Behavior Profiling Redefines Security at the Mall of America

BY: Elaine Pittman | February 6, 2013

After 9/11, the owners of the Mall of America handed the facility's security director a blank check. They wanted the mall to be outfitted with cameras and metal detectors, but Security Director Doug Reynolds didn't think that was the right solution. While the tech tools would aid security efforts, Reynolds didn't think they were the best fit for the unique facility that he is charged to protect.

The term "mall" doesn't provide a complete picture of the Mall of America. Located near Minneapolis in Bloomington, Minn., the facility is visited by 40 million people annually and spans 4.2 million square feet. Not only does it house the stores one would expect to find in a shopping mall, but it also features the United States' largest indoor theme park complete with roller coasters, an aquarium and a movie theater. In addition, a hotel is scheduled to open early this year. All of these attractions combine to create an extraordinary environment for a security department.

Reynolds surveyed different security methods and industry standards, but none of the conventional approaches in the United States seemed to be the best fit for the Mall of America. "We thought cameras were good but they were missing an element, which ended up being the human element," he said.

Looking to Israeli security methods, Reynolds learned about how behavioral profiling is used in the country, especially at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion International Airport. He attended training in Israel to better understand how the technique is used and how security officials there have improved it.

"Most people think that behavioral profiling started in Israel but it did not; it actually started in the U.S. through the FBI to do different types of profiling for crimes, such as serial killers, sexual predators, that kind of thing," Reynolds said. "The Israelis — when they were looking for best practices — found the FBI doing it, and they took it on and honed the skills and perfected the science behind it."

Expanding Practice

When the Mall of America began its behavior profiling program about five years ago, it was breaking new security ground in the U.S. "When you step outside of what society is used to, there is always risk, and we told folks ... that there are going to be people who don't know what the program is about," said Security Director Doug Reynolds.

The risk seems to have paid off. Behavioral profiling is being embraced by other U.S. security officials, and Michael Rozin is using his experiences from helping launch the mall's program and being a security agent for Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv where the method is used.

For example, the security director for the Greenway Plaza business complex in Houston adopted the program about a year and a half ago. It's also being expanded into school systems.

Timothy Kingsley, associate vice president of operations and government affairs for American Security and Investigations, said a good job has

A former Israeli Airports Authority security agent, Michael Rozin, was brought onto the Mall of America's security team to help adopt the country's behavioral profiling principles to the public environment at the U.S. facility. Rozin and Reynolds worked to create the mall's Risk Assessment and Mitigation (RAM) program, which instead of relying on technology to help identify a potential security risk, uses trained officers who look for behavior that isn't considered normal in the mall's setting.

The Mall of America's security department consists of about 150 people with the lion's share constituting what most people consider typical security. RAM personnel make up a small percentage of the department's staff, Reynolds said, but all security personnel are exposed to the program and its concepts. "A handful are given the additional 10 to 12 weeks of training in it," he said.

The RAM officers work in what Reynolds described as "visually undercover" — they wear plain clothes and ear pieces, but visitors can spot the officers if they're looking for them.

been done in academic environments to identify students who may be experiencing a crisis, but an appropriate system must be in place to identify key indicators of a possible future event.

"We have had an unprecedented amount of events in the last decade surrounding active shooters and what I call catastrophic crimes in the workplace," Kingsley said. "I think it's time that we really start not looking for the weapon — of course always look for those things — but let's look for the common denominator. Human beings have similar behaviors."

American Security and Investigations is in the early stages of rolling out the program in a Minnesota school district. He said key staff members in the company are being trained first, but eventually it could be a districtwide awareness campaign and not limited to security personnel. Kingsley said the company also is looking to use behavior profiling in other environments, including hospitals and commercial real estate.

"We want people to see them. We want them to know they're out there," Reynolds said. "If it's a person with harmful intentions then they think that this thing, I don't know what it is or how big it is, but it's there, it's a factor and this is not the place to commit the crime."

Although the behavior profiling program was adapted to fit the Mall of America's environment, it uses the same three components as Ben Gurion airport: detecting suspicious indicators, security interviewing (which Rozin said is the most important) and operational deployment.

