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Cure for the Five-Finger Blues

Arm-A-Dor has Guitar Center strumming a happier tune

By David P. Schulz

Specialty music retailer Guitar Center has been growing by leaps and bounds, both by opening new stores and through acquisition. Headquartered in Westlake Village, Calif., it operates two distinct formats. Guitar Center stores, of which there are more than 180, offer guitars, amplifiers, percussion instruments and keyboards, as well as professional audio and recording equipment. The 90 or so Music and Arts units it acquired last year specialize in the selling of band instruments.

The company has been morphing ever since it began as an appliance and home organ store in North Hollywood, and its growth pattern has resulted in a crazy-quilt assortment of stores and locations ranging in size from an average of 17,000 sq. ft. for Guitar Centers in primary markets to as little as 5,000 sq. ft. in some tertiary markets.

The company went public in 1997 and opened its 100th store in Little Rock, Ark., in February 2002. It was about this time, says director of loss prevention and safety John MacFadyen, that Guitar Center "found that we had a problem with the back door." The plate-glass storefronts were protected by roll gates, but doors on the back and sides of the stores — many serving primarily as emergency exits — were a bigger challenge. These doors were equipped with panic bars and reinforced with a heavy bar that had to be removed during operating hours to comply with safety codes. Even then, MacFadyen says, burglars would break in by prying the door open with a crowbar or some other tool and make off with whatever they could before anyone could respond to the alarm.

"Once the door is pried open, they have 60 to 90 seconds to grab what they can — guitars, amplifiers — that could be worth anywhere from \$2,000 to \$10,000," MacFadyen says. In addition, during business hours there was a problem with "runouts" — thieves who would grab what merchandise they could and flee through an emergency exit to an accomplice waiting in a getaway vehicle.

The manager of one East Coast store installed a security hardware device called Arm-A-Dor, supplied by the Sargent & Greenleaf division of Stanley Security Solutions. "We fell in love with it and haven't had a problem since," MacFadyen says.

Break-in crack down

At their height, Guitar Center was experiencing about one break-in a month. That has been reduced to "one or two a year," none of them involving a compromised Arm-A-Dor, MacFadyen says. (In one recent instance, a burglar had taken the time to pound a hole in the building's brick wall with a sledgehammer in order to gain entry.)

Arm-A-Dor is "three products in one: locking-bar security, an alarm and a panic bar," says Phil Pitt, a marketing executive with Nicholasville, Ky.-based Sargent & Greenleaf.

The locking bar offers protection against break-ins from the outside. The alarm is another level of protection against theft and intrusions, while the panic bar provides life-safety compliance. The device, which cannot be unlocked from the exterior, meets safety and fire code requirements.

When engaged from inside the store, Arm-A-Dor also can activate an audio, visual or electronic alarm, a video camera or any combination thereof.

Every Guitar Center built in the last three years has been equipped with Arm-A-Dor, while older units have been retrofitted with the device on an "as needed" basis. The system "has saved tens of thousands of dollars in merchandise loss, not to mention the expense of repairing doors," MacFadyen says. In addition, store personnel are grateful that they don't have to wrestle with heavy door-guard bars each day.