

ABC News: The Blotter

The Locksmith 'Mafia': Making an Estimate You Can't Refuse

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A New York City-based locksmith business has been squeezing out competitors and fleecing customers across the country, drawing nationwide outrage from consumers and professionals alike, according to the Council of Better Business Bureaus (CBBB).

The CBBB, a non-profit organization that provides information on businesses to the public, told the Blotter on ABCNews.com that Dependable Locksmith is the most notorious of a number of "bully" locksmith companies known by some as "the locksmith mafia."

A CBBB reliability report about Dependable Locksmith asserts the company advertises in cities across the U.S., using addresses that appear local but are often non-existent. According to the CBBB, dispatchers in these areas pose as independently-run neighborhood locksmiths, and their late arrivals, unmarked vans, excessive fees and insistence on cash-only payments mark the modus operandi of the organization.

Locksmiths as far as Denver "are literally afraid" to speak out against these companies because of their tactics, said Susan Liehe, spokesperson for the Denver BBB.

Liehe added, "These sole-proprietor locksmiths are introverted, insanely ethical people who regard this whole operation with apprehension, resentment and fear. When I spoke with them, they couldn't get off the phone quickly enough."

The attorneys general of Illinois and Ohio sued Dependable Locksmith in December 2005 and June 2006, respectively, for repeated alleged violations of laws concerning consumer protection and deceptive business practices.

The Ohio attorney general's case is currently pending. The company was ordered to pay \$2,875 in fines and cease its false advertising as a result of the Illinois attorney general's case, according to the CBBB.

"On the phone, they said it would cost \$35 to unlock my car," said Carol Pintar of Oak Creek, Wis. "The guy showed up wanting to get paid first, but said \$35 was just for coming out. He wanted another \$95 to open the door."

According to Pintar, when she came up short, the locksmith offered her a ride in his car to find an ATM. She declined, and the locksmith ultimately accepted a cash payment of \$95 total -- all the money Pintar had with her.

As of today, the CBBB reliability report for Dependable Locksmith shows more than 100 complaints filed within the last year. Only 12 have been fully resolved.

Dependable Locksmith did not return repeated phone calls from ABC News seeking comment.