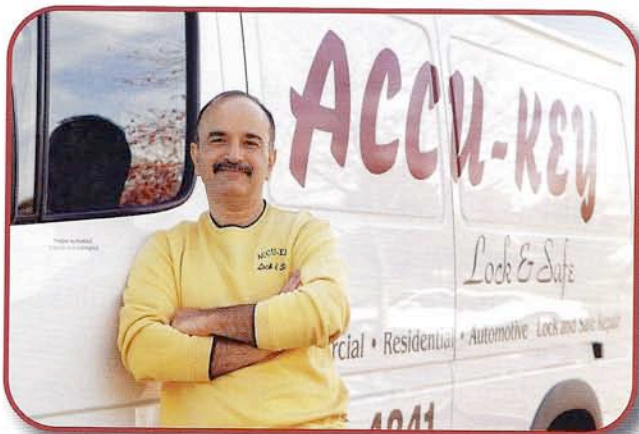


member SPOTLIGHT

ALOA 2008 Best Mobile Van winner



Congratulations go to Mehdi Zahedi, CRL whose van was chosen by the members of ALOA as the inaugural winner of the "2008 Best Mobile Van in the World". ALOA Northeast Director, Bob DeWeese, CML, CPS, arranged for the following interview:

What prompted you to enter this ALOA contest? Will you enter again?

My van is my mobile store front, and I take pride in what I do. I receive a lot of compliments from customers for my van, but winning this award is a greater honor because my van was picked by other locksmiths as the best. I will definitely enter the contest again.

What recommendations would you make to someone who is just starting their mobile business?

Buy the best key machines. It is the heart of your business. Dress clean and professionally. Be truthful with your customers in your words, and actions. Never stop learning about your trade. Prepare to be available to the customer when the other locksmith is sleeping, at the movies, or out of town. Spend the time it takes to give quality service, and don't be afraid to charge accordingly.

Mehdi Zahedi, CRL
Accu-Key Lock & Safe Inc
Kettering, OH www.

Tell us about your background in security and your experience in locksmithing?

I am An ALOA and SAVTA member. I have been in this profession full time for 19 years. Other than commercial and residential lock servicing, we do a fair amount of safe work these days. I am a certified GSA inspector, and with Wright Patterson Air Force Base in the area, I get some work from them, and quite a bit more from their outside contractors. Automotive work used to be 30% of the business, but safes have taken the place of that for the most part.

How long have you had your business? 17 years.

What was your starting point in security? In 1989 I walked into Centerville Lock & Safe to purchase some Foley Belsaw blade sharpening equipment. I talked to the owner Roger Krass, and told him that I had tried to learn locksmithing through a correspondence course, but was not able to finish it. After talking with me a while, he hired me as his shop man, and I started the following Monday. I feel fortunate to have worked for Roger. Having someone to look over your shoulder and teaching you the trade by the book is a big plus in any business.



What was your most unusual locksmith job? And how did you handle the situation?

The first year I was in business, on a very cold snowy night, I received a call to open a trunk of a Ford Taurus. The lady said she was sure the keys were in the trunk because she could not find them anywhere else in the house. It was very cold, and she was shivering, so I told her that she could wait inside, and I would call her when the trunk opened. She had not made it to the front door of her house when I opened the trunk and called her back, but for a few seconds the trunk lid was blocking our view of each other. The keys were not in the trunk, and she said that she would look some more in the house. Later that night she called back and asked how much it would cost to make keys to her car, but before I was able to answer she proceeded to say that she was sure the locksmith that was there earlier had taken her keys. I told her that she was calling the same person, and asked her to stop calling all the shops in town, and accusing me of theft. I went over the next day, and made a set of keys for her car at no charge, and even gave her the money I had collected the night before. I further told her that I wanted nothing to do with her or her money, and not to call me for service again. Being a new locksmith in town I could not take a chance at other lock shop owners thinking that they had a crook among them. Today I know most of the other locksmiths in town, and most of my customers know me by name. I might handle the situation differently today. Since that incidence, I learned not to open a car, or work on a safe without the owner standing next to me.

What are the changes that you've noticed in the security technology recently?

I think technology changes more rapidly now than it did twenty years ago. Luckily there are a lot more reference books to help us with our daily tasks. Remembering wafer locations in automotive locks manufactured prior to 1995 was pretty easy. I can't imagine doing automotive locksmithing today without a reference book next to me.

What do you see as the future of security and where do you think we are headed in today's age of technology?

