



[John Kelly](#) Columnist

Waging war on shady locksmiths

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By [John Kelly](#), The Washington Post

Mark Baldino's war against shady locksmiths is waged from two tables pushed against the wall of his office in Springfield. The tables are covered with neatly stacked piles of paper. There's a pile for Bing, another for AOL. There are piles for InfoUSA, Acxiom and Manta.

"It's really about the search engines," says Mark, 58, who with his younger brother, **Gary**, runs Baldino's Lock & Key, the locksmith business their father started in a shed behind their house in 1961, now grown to 17 locations in our area.



(John Kelly/THE WASHINGTON POST) - Mark Baldino of Baldino's Lock & Key in Springfield is spearheading an effort to get search engines to remove questionable locksmith listings.

Each pile of paper represents an online search engine or business directory that Mark has either sued, is planning to sue or hopes he won't have to sue. He alleges that search engines don't do enough to check the results that come up when someone looks for a locksmith. Some locksmiths take out [listings with false local addresses](#) and local telephone numbers that route consumers to call centers that send out technicians who may not be professionally trained and licensed and who may overcharge you. These deceptive listings swamp the search results — whether it's a list or a dot-filled map.

Mark knows the worst villains are the bad locksmiths, but he's taking aim at the search engines, which he calls "aiders and abettors."

"As a provider of information, wouldn't you want your information to be true and accurate?" he says. It's been a dizzying odyssey. Mark is active with a task force formed by the Associated Locksmiths of America (ALOA), the industry's trade group. The effort is called "[Stop the Insanity](#)," an apocalyptic name that should give you an indication of how existential a threat these groups feel. (Mark says his company loses a million dollars a year to disreputable locksmiths.)

Mark has had some success. Recently, he came to an agreement with Ziplocal, a Utah-based publisher of phone directories and online listings. Mark had contracted with Ziplocal for advertising, then, as a way of getting their attention, stopped paying his bill. He owed them more than \$18,000. He agreed to pay if Ziplocal promised to remove from its online directory those locksmiths “whose phone numbers are associated with fictitious addresses and nonexistent locations . . . that thereby diminish the value of Baldino’s advertising by significantly obscuring the visibility of Baldino’s listing in Ziplocal’s online directory.”

An agreement was signed last month.

He also got through to someone at Google who he says agreed to delete locksmiths if Mark regularly e-mailed him an Excel spreadsheet of the bogus listings.

In a statement a Google spokesman said: “We’re aware of the gaming practices happening in the locksmith industry — practices which long predate Google and have affected the Yellow Pages for decades. We’ve implemented several measures to combat this issue, including improving our spam detection algorithms and working with the locksmith industry to find solutions.”

Mark says local regulators aren’t doing enough about the problem. He pays for his employees to be licensed in Virginia and wishes the state would launch some sting operations that pounce on unlicensed locksmiths.

For their part, the search engines say consumers have to be careful, digging into the listings and not taking them at face value. In a statement, a Microsoft spokesman said: “To further verify results — and access wisdom of crowds — Bing also aggregates user reviews from sites like CitySearch and Yelp directly into search results to help people easily see commentary and navigate to other resources on the Web that have useful information.”

Mark says the wisdom of the crowds is too often perverted by false reviews posted by the locksmiths themselves.

“It’s only going to get worse,” Mark says. He’s certain these same techniques — straw-man listings — will be used by sketchy plumbers, carpet cleaners, HVAC providers, anyone who makes money by coming to your house.

It’s truer now than it ever was: Caveat emptor. Buyer beware.

The keys to a good locksmith

There are tips for protecting yourself at the Federal Trade Commission’s Web site. (Go to www.ftc.gov and search “[locksmith](#).”) The best way is to find a locksmith *before* you need one and enter the firm’s name and number in your cell phone. Ask friends for recommendations or visit the ALOA Web site: findalocksmith.com. Read reviews posted on online rating services with a critical eye.

When you find a locksmith, ask to visit his shop. There are some good mobile locksmiths out there, but ones who falsely claim to have a physical location are best avoided.

If you’re locked out of a vehicle, use an auto service such as AAA or see if your insurance company covers auto lockouts.

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