

A SMALL FIRM'S STORY:

Outside Browns, the Derby builders merchants; next page, a view into the yard

Photos by Mark Rowe



Cost of trust betrayed

Of the two directors, Jerry Wheeler was sitting behind the desk, but Jim Parlato did nearly all the talking. He gave the story of Browns, the builders merchant in Derby; founded in 1990, a management buy-out; the third shareholder died of cancer in 2004. It was a typical story of small business Britain. It was not what *Professional Security* had come for, but we listened; partly because that's only polite, partly out of a sense that the men had to come to the point - upsetting though it was - in their own time. Sure enough Jim did, because his story of an internal theft was one he was ready to tell. We were indeed invited there. Perhaps he was even glad to tell it to someone.

A problem

He said: "We run it along family lines. We have a very low turn-around of staff; I can't remember the last person to leave, until this current incident." That was his cue to himself. "We identified ... a problem." As he said, it's not only a problem for the building trade; and it's wrong to call it endemic; but it does tarnish the trade; this common willingness to try to get something for nothing, asking for a little bit extra than what you are paying for - even if only a bag of cement. It's something covered at induction for new staff. Like others in the trade, Browns try their best



to eradicate it; and they don't fool themselves that nothing goes missing.


Things weren't right

About 15 months ago, Jim noticed that things weren't right. The firm does have procedures to make sure that materials don't leave the yard without the correct paperwork. "We also have trackers in the vehicles, so I can see where the driver is supposed to be going, and where he actually is. There's CCTV. I suspected something wasn't right." A couple of times, men would say that they had a request for a load, and a vehicle, but not the paperwork. Or there would be a 'ticket', but not for the proper address. A couple of times, thankfully, the staff would not load without the paperwork. "I suppose when you have been in the

business a while, you get a bit of a gut feeling, that there's something going off. I said to you," meaning his fellow director Jerry Wheeler, "I am not happy about one or two drivers." At this Jerry agreed. Jim went on: "I was trying to keep it low key." Going missing was not only what you might call the bread and butter stuff of the trade; sand and bricks; that comes and goes in quantity. On the plumbing and heating side - where the cost of each unit is much greater - a discrepancy came up on some boilers. Not the sort of thing that you would ever have many of in stock. So when you cannot account for ten or 12, that's a fair amount of money. Again, the two directors sought to keep their suspicions to three or four people internally. "And we were trying to monitor CCTV; we actually put in a covert camera, trying to do it ourselves. But because it [the pilfering] wasn't on a regular basis, it was difficult." At this point *Professional Security* put in its first word; that the two men, after all, were doing their full-time jobs too. They appeared glad to have that recognised. Jim said: "We wanted to catch them and make sure we could get rid of the problem, because [if they suspected they were under surveillance] they would get a little bit cleverer and more covert."

No pattern

The two directors couldn't find a pattern, which hindered their monitoring of CCTV. It was not a case of, say, beginning the CCTV monitoring on a Saturday afternoon, or a Sunday morning. The thief - or



UNHAPPY

'Technology has made it really easy to access and collect confidential information, largely due to behavioural patterns that espionage doesn't happen.'

Raili Maripuu, MD of counter-espionage firm WhiteRock.



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more likely thieves, as in any business a thief probably needs to collude with others - was looking for opportunities. The directors were introduced to a local security consultant, Rod Repton. So local in fact that his office is only a couple of minutes' walk away. They met the former Derbyshire Police detective, but not at their premises, thinking that the former DCI might be a known face and might put a thief on his guard. The directors told their story to Rod. They did have one piece of CCTV evidence that they could show; of a van driver on a Saturday afternoon pulling up. The footage didn't show what a load was; but two men were involved. It still sticks with the directors how Rod assured them that he would catch

the thieves; because they would do it again, maybe when someone was on holiday and the yard had fewer men around. Rod told them that he could do surveillance of suspects, at so much an hour; but how long would that take? He suggested instead that he did a security survey, and while going around the site he would speak to some of the men. Jim said of that survey: "You don't notice the obvious; sometimes it needs somebody to come in, someone who knows what to look for, to tell you where your failings are."

Suspects

From Rod's questioning, it arose that one or two of the staff - who as Jim put it 'wouldn't snitch, but weren't happy it was going off, and were prepared to divulge so much' - suspected something, the same as the directors did. One or two of them had seen somebody come in; some money exchange hands; but nothing (at that time) leave the premises. Another time, on a Saturday morning, a small amount was loaded, with word that the paperwork would be sorted out later. Rod, as an outsider, as a former senior detective, had the experience to ask the right questions, and the down to earth manner to get on with the workers. His 'review' found that something was definitely going on; and the two men that the directors suspected were the two. They were a driver; and the transport manager; and they admitted everything. They left the company.

