

Is Your Locksmith a "Scamsmith"?

Article by David J. Garber, CPM and Jack "Frank" Flam

In today's climate of seemingly endless legal liability, it is unconscionable to think that anyone would subject themselves to obvious and large-scale liability exposures by his or her most basic actions. To our amazement, this is exactly what is happening when locks on many apartment communities are changed.

The main concern is how much the locksmith will cost, not whether or not he or she is trustworthy and competent. Installation of the best systems and hardware means nothing if their integrity is breached by the use of improper personnel for installation, maintenance, and repair. Imagine your liability position if a burglary or attack is facilitated by an improperly installed or maintained lock. It becomes even worse if the person responsible for the installation has a criminal record.

Locating Vendors

Some professionals prefer to obtain vendor information from other professionals operating in the immediate vicinity of their properties. Other managers gather vendor information from the Yellow Pages, professional magazines, and other local publications. Seasoned professionals often feel that they know exactly what they want in a vendor, and look through the advertisements for this specific information. The problem is that the vendors know this also, and many dangle their ads in front of managers like worms before fish.

Regardless of how this information is accumulated, it should not be accepted on face value. A good deal of this information may be subject to exaggeration, and some of the data could be just plain false or misleading. All claims must be verified. A qualified and honest vendor will welcome the opportunity to respond to your questions.

Questions to Ask

How long has a vendor has been operating in the community? This information should be verified by reviewing the vendor's business license information. In addition to looking for the date of original issuance, you should make sure that the original owner and the current owner are the same individual.

How large is the company? Multiple telephone numbers for service in various areas of the city should not be interpreted as a large vendor with multiple locations. It may be just a small vendor with several numbers, or even a mobile vendor with no substantial base of operation. Likewise, a listing containing the designation "main office" does not necessarily mean that there are any additional locations.

Does the company operate professionally? A visit to one or more locations will provide you with an opportunity to verify the existence of an established business and provide for a review of the extent and scope of the operation. This should include a review of required documentation, as well as the quality and quantity of equipment and supplies being used.

Is the company/employee properly licensed? Licensing requirements vary by state and locale. A call to your local locksmith's association and city business licensing office will obtain the appropriate requirements in your area. All of the proposed vendor's documentation should be reviewed with particular emphasis on original and current expiration dates, names of individuals licensed, and any limitations, or areas of specialization. Verify that the individual named as the licensed owner is actively involved with the operations of the company.

Documents to Review

Although licensing and permits required will vary as noted above, some of the more common documents and credentials that should be provided by your locksmith are:

- State contractor's license, with emphasis of areas of specialization.
- State locksmith's license, usually issued by a bureau with security and investigative services.
- Local, city, or county police permit -- Most require fingerprinting for a review of prior convictions.
- Business license or business tax registration certificate.
- Certificates of worker's compensation insurance and liability insurance with appropriate and adequate amounts of coverage. Once you decide to do business with the vendor, you should have the vendor direct the insurance carrier to send you a certificate of insurance with your appropriate entity named as an additionally insured.
- Evidence of membership in professional trade associations such as Associated Locksmiths of America (ALOA) and the Institutional Locksmiths Association.
- Certificates for technical classes taken and completed.
- List of local commercial and residential references.

Additional Questions

A searching conversation with the vendor is a key part of the selection process.

Where did you obtain your training, and how many years did you apprentice? Look for areas of specialization such as safes, vaults, aluminum or glass-door work, electronic low-voltage entry, and master key systems. Ask to see a working sample of a master key chart and account. Each additional area of specialization indicates an increased level of competency and experience.

What brands of locks and supplies do you carry? The extent, variety, and quality of lines carried will display the knowledge and capability of the locksmith.

What kind of key machines do you use, and how many do you have? How many mobile trucks do you have, and how are they equipped and stocked? These questions will reveal some of the vendor's ability to deliver professional services.

In order for this vendor to function properly as a professional locksmith and/or security consultant, a complete working knowledge of handicapped-access and fire codes is essential. Direct questions should be asked about the vendor's knowledge in this area. Ask how the vendor stays current on these changing codes, and how the employees of the company are advised of this information.

Remembering that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, questions must also be asked about the company's employees. What are the hiring requirements? Are all workers licensed and bonded? Does the company have a questionnaire that tests the applicant's qualifications? Does it complete periodic, formal written employee performance and technical skill appraisals? Upon receiving an affirmative response to these questions, ask for a review of these documents.

Perhaps one of the most obvious questions to present is the least asked: *Do you subcontract any of your work out to other vendors?* Many vendors subcontract work out to uninsured or unqualified people, either regularly or during high demand periods. In either case, using this type of vendor means that you do not know who is actually doing the work.

Conclusion

An ounce of prevention is truly worth more than a pound of cure. When it comes to the safety and security of your property and people, take the time to complete the research necessary to hire a competent and trustworthy locksmith. Then go the extra step to make sure this vendor has proper employment practices, equipment, licensing, and insurance to protect the property and all concerned parties.

The hiring of a qualified professional locksmith will also provide you and your employees with an additional security consultant. More importantly, you won't get scammed.

About the Authors

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