

A Consumer Guide to Purchasing a Burglar Alarm System and Understanding False Alarms

Produced by the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA)

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What You Should Know and Ask Before You Sign on the Dotted Line

A burglar alarm system can bring you a sense of security and peace of mind. It is an effective tool with proper installation, adequate training and regular maintenance. Poorly used, installed, or maintained systems can cause significant problems for you, public safety agencies and your alarm company. Therefore, it is important for consumers to do their homework **before** buying or installing an alarm system.

Do not buy out of fear! It is often our first reaction to purchase an alarm system after being burglarized. Unfortunately, this is when we are most vulnerable. Consider the following:

- What environmental factors need to be taken into consideration?
- What will your budget allow in terms of buying or leasing a system?
- What will your monthly monitoring costs be?
- Take your time and be sure you know what kind of system is right for you.

Before purchasing an alarm system, contact your local public safety agency and Better Business Bureau or Office of Consumer Affairs. Some public safety agencies track the false alarm rates of alarm companies. False alarms are an indicator of the quality of the alarm installation and user education. Consumer offices can usually tell you the nature of and how many complaints have been filed against an alarm company with whom you may be considering doing business. The consumer office should also be able to tell you if those filed complaints, if any, were satisfactorily resolved or not. You may then take the information you learn from the above sources and make a much more informed decision about the company you select to install and monitor your alarm system.

Inquire if your state requires alarm companies to be licensed. Some public safety agencies also require local licensing, which may be in addition to any licensing required on a state level. If the alarm company or its employees are not licensed as required, they may not have submitted to background and fingerprint checks or even be qualified to install an alarm system. To protect your rights, be sure all required licenses and permits have been obtained.

If your alarm system will be monitored, either by your installing company or by a third-party monitoring center, be sure to find out the length of the contract. Typically, monitoring contracts are between two to five years in length.

- What is your recourse if you are not satisfied with the services provided?
- Can you cancel the contract?
- Under what circumstances can you cancel the contract?
- What are your rights if your monitoring company is purchased or acquired by another alarm company?

These are the types of questions you need to consider before you obligate yourself to a long-term contract. Most important, read and understand your entire contract before signing it.

Most alarm/monitoring companies will attempt to verify the validity of an alarm signal prior to requesting public safety dispatch by placing a call to the alarm site. Some alarm companies have voluntarily elected to employ a more effective form of verification, called Enhanced Call Verification (ECV), whereby the monitoring companies first call the alarm site, and if unable to reach a responsible party, will then call a second telephone number (usually a cell phone) in an attempt to avoid an unnecessary dispatch request. ECV has proven very effective in reducing the number of false alarms to which public safety responds and should be considered standard in any monitoring contract you sign. If ECV is not a standard practice for the company you choose, you can request the use of ECV for your alarm account, in order to reduce your chances of a false alarm.

The following chart has been developed in an effort to aid you in the selection of an alarm company and alarm system components and provides you with a guideline of the types of questions you should ask. Be a smart consumer!

- Comparison shop for things such as best price, features you want and most favorable monitoring terms and conditions.

- Look for alarm companies that take false alarms seriously and have false alarm reduction plans in effect.
- Talk with at least two different alarm companies and get written estimates.
- Ask who your contact will be for ongoing training, service and support.

Space is provided in the chart for you to record the answers to your questions for later comparison.

Comparison Shopping Guide

Question	Company		
	1	2	3
Knowledge About the Alarm Installation Company			
Are the alarm installation company and its employees licensed by your state and/or local public safety agency, if required by law?			
Have you checked on the alarm company's complaint record, if any, with the local Better Business Bureau or Consumer Affairs Office?			
Will the alarm company provide references?			
How long has the alarm company been in business?			
Will the installing company provide monitoring? (If not, proceed to the next section.)			
Does the alarm company attempt verification on alarm signals prior to requesting public safety dispatch?			
Does the alarm company employ the use of Enhanced Call Verification?			
Will the alarm company attempt to cancel the call with the public safety agency if it is determined to be a false alarm?			
Knowledge About the Monitoring Company			
The monitoring company and its employees licensed by your state and/or local public safety agency, if required by law?			
Have you checked on the monitoring company's complaint record, if any, with the local Better Business Bureau and/or Consumer Affairs Office?			
Will the monitoring company provide references?			
How long has the monitoring company been in business?			
Where is the monitoring station located?			
What is the phone number for the monitoring station?			
Is there a local representative for the monitoring company?			
Name and phone number of contact.			
Does the monitoring company attempt verification on alarm signals prior to requesting public safety dispatch?			
Does the monitoring company employ the use of Enhanced Call Verification?			
Will the monitoring company attempt to cancel the call with the public safety agency if it is determined to be a false alarm?			
Your Local Law Enforcement			
Did the alarm salesperson guarantee public safety response time?			
What is the alarm company's false alarm rate with your local public safety agency, if available?			
Will you have a trial testing period during which you can practice using your system without worrying about public safety being dispatched?			
Were you advised of the requirements for alarm user permits or registrations, if any?			
Will the alarm company assist you in obtaining the proper permits and/or registrations?			
Do you know the fines, fees, and penalties for false alarms, if any?			
Alarm System Contract			
What is the length of the contract?			
Do you know the terms if you should cancel the contract early?			
Do you know the warranty terms and length?			
Is there a service plan after the warranty expires?			
Do you have any recourse if you are not satisfied with the services provided?			
Can you cancel your contract if you are not satisfied with the services provided?			
Are all promises made by the sales representative located in writing within the contract?			
Alarm System Costs			
Do you know the full cost of the alarm system? (get itemization)			
Would you be purchasing or leasing the alarm system?			

