

Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves

By James L. Hancock, CML

Who knew back in the 1970's when Cher sang this song that it would be so prophetic about the state of the locksmith industry today. We are involved in a struggle today that has the potential to set the locksmith profession's image back by decades and to indeed ruin the reputation that many legitimate companies have nurtured for years.

I am talking about the oft referred to "gypsy" locksmiths. If you are in a large metropolitan area you know the ones of which I speak. The "locksmiths" that go out and charge exorbitant prices for shoddy work and then use scare tactics on the elderly to collect these fees because the general public does not know any better. These are the same individuals and companies that have had many things written about them, many complaints lodged against them yet everyone is seemingly powerless to do anything to stop them. They operate under a cloak of mystery. The companies go by many different names with multiple phone numbers. In the telephone book ads, they generally show multiple service areas with different numbers for each but no real street address. They often have toll free numbers listed for their service and in the ad it usually say's "all calls answered at such and such address". If you use MapQuest or something similar, you find out quickly that the address does not exist in your city or any city that can be found for that matter. Gypsy, someone who has a nomadic or unconventional lifestyle, is how Webster's defines it. The locksmith industry seems to define it as a nuisance and a problem but because of the nomadic and almost transparent existence of these companies, a problem for which there is no easy solution. Again, those of you in the larger metropolitan areas know about these issues while those of you in the smaller areas have certainly heard about them so none of this is new. But the game is changing and I think the boldness with which these companies are going after customers will ultimately affect us all unless some we as an industry band together to inform the public.

In the last 6 weeks here in Austin, Texas, we have discovered just how underhanded these companies are willing to be and the lengths they will go to in order to make a

dollar. We had a consumer call us one day and ask that we come out to straighten out a problem we had supposedly repaired days earlier. When we told the customer we had no record of ever being there, she was adamant that it was our company that she called and that the technician even stated he was with our company when he arrived. We asked for a copy of the receipt and she said the technician informed her that his service vehicle was in for repairs and he was using his personal vehicle and had no receipt book. When we asked her for the phone number she called, she said she had Googled "Locksmiths in Austin" and called the number on our ad. We immediately did the same and sure enough, one of the top listings was for our company, with our web site but THE GYPSY COMPANY phone number. Somehow, they had managed to attach their number to our listing. We immediately got on the phone with Google only to discover that Google has no live support, only email. We sent emails to them to request the correction be made and thus far, 6 weeks removed, we have had zero response from them. The thought of legal action certainly crossed our minds but Google has a "Hold Harmless" disclaimer regarding erroneous info on their search engine results.

Since this incident, we have had about a half dozen other instances where people have called us regarding these "sub-contracted" technicians and either poor workmanship or wanting to know when we were coming back to finish a job. Each time, someone has called the bad number listed in the web search. When we have called this number, of course the first thing they do is deny it is happening and then say the Google search is simply a mistake. The last incident thus far actually happened yesterday. Once again, a customer called us and said one of his employees had scheduled for us to come out and was wondering when we would be there. When we told him we had no such call, he was adamant that the employee had called us. Upon further investigation, the employee had called the Google number. We told the customer that we were on the way and would take care of the issue. Once our technician arrived, he was told by our contact that our "other" technician would be arriving soon as well. As my legitimate employee stood in the wings waiting, the "other" technician arrived and was immediately stopped by security and asked if he worked for our company. He very confidently said yes. When asked to produce his ID, a State of Texas Locksmith License Pocket Card, he could not. When asked to produce something with our company name on it, he

could not. This person again gave the “service vehicle in the shop” story. Once security sent him away, our technician was asked and confirmed that the person was not in our employ and had no connection to our company. Regardless of what part of the world you are from, this is bold. And the scary part about this is these are the customers we know about. What about the ones that we do not know about. The ones that are not calling us back. . What about the customers who have had a bad experience and are now blaming us without cause? Our 60 plus year reputation could be in serious jeopardy and so could yours if this is happening to you.

