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'I feel like they ripped me off'

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By [Herb Weisbaum](#)

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SEATTLE - They promise quick service at a fair price. The company even calls itself Dependable Locks. But customers tell KOMO 4 News the company is anything but dependable.

Last week, we warned you about a nationwide ring of locksmiths using a variety of names but working for Dependable Locks in New York.

Unhappy customers complain of price gouging and shoddy work. Friday night, the Hartmann family in Medina saw my story and recognized the man in the video as the guy who gouged them when he changed the locks at their house.

The Hartmann's had lost a key and needed to change all their door locks. They wanted a local locksmith to do the job.

So Sue Hartmann went online and searched for a locksmith in Bellevue. She landed on an ad for Seattlelocksmith.com. She says the price was reasonable.

"They quoted me \$39 for the service call, which I thought was fine. And they quoted me between \$19 and \$25 per lock," she said.

That would make the job \$205 at most. But the final bill was a whole lot more -- \$536.

"I feel like they ripped me off frankly," said Jerry Hartmann. "They quote a price and they get someone out here who sets an entirely different price."

Jerry Hartmann called the number on the receipt -- Dependable Locks in the Bronx -- to complain. He was told to write a letter.

"And I said, 'You have no intention of refunding the money do you?' And they said 'no.' "

Maria also had a run-in with Dependable Locks. In April, she locked her keys in the car with the engine running. Searching the yellow pages, she picked a company called "A1 Locksmith 24 Hours." It had a 206-area code, but it's really Dependable Locks.

Maria says the dispatcher would not give her a price quote.

"As soon as he arrived in an unmarked car and no uniform, I thought scam, this is a scam," she said.

The locksmith said he wanted \$110 before he did anything.

"I had a horrible problem and I needed it to be resolved and they were gypping me, they were using that against me," she said.

Maria says the so-called locksmith was very unprofessional. The proof of that is the scratches on the inside of her door. He also damaged the door.

"I actually took it into a shop and they bent it back, but the seal was open and water was leaking into my vehicle," she said.

We've called Dependable Locks several times about our investigation, but so far, no comment.

The Better Business Bureau says the company has an unsatisfactory business record.

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Tips for choosing a locksmith

What's in a name? Unscrupulous individuals often operate under many business names or aliases. They may answer the phone with a generic phrase like, "locksmith service" or simply "locksmith". If the call is answered this way, ask, "What is the legal name of your business."

Unclear advertising: Look closely at the ad(s) in the yellow pages. Is the specific name of the business clearly identified? Does the ad look similar to other ads but have a different name? Does it appear that the dealer actually operates under several names?

Unmarked car: Some legitimate locksmiths will work out of a car or unmarked van for quick jobs, but most should arrive in a service vehicle that is clearly marked with the name of the business.

Ask for identification: A legitimate locksmith should ask for identification and some form of proof that you have the authority to allow the unlocking to be done. A legitimate locksmith should also provide you with identification in the form of a business card or invoice with the company name on it. Identifying information should also match the name on the service vehicle.

Get an estimate: Find out what the work will cost before you authorize it. Never sign a blank form authorizing work.

Demand an invoice: Insist on an itemized invoice. You can't dispute a charge without proof of how much you paid and what you paid for.

Just say no: If you are not comfortable with the service provider, you can, and should, refuse to work with the locksmith.

Tips courtesy The Council of Better Business Bureaus