Got it rolling

Jim said: "It sounds easy, the process was shorter than I thought, and it took less time than I thought, once he [Rod] got it rolling. Some of the guys were almost relieved to get it off their chest. We both took it personally," he went on, meaning himself and Jerry Wheeler. One of the guilty men had been with the firm for ten or more years; not a close friend, but a good work colleague, Jim called him. "I didn't socialise with him, but I put trust in him." This was the transport manager, whose £2000 qualification he paid for; and the firm looked after him in other ways. "Unfortunately you get let down. I suspected he had some involvement, but was reluctant to admit it to myself. The only problem is - I try and stop myself getting too cynical, because if you start looking around and casting doubt on



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everybody working for you, it isn't a very good working environment."

Loss value

At no time did he offer to put any money value on the loss. That may be because of natural embarrassment; or, in a small business, even quite a small value loss can feel big to the firm; or, it was more than the monetary loss that rankled. As Jim did volunteer, the loss is in the intangibles - the betrayed trust, which - though it wasn't something that he went into - may cause you to query if the way you go about your business is the right one. Jim and Jerry began the business in the first place, in 1990, because they didn't want to work for a conglomerate. The two have put decades into the business, and are now looking to take a back seat, to let the next generation, sons, take over.

A legacy

As Jim said: "We would like to see something left behind, and a bit of a legacy - I know that sounds a bit corny." The staff theft was threatening that legacy - which was why the directors took it so personally, and wanted to get to the bottom of it, though they didn't go to the police about it. As Jim put it, Rod came in, and solved the problem; and has carried on the security review. Jim touched on some of the advice, that either Rod will work on or offer others to do the work. Key-holding, for example. Jim has always come to the yard if an alarm has gone off, as he lives closest; sometimes it's been a false alarm, sometimes an attempted burglary. And as Jim admitted, he hadn't thought of the consequences, if he'd been on the scene with an intruder. Likewise the firm had taken for granted the way that staff opened in the morning; and appreciated Rod's point that it's safer to let yourself in, lock that gate, then unlock inside doors, before you return to unlock again the outer gate. Otherwise you risk simply unlocking a path for a dawn raider. Jim did say that the security review doesn't stop now that the 'problem' is out of the way; the firm wants to make sure that it doesn't happen again. Hence Rod



Rod and Sam Repton

Photo by Mark Rowe

year. But what that firm could afford and would have cause for might be a consultant that does a risk assessment for a fixed fee. The client can do what he chooses (if anything) with what it recommends, whether more CCTV,

Back from retirement

Rod Repton has been in *Professional Security* a few times over the years; after his police career he set up in Derby as a trainer and consultant; his company was also for a time an SIA-approved contractor. He was secretary of Ex-Police in Industry and Commerce (EPIC). His business, then, has much in common with Browns, in that it's family; his daughter Sam runs it now; the work is mainly in drug and alcohol in the workplace testing.

Back like Bruce

He'd done work for such firms as Thrifty, the car and van rental firm, and tyre-makers Pirelli, on much the same lines as he has done for Browns; investigations into workplaces. He'd gone into retirement, more or less; he's a long-time Rotarian, he likes his football; recently he did a stint as a lecturer on an Atlantic cruise liner. But at 66, here he is back. As he puts it, if entertainer Bruce Forsyth can make a come-back at the age of 83, he can. And he thinks that he has a model that works, for small firms (such as Browns) with a workforce of perhaps 30 that cannot afford, or would not have the work for, a security manager on £40,000 a

or trimming an overhanging tree at the perimeter wall that an intruder could climb up to get over the razor wire on the top of the wall; or policies to bring in 'checks and balances' so that someone cannot exploit the trust of a small business. If the client does want to employ him further, they get their own security consultant for the fraction of the price of the full-timer. Either Rod, or other former police or armed forces people, notably the retired Derbyshire Police detective sergeant Sandra Gibbs, who used to work with Rod.

There to assist

Typical takers of the service might be small factories, the building trade and building sites, garden centres. If they suspect, as Browns did, that something is wrong, they don't know who to turn to - or rather, who to trust (that word again). Rod is at pains to point out that he sells himself when entering a business as there to assist; not there to catch anybody out, but there to reward honesty. Staff, besides those at the very top, may feel conflicted, not knowing where to report suspicions of wrong-doing (which may be about health and safety, besides theft). Talking of health and safety, Rod and Sam are pictured in their high-vis and with hard hats to show that they are used to and ready to go on building sites and the like. □

will do unannounced visits, first thing in the day for example. Talk of the devil, and Rod did open the door; time was up. There was not time to ask

about that sense of trust betrayed; and what they would have done, but for Rod. But perhaps that was none of our business. □



HAPPY

'Webcams are integral part of corporate lives, and the vast majority of devices are camera and microphone enabled, giving spies a free gateway to businesses and personal lives.'
Rauli Maripuu, MD of counter-espionage firm WhiteRock.