

SCAM TRACKER



Could Your Alarm System Make You a Target for Thieves?

GOT A SIGN IN YOUR FRONT YARD warning would-be burglars that your house is protected by an electronic alarm system? It's there to keep you safe, but that sign may actually make you a target for a home-security scam.

In the latest twist, criminals are checking out yard signs, which often have the original installation date printed on the back. Then they strike by ringing doorbells and pretending to be from the company. Be on the lookout for these scammers:

Fraudulent 'technicians.' If someone claiming to be from your security company shows up and says that its computer noticed glitches in your system, watch out. His goal is to con you into letting him into your house to "fix" your alarm. Instead, he's going to tamper with it so that he can come back and steal from you.

Unscrupulous 'sales agents.' Those tricksters pretend that they need to "upgrade" your system. That's unlikely, because most reputable companies call to make an appointment before sending a representative. He actually wants to pressure you into signing a new monitoring contract—often with a different company—at inflated prices and with a five-year term or longer. People who sign those deals often find they can't get out of the contract without paying a penalty.

Phony 'system installers.' Their spiel is that your original installer has gone out of business. The imposter will tell you that his firm has taken over the contract and that you have to buy new equipment and sign a new contract—at a higher price and with a long-term lock-in.

Some con artists take a deposit for a new security system and are never heard from again. So don't be fooled into handing over cash to someone who shows up at your door. Remember, legitimate companies don't send a repairman unannounced. If your monitoring company has gone out of business, you will be notified by phone or mail.

Here are other ways to protect yourself:

- **Request references.** Ask any salesperson who appears at your door for names of neighbors that his company has serviced. Before you commit to any work, check with them to get their impression of the equipment and service.

- **Make sure contractors are legit.** Always ask for a license. Look for the number, the state where he's registered, and the name under which the license is filed. Also insist that all estimates for service and equipment be put in writing specifying the equipment, who will install it, how it will be maintained, and—of course—how much it will cost.

- **Read the fine print.** Make sure that everything you have agreed to is written into the contract. Read it closely for commitments you may have missed, such as monitoring fees and your right to cancel the deal.

If you have regrets, you're entitled to change your mind. The Federal Trade Commission's Cooling-Off Rule gives you three business days to cancel a deal if you sign a contract in your home or at a location that's not the seller's permanent place of business. And don't worry; you can change your mind even if the equipment has already been installed.

PACKAGING PLOYS

The Price of Premium Pasta

Pasta has a special place in many holiday meals. But does it pay to celebrate with a fancy brand? To find out, our experts compared regular pasta with a pricier new premium line.

THE TEST We pitted one of Barilla's Collezione Regional Specialties, Abruzzo-inspired Spaghetti Alla Chitarra, known for its distinctive square shape, against plain Barilla Thick Spaghetti. The former is pressed through a bronze die to create a coarse texture similar to homemade pasta, according to the company. Both products contain the exact same ingredients and are nutritionally identical.

The fancy pasta comes in an elegant dark-blue box emblazoned with gold lettering and a gold seal with a map of Italy, accompanied by the words, "Inspired by Abruzzo, Italy." At \$2.33 per pound (the price we paid locally) vs. \$1.49 for the regular version, you may think it came right off the boat. Nope; it's made in the U.S., though the company says its wheat blend and manufacturing equipment resemble those from its plant in Parma, Italy.

For our test, technicians cooked a half-pound of each pasta according to the manufacturer's directions, then served them twice in blind taste tests—sans sauce—to trained sensory panels.

THE VERDICT Our experts found both products quite similar in taste and texture, and concluded that most people wouldn't notice a difference between them, especially with added sauce. The only real distinction between Spaghetti Alla Chitarra and Thick Spaghetti is the shape of the pasta—and the price. At 84 cents more per pound (and at some stores, we found a much greater price difference), the Alla Chitarra hardly warrants the premium.



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