Now the issue becomes, “how do you combat this?” We have personally tried to contact all of the local media sources; newspaper, television, radio, and tell them our story so that a consumer affairs story could be done to warn the public. This has thus far gone nowhere as the local media deems it as an issue between competing businesses. We have written to the national news media sources; ABC,NBC etc., and pitched the idea as a “Primetime Live” or “20/20” type segment in the vein of the bump key frenzy a few months back. Again, so far there has been no response. Here in Texas, where a license is required to do business as a locksmith, the natural remedy would be to contact the regulatory agency and turn it over to them, however as is the case in most places today, they are overworked and understaffed to the point that it may be weeks, months before the issue could be addressed and even then, who do you go after when the company has no valid local address. The same holds true with our associations. ALOA and the associations at the state and local levels are not in a position financially nor do they have the legal authority to do anything. So again, that leaves us with the question of what can be done. I will humbly offer some ideas and look forward to hearing from anyone that may have any other offerings.

We know that as individuals we do not have the same strength as we do as a group. What if in your community, you rally all of the legitimate locksmiths together and take out an ad in the local newspaper(s). I do not mean a small business card ad but rather a quarter page or larger and run it on a Sunday, the most heavily read day of the week. Or even a couple of Sundays in a row. Use the ad to warn the public about the “Fraudulent Service Companies” in your area, making sure to include every company

name and phone number for the companies that contribute. Much as you would like, you can not name the “gypsy” companies without the possibility of lawsuits. If you live in a state where licensing is required, stress in the ad for the consumer to check for a license before contracting work. Although ad space in the newspaper is not cheap by any means, banded together with enough people, the expense could be palatable. It certainly could offset the amount of income you may be or are already losing to these Thieves.

Another idea that would certainly take care of your existing customer base is to send out mass emails and faxes to them warning them of the issues and reinforcing to them your phone number and address. Again, this takes care of the existing customers but does nothing for the general public; however between you and your legitimate competitors, it would probably cover a large percentage of the population.

Are there any other ideas out there? I would love to hear them. You can email me at jimh@cothrons.net. I truly believe that the only way to make a dent in this issue is to hit the pocketbook of the parent company and not just the local guys running the calls. To paraphrase a well known underworld hit man, “you cut off the head of the dog, the tail stops wagging”. If you only attack the local guys and are successful running them off, someone else just moves in to take his place.

As always, these opinions are expressly mine and in no way reflect any position taken by ALOA or any other organization. Also, to those of you that know me and are shocked by the fact that I know a song by Cher, I am a reformed musician and plead the fifth.

Addendum:

After writing the above article, as therapeutic as it was to get it out, I was still very angry and could not let it go, so we took another step that may help some of you in the future. Here in Austin, we have affiliates for all 4 major television networks, ABC,NBC,CBS and Fox as well as a local cable 24 hour news station. I got on the phone and also emailed all of them regarding the local situation and the national implications as well. Three of the stations contacted me to

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get more information. Two of them actually did a story on the issue. The local cable news station has put it into heavy rotation and it plays approximately every 30 minutes. It was done very much in the style of “ambush journalism” whereby the reporter sets up the bogus company and gets them to trip on their own words when they show up to do work. He also called various “800” numbers listed on the web that supposedly were in Austin but had no legitimate address. It was GREAT! It may not stop all or any of these gypsies from operating in Central Texas but because this station is viewed by anyone sitting in a waiting room in a local doctor’s office, the hospitals, car dealers and pretty much anywhere there is a television for customers in waiting areas in town, the public is getting a chance to be made aware of the issue in a big way. If you would like information on how we approached the media to get them to see this as an important story, feel free to contact me and I will gladly share what I can as this has now become a mission for me.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *ALOA has been tackling this issue for over three years now. We refer to them as “phony locksmiths” to separate them from legitimate locksmiths. ALOA Legislative Manager, Tim McMullen, JD, CAE recently presented at the National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) Consumer Protection meeting in San Antonio, TX on October 27, 2008, to 68 Assistant Attorneys General representing 35 states and the District of Columbia. There were also a number of representatives from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Over half had not been briefed on the issue of “phony locksmiths” before. In his presentation Tim highlighted this nationwide epidemic and emphasized the false listing of address’ used by the “phony locksmiths” to appear local. He had an example of a locksmith storefront that listed an address just one block from the hotel where he was making his presentation. The address turned out to be a delicatessen. For more information and to find resources on what you can do to combat these scam operations, go to <http://www.aloa.org/legislation/pressroom.php>*