is 32.0 through the first five months of 2006.