

The keys to hiring a reputable locksmith

If you've ever locked yourself out of your car or home, you know what a hassle it can be. Your first thought is to get someone to help you out. If a family member or friend can't deliver a spare set of keys, your next call might be to a local locksmith.

Tips for picking a locksmith

What's the best way to pick a reputable locksmith? Consider researching locksmiths before you need one, the same way you would a plumber, electrician, or other professional. That works well if you don't need a locksmith right away.

Regardless of whether you are locked out of your car or home, you need new locks installed, or you require other security work, the Bureau of Consumer Protection offers these tips to help you hire a legitimate, local locksmith.

In non-emergency situations:

- Call family or friends for recommendations.
- If you find a locksmith in the phone book, on the Internet, or through directory assistance, and a business address is given, recognize that some disreputable companies list street addresses to give the impression that they're

local or that they operated out of an actual building at the stated address. If being local is important to you, ask some questions about the business location before hiring a locksmith.

- Good questions include:
 - Where is your business located?
 - Is your location an actual building?
 - How long have you been operating in that location?
 - Where were located before?
 - How long have you been in business?
- Remember that some legitimate locksmith companies may not include a street address in their listing either because they operate a "mobile" business or they operate their business out of their home and may be reluctant to list that address. Write down what you are told, if possible. It not only could help you make a decision, but also provide information if the locksmith you chose turns out to be disreputable.
- Check out locksmiths with the Bureau of Consumer Protection and the Better Business Bureau

(www.bbb.org) to make sure there are no unresolved complaints on file. This is true whether you need a locksmith for a one-time job, or you want to hire someone to work for you on a continuing basis. You must be able to trust your locksmith. You don't want to give access to the locks for your home, car, or place of business to just anyone.

- If a company answers the phone with a generic phrase like "locksmith services," rather than a company-specific name, ask for the legal name of the business. If the person refuses, call another locksmith.
- Beware of offers of multiple discounts, emergency service promotions, claims of lowest prices, "No. 1" self-ratings and other puffery (exaggerated praise in advertising or publicity).
- Get an estimate for all work and replacement parts from the locksmith before work begins. If you can get a written estimate, that's even better. In cases of "lock-outs" (being locked out of your car or home), most legitimate locksmiths will give you an estimate on the phone for the total cost of the work.

- Once the locksmith arrives and has the chance to inspect your lock, ask if the estimate given over the phone has changed. If it has, you may want to seriously consider getting a different locksmith.
- In the case of a lock-out, be cautious if you're told up front that the lock has to be drilled and replaced. An experienced legitimate locksmith has invested in the tools and education to provide quality service, and can unlock almost any door.
- Ask about additional fees before you agree to have the locksmith perform the work. Companies may charge extra for responding to a call in the middle of the night. Ask if there is a charge for mileage, or a minimum fee for a service call.
- Find out if the locksmith is insured and ask the name of the insurer. Write it down if you can. If your property is damaged during a repair, or if faulty work leads to loss or damage, it's important for the locksmith to have insurance to cover your losses.
- Never sign a blank form authorizing work.
- Don't pay for service in advance and always ask that parts that are replaced be returned to you.
- When the locksmith arrives, ask for identification. A driver's license is best because it contains a picture and other information, like the state that issued it whether it's expired or not. Also ask for a business card. Check to see if the invoice includes the company's name, and whether

the locksmith's vehicle has a name that matches the business card, invoice, and/or bill. Also check for any discrepancies between the invoice, the business card, and the identification.

- Expect the locksmith to ask you for identification, as well.
- After the work is completed, get an itemized invoice that covers parts, labor, mileage, and the price of the service call.

If you're dealing with an emergency, like being locked out of your car, you really don't have time for thorough research. Also, anxiety and the need for fast help could cloud your judgment. The Bureau of Consumer Protection offers these additional tips for emergency situations:

- If you're locked out of your car and have a roadside assistance service, call them first. These services sometimes are included with the purchase of a car, or as an add-on through your insurance company. You also can buy this service separately. Roadside assistance plans often have a list of pre-approved companies to perform services like unlocking cars, jump-starting batteries, changing flat tires, delivering gasoline, and towing.
- Do as much research as you can before choosing a locksmith.
- Follow the tips for non-emergency situations. They are just as important in emergency situations.

In case there's a next time

Once you've found a reputable locksmith, keep the company's name

and contact information in your wallet and address book at home or at work. You also may want to program this information into your home and cell phones. This can save you time and trouble the next time you need these services.

For more information

If you have a problem with a locksmith, try to resolve the dispute with the company first. Make sure you act quickly. Some companies may not accept responsibility if you fail to complain within a certain time.

For more information, or to file a complaint, contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection at:

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(Some information taken from the Federal Trade Commission fact sheet, "The Keys to Hiring a Reputable Locksmith", February 2008.)