RAM officers look for behaviors or objects that are not considered normal in the mall. And once something suspicious is observed, RAM officers look into the situation further and if it involves a person, they conduct a security interview to get more information. "Here it's very different because in an airport setting you are somewhat expected to answer some questions, especially in Israel where everyone has to go through an interview session before they board a flight," Rozin said. The interview techniques had to be adapted to fit the public environment of the mall including how RAM officers approach people and obtain cooperation as well as the way they ask questions. The principles of interviewing are maintained and what officers are looking for are the same, but the method differs.

Is observing behavior and talking to people more effective than a security measure like using metal detectors? Rozin believes so, highlighting what he said are the two main factors that create acts of violence: intent and means or weapons.

"If you look through the years both in the United States and overseas, you see that the weapon itself as a factor has constantly been evolving and changing," he said. "Bad guys have the ability to outsmart technology like metal detectors, X-ray machines, whatever is out there and come up with a weapon they can get into the secure environment and use to attack."

Ultimately the Mall of America's RAM program seeks to deter people with harmful intentions from coming to the facility. Rozin said technology, like metal detectors, doesn't necessarily deter someone; instead they just pose a challenge. "What creates true deterrence is an unpredictable system — a security system that is there and looking for intent constantly," he said.

And this highlights the importance of the security interviews. Asking the right questions at the right time is a problem for anyone with harmful intentions, according to Rozin. In one example of how the right questions can unravel a person's lies, during a security interview, RAM officers identified a man who had been going onto military bases, although he wasn't in the military.

Reynolds said that a couple of years ago, two RAM officers were nearing the end of their shift and walking down a parking ramp when they passed a man wearing a Marine Corps uniform who was waiting for the elevator. The RAM officers continued walking down the parking ramp until one said he got a weird feeling about the man in uniform and the other agreed. They found the man still waiting for the elevator, identified themselves and asked if they could talk to him. Reynolds said they asked him if he was in the military and he said he was a sniper. A RAM officer asked what his longest shot was and he didn't know. They went on to inquire about the rifle he used and he didn't know answers that they thought he should have. The officers identified the man's car and saw an Air Force uniform in the backseat as well as a U.S. Department of

Defense sticker on the vehicle.

The police were called and the Defense Department sticker was identified as legitimate, but as the interview continued, the man's story fell apart. "It turned out he was a runaway and his guardians were retired members of the military," Reynolds said. "As a dependent of a retiree, you're given an ID card that lets you on military bases and [gives] access to a place called clothing and sales where you can buy uniforms." The man had created a false identity by going onto bases and listening to the conversations of military members.

Securing the Mall of America isn't strictly an internal function. The security department has created a "solid" relationship with the Bloomington Police Department, said Reynolds acknowledging that as a private entity, the mall has limitations and must rely on other law enforcement. Local agencies become involved when the security interview reaches a point at which additional information is needed or if someone provides a fraudulent identification card. In addition, the mall has provided awareness training to law enforcement officers on the RAM program and its security procedures, which Reynolds said makes things run more smoothly when they are called to the mall. "Certainly a big piece on that is to be able to articulate to the responding police officer why we called the police over."

Reynolds also attributes the program's success to the use of red teaming, where a scenario is created that should get the attention of a RAM officer. Indicators are set up in an area and the officer is watched to see how he or she responds and how the interview process goes. Reynolds said red teaming is critical because the program is relatively new (it's been in use in the Mall of America for about five years) and the testing process not only helps him know if something isn't being taught properly, but it also ensures that the officers are always aware of their surroundings.

Another aspect that's been key to the program's success has been enlisting the help of everyone who works for the mall — from sales clerks to janitors. Reynolds said they are the subject-matter experts of their areas and notice when something doesn't match typical behavior in that setting.

"We would not be as successful as we are without utilizing all of the different entities, whether it be other departments or, even to a degree, guests," he said. "We have guests that come to us and tell us when something doesn't look right."

Reynolds has presented the program to a diverse range of groups, and Rozin is now working as a consultant to educate others about behavior profiling and how it could fit into their security processes. "We want people to know about this program," Reynolds said. "We want this to be the new industry standard."

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