



Panty pirates plunder Victoria's Secret stores across the United States, stealing thousands of dollars worth of merchandise and selling it on popular Web sites like eBay and craigslist.



December 10, 2008

Ask me about my panties

MUNCIE, IN—Law enforcement officials and industry groups say amateur thieves and organized crime rings are behind panty thefts that range from Connecticut to California.

According to the online security newsletter, CSOnline.com. Victoria's Secret has had more than \$2.7 million worth of bras stolen, more than an 80 percent increase from the previous year. The topic is a touchy one for Limited Brands, Victoria's Secret's parent company, and public relation employees are remaining mum about the situation.

Thieves are using a method referred to as boosting, or stealing items in bulk, usually clearing out the entire shelf. In order to get past security alarms, sensor tags are either removed or placed in foil-lined bags. Thieves then sell the product on auction Web sites.

George Tutaya, 41, of Rego Park, N.Y., was arrested and charged with 18 counts of criminal possession of stolen property after selling more than \$80,000 worth of stolen Victoria's Secret bras on **eBay**. He said he purchased the bras from a shoplifting ring. When police arrested him, they found \$26,000 worth of unsold bras in his home. The bras range in price from \$40 to \$80 a piece and are sold online for \$25 or more.

In late spring, police in Media, Pa., arrested four people suspected of being part of an interstate crime ring that cost Victoria's Secret between \$600,000 and \$1 million. Muncie had a smaller scale incident in September 2008 in which thieves made off with 80 bras. At the same time, four other stores in the Indianapolis area were hit, according to a Victoria's Secret employee.

Some local shoppers are now skeptical about buying bras and panties online.

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Ask me about my panties (con't)

Stopping the scallywags

Retail theft is on the rise and the National Retail Federation said in its 2008 report that 68 percent of retailers have been able to identify or recover stolen merchandise and gift cards on online auction sites, 61 percent more than last year. The report also indicated that 63 percent have seen an increase in e fencing selling stolen items on online auction sites - activity in the last year.

Retailers are spending on average \$230,000 per year on labor costs to aid in loss prevention. Larger companies that have increasing problems in theft are spending upwards of \$1 million dollars a year. According to the NRF, the Federal Bureau of Investigations says retail crimes account for \$30 billion in losses a year.

The NRF and FBI have launched a network called the Law Enforcement Retail Partnership Network, created to track patterned crimes through national databases and share the information among retailers in an effort to fight back against illegal activity. **eBay** paired up with **LeadsOnline**, the nation's largest online investigative system, which has databases of almost 160 million records. The company also helps businesses, pawnshops and identity theft, narcotics crimes and metal theft victims to find stolen property, according to its Web site.

Before the aid of **LeadsOnline**, detectives would have to search eBay for stolen property then write the company on department letterhead and include a subpoena in order to get any information on a seller, said **Erin Hunt**, account executive for **LeadsOnline**. "Now eBay comes strictly to us to make it easier," Hunt said.

The detective can log into **leadsonline.com** and search using specific parameters. Hunt found 198 Victoria's Secret items for sale within 10 miles of Muncie, Ind. "Not all sellers are selling stolen property," Hunt said. Some sellers are selling items they may have received as a gift or purchased on sale.

Craigslist cannot be accessed through **leadsonline.com** because of the model, Hunt said. It is set up much like a classified ad in a newspaper. The seller does not have to create an account and often is never known.

"We always do encourage the police department to tell us their success stories," Hunt said. "We like to hear them."

The success stories are posted on the **leadsonline.com** Web site.

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