Question	Company		
	1	2	3
What is the cost of an annual service contract?			
If there is no maintenance agreement, do you know the charge for service calls, labor, parts, mileage?			
Is there an extra charge for service outside normal business hours?			
What is the response time for service calls?			
Does the monitoring company charge for calls to your local public safety agency?			
How much is the monthly monitoring fee?			
Will the alarm company pay the false alarm fines caused by faulty installation, equipment or technician error?			
System Components			
How many window and/or door contacts are in the proposed system?			
How many motion detectors are recommended and are they dual technology motion sensors?			
Is the system zone specific or are all zones compiled into one?			
Are there pets, plants, heating, cooling in the environment, which may affect the installation and operation of motion detectors?			
How many sirens are recommended?			
Does the system have dual technology glass break detectors?			
Is closed circuit TV an option?			
Are there video and/or audio verification capabilities?			

Understanding False Alarms

Though alarm systems are effective with proper installation, training, and maintenance, false alarms are a tremendous drain on public safety resources and can cause strained relationships between you and public safety. Consumers need to take responsibility for their alarm systems and be aware of the ramifications of false alarms and how they affect public safety response.

False alarms are caused by a number of reasons:

- Errors by employees, cleaning crews, friends, caretakers, maintenance employees, delivery personnel, contractors, landscapers and apartment management.
- Relatives with a key to your home who have no knowledge of your alarm system.
- Pets, rodents, bugs and/or wildlife.
- Items within your home or business that may move into the path of a motion sensor, i.e., balloons, signs, curtains, holiday decorations, etc.
- Open windows.
- Unlatched or defective doors or windows.
- User error.
- Faulty, defective or malfunctioning equipment.
- Lack of adequate training.
- Lack of proper maintenance, including battery replacement.
- Questionable system design and equipment installation practices.

The few examples listed above are examples of significant causes of false alarms to which public safety agencies respond.

You can be part of the solution and avoid becoming part of the false alarm problem by asking some simple questions about all the companies you are considering before you buy or lease an alarm system.

- Ask each alarm company how the system they propose avoids false alarms.
- Ask how you can operate the alarm system in order to avoid false alarms.
- Ask your local police department what the false alarm rate is for the company(s) you are considering.

Be sure you know what you are buying, how much it will cost, and the level of support you will receive after you are a customer. Being an informed consumer and cognizant of your responsibilities and those of your alarm company will help you decide what system and features are right for you. Doing your homework before signing on the dotted line is a consumer's best defense (*caveat emptor*).

Glossary of Terms

Some common terms are defined here to help you understand alarms and alarm system activation processes. For a much more comprehensive glossary of terms, visit the FARA web site at www.faraonline.org. From the Home page, select Consumer Tips, which contains a huge amount of educational information designed to help you better understand alarms and make the right decision for you.

Cancellation: Your alarm company and/or monitoring company calls your public safety agency to notify that there is not an emergency at the alarm site requiring public agency presence. (This is a call back to the law enforcement agency after an initial request for dispatch.) Many public safety agencies do not issue false alarm fines for a cancelled police dispatch.

Dual Technology Glass Break Detectors: Uses two sensors that combine two different technologies to sense glass breaking. These are generally believed to be more reliable and less prone to false alarms.

Dual Technology Motion Sensors: Uses two different technologies to detect motion. The most common devices require heat and motion to set off the alarm. These are generally believed to be more reliable and less prone to false alarms.

Enhanced Call Verification: An attempt, by the alarm monitoring company representative, to contact the alarm site before requesting public safety dispatch, and if no contact is made with a responsible party, a call is made to another telephone number (usually an alarm user's cell phone) in an attempt to avoid an unnecessary dispatch.

False Alarm: An alarm dispatch request to a law enforcement agency when the responding law enforcement officer finds no evidence of a criminal offense or attempted criminal offense.

False Alarm Rates: Your local public safety agency may have the software capability to track the number of false alarms from customers of a particular alarm company. This rating would indicate how well one alarm company does against other local alarm companies in the area of false alarms.

Leasing an Alarm System: Rental of alarm equipment for a period of time. At the end of the contract, the alarm company may remove equipment if the contract is cancelled.

Monitoring: The operator receives your alarm signal and contacts your local public safety agency to request a dispatch to your alarm site. This location is usually referred to as the "Central Station" and may be located in another state.

Permits or Registration: Many public safety agencies require the alarm user or the alarm company to obtain a permit or registration to operate an alarm system. Some are renewable while others do not expire until the alarm user changes. A fee may be charged.

Purchasing an Alarm System: The customer pays for the alarm system and owns all components.

Verification: An attempt, by the alarm and/or monitoring company representative, to contact the alarm site telephonically or by other electronic means before requesting public safety dispatch, in an attempt to avoid an unnecessary dispatch.

Video/Audio Verification: Some alarm systems allow the monitoring company to "see" (video) and/or "hear" (audio) into the protected site once an alarm activation occurs.

Zones: Pinpointing the specific location from which an alarm signal is transmitted.

For More Information Contact:

For more information on this topic or other matters related to alarm management, please contact FARA.

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