I think as the prices come down, more companies will move towards electronic access control, and in order to stay competitive with alarm companies locksmiths



need to keep up with new technology, and be more diversified in the products, and services they offer.

How do you stay informed about new products and security techniques? i.e. magazines, conventions, classes, etc.

I read the trades magazines, take classes at the ALOA convention, and tech schools. I think one of the best things that has come along in our industry is Clearstar Security Network. On a busy day I find it easy to post a question and receive an answer from other locksmiths all over the world. Even though I have not met many of the locksmiths

that I talk to on Clearstar, I know I have friends all over U.S. and as far away as Australia that help me with a repair problem, or send me a part that is not readily available from a wholesaler.

Do you find that other locksmiths in your area work together on referrals and work flow?

It has been the number one most effective concept for us in Dayton. Even on the busiest day, if I can't help a customer myself, I would take the time to give the caller phone numbers for locksmith friends of mine in the area, or as far as Cincinnati 50 miles away. This is true for all our members at the local Ohio Valley Chapter of ALOA.

How has life changed for you as a security professional in the past year?

Life is good, work is plentiful, and business is growing.

How do you sell security to the public?

The yellow pages, and referrals are all the advertising I need. I never intended to have employees, and as a rule I have all the work that one person can handle.

What do you like most about your job?

In this business every day can present new challenges. I love driving around town, and meeting new people. It's nice not to have to stare at the same gray four cubicle walls all day. 40 to 60% of my daily work is from repeat customers. I tell everyone that I get to visit with my friends, and get paid to do it.



What do you think is the biggest obstacle facing security professionals, if any?

Legislation put together by other trades that would affect our industry.

Can you remember your first big security job? What can you tell us about it?

I had missed the deadline for the Yellow pages the first year I was in business, and I passed as many business cards as could locally. The owner of a roofing company that is still my customer today, called and asked if I could cut down on the number of keys he had for his building. It took two days to install some locks, and masterkey their place of business, and I collected for my first \$500 job. By comparison, a few months ago I installed a CDXO9 unit, and an electrified Locknetics lock with audit trail capability on a sound proof door. It took a full day, and I collected \$5500.

Have you personally run into issues with bump keys which have recently been featured in the news? How do you feel about this issue?

I've had some inquiry from customers, but have not seen any rise in sales because of it. There has not been any break-ins associated with bump keys in our area that I have heard of.

How do you feel about the issue of phony locksmiths? And how do you think this affects the locksmith industry?

It is a big problem, and I believe we might have one in our area right now. This is why it is important to be part of ALOA, and your local chapter. We discuss these issues in our meeting every month, and bring it to the attention of proper authorities when possible.

What methods have you incorporated into your day to day business that demonstrates your professionalism and level of experience to your customers?

Being a one man outfit, I think it is helpful that the customer knows they will be dealing with the same person every time they call. I make sure I am on time, and if I am running late I will call and let them know. I only install products that I can stand behind, and other than electronic locks all parts purchased, and installed by us receive a one year

warranty on parts and labor. Even still, I have replaced parts for free months after the warranty has run out. I first satisfy myself in knowing that the customer has received what they paid for, and as a rule that exceeds the customer's expectations. Most of the parts I buy come from U.S. Lock. I am happy to say that I have been dealing with the same rep Sophia Arnold for the past 15 years. It would be impossible for any locksmith shop to take care of their customers needs without a good relationship with their wholesaler.

Name a few things that you think locksmith business owners should do to help their businesses prosper and grow.

Educate yourself, and your employees. Give your employees incentives for plus selling when they are at the job site. Embrace change.

How long have you been a member of ALOA? How has your membership benefited you or your business?

I have been an ALOA member since 1992, just a few months after I started the business. Other than the trade shows, and classes that ALOA offers, I think it is important for all of us to know that at this very moment the alarm industry, and electrician unions are working hard on passing legislation across the United States that would benefit them, and could care less about our trade. We need a united front in our industry to keep an eye on their movement, and to speak for us when possible. To me that is Associated Locksmiths of America.

What is the thing(s) you like most about where you live and conduct your business? Why?

Dayton is the right size town for me. We get our four seasons. People are friendly, and traffic jams are minimal. Even though some of the larger companies are having a hard time, we have seen a steady growth in our business over the last 17 years. I believe the next few years will be testing grounds for all of us who run a business in this country. At this time I don't foresee making any changes.

Credit for the photos goes to John E. Johnston a former ALOA member and a locksmith until a few years ago when he changed professions and went into photography.

