

# HOW TO START YOUR OWN MOBILE LOCKSMITHING SERVICE

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## **HOW TO START YOUR OWN MOBILE LOCKSMITHING SERVICE**

The locks on the doors of most homes keep the skilled burglar out for about 30 seconds! This is especially true if the only thing slowing him down is a standard key-in-the-knob lock.

Statistically, there's about one residential burglary every 30 seconds in this country. Traditionally, as the economy falters and times get harder, the number tends to rise.

Quite naturally, people are concerned and frightened. As a result, locksmithing is not only one of the new "demand" businesses, it's rapidly becoming one of the more profitable businesses for entrepreneurs with not too much capital to invest .

Today's locksmiths are usually well versed in mathematics and basic electronics. They almost have to be, what with the new types of locks being introduced. Today's locksmith is more likely to be known as a "Security Specialist", than as just ordinary locksmith, as in the past .

Even so, most locksmithing businesses are still one-man operations. In many instances, it's a husband and wife family affair, with the husband handling the mechanical end and the wife the books and financial end of the business. Most of these small operations concentrate on the repair side of the business, and deliberately choose to remain small in size. As we will discuss later, however, this need not be the case; these small businesses can "grow up."

According to the area in which he is located, an established, well organized and trained locksmith may gross between \$50,000 and \$60,000 per year, using a van as a mobile "workshop," and space in his home as an office. Remember: As the economy turns toward recession, burglaries increase and people become aware of the need for better locks to protect what they own; thus the locksmith enjoys an increased income during hard times.

Just because locksmithing is a "personal" kind of business, and can be started on a shoestring and operated out of the home, that's not to say that a locksmithing service cannot be developed into a million dollar business. On the contrary, there are a number of operations in some of the larger metropolitan areas that have several mobile locksmith vans on the road, in addition to retail store locations. These operations are grossing well into the million dollar figures every year.

It's a matter of desire, determination and personal fulfillment and satisfaction. Attitude, marketing skills and general business knowledge are also positive attributes necessary for real success. Very definitely, the sharp businessman with determined ambition can dominate any market with a modern locksmithing service.

The key ingredient to this business is the utilization of proper marketing and selling skills. It goes without saying: You can know all there is about the mechanical functioning of a business, but without innovative marketing and selling skills, your business will surely flounder.

However, given the marketing know-how, plus persistent sales efforts, you can succeed in this business with the knowledge you can acquire of the technical side. The success of any business

is built upon the marketing and sales expertise of its founder, because after all, "mechanics" can always be hired, if you decide to go that route rather than learn the trade and the business.

Your marketing efforts should stress the theme that your services will allay the fears of your buyers. You want to get across to your prospective customers the sense of security your service will provide. You can make them safe in their own homes; no longer will they have to worry about being rudely awakened in the middle of the night by a burglar rustling around in their house; no longer will they have to worry about coming home to a house that's been cleaned out or ransacked.

Once you understand that fear is a basic human instinct, it's easy to see that virtually everyone can be a prospect for your services as a locksmith. Your potential market includes everyone in your area, because everyone has possessions. So every homeowner, every apartment dweller, every business owner, all the schools, churches, government institutions, and a wide variety of other commercial and industrial accounts can be yours.

In this day and age, new homeowners and apartment dwellers want the locks changed the day they move in, so that former occupants and other keyholders will not have access to their place. In addition, there will probably be the need for additional keys for each member of the new family, now that new, safer locks have been installed.

Commercial and industrial accounts present an even more lucrative market. Larger companies tend to want their keys "departmentalized," so that office workers can get into the building on weekends, but not into the factory or shipping areas, and vice versa. Banks and savings institutions frequently need the safe deposit locks changed.

Generally speaking, newcomers to this field should focus their efforts on the commercial and industrial area as soon as possible. The commercial market is vast, and often up for grabs in many areas. In addition, the profit margins in these areas are excellent! With one of these accounts you'll have work paying about \$500 or more per visit, compared with \$25 to \$50 per visit for a residential job. With commercial/industrial accounts, there's also the possibility of ongoing service and maintenance. Definitely, the commercial/industrial business is well worth going after, and can put your business in the black very rapidly. However, it does take aggressiveness, and the determination to sell these accounts.

Start small. Consider working out of your home in the beginning. Most of today's successful locksmiths began by working out of their homes, with the family car or van outfitted with the tools and equipment needed. Such an approach will enable you to get started for as little as \$1,000. You should be aware however, that this is just a beginning, and not all it's going to take to really establish your business. With this level of investment, you're more or less limited in the business you can handle and the money you can make. Locksmiths who want to make the really big money should be investing all their early profits into more equipment and inventory up to a level where they can offer complete full-service locksmithing. Such a business would require at least \$5,000 in equipment, perhaps even \$10,000, depending on how many different services you want to offer. This estimate for start-up costs does not include your van or inventory of spare parts and new locks.

Perhaps a quick word of caution is in order here. You've no doubt seen or heard some of the advertisements promising all kinds of big money to be made with your own locksmithing service; "Just send for the learn-at-home correspondence course, and you'll be home free." It's true that you can earn big money in this business, but as we've noted earlier, without a lot of sharp marketing and selling expertise, plus at least the essential equipment to handle the kind of work these courses teach, enrolling in one of these courses will put you no further ahead than you are right now. This business requires equipment and knowledge.

You can make excellent money as a locksmith, so long as you operate your business capably and in a professional manner. But without a full line of the equipment required to handle a wide variety of jobs, you will be limiting your total income potential. The more you invest in quality equipment, the more different kinds of jobs you can handle, and thus the more money you'll be capable of making.

This is definitely a business in which you decide for yourself exactly how far and how fast you want to go. As we've said, some operators are perfectly content to work out of their homes, using a mobile van. They don't want the larger problems involved in hiring employees, or the expense of maintaining a retail location.

But to make the really big money in this business, starting small and working out of your home, you should plan to put more mobile trucks on the road, and as soon as possible, open a retail location. Each mobile van will give you another satellite business, and a retail location will afford you a base headquarters for your mobile vans.

It is of the utmost importance that you build and maintain a professional image as a quality locksmithing operation from the start. Clinging to the craftsman type of image will be of advantage only if you wish to stay in the "Mom and Pop" category.

You should endeavor to handle all jobs as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Outfitting yourself and your help in sharp looking uniforms will help. Making your calls in a clean, well-organized van will also play an important part in the image your customers have of your business. You want your customers to have confidence in your business, and in the quality of work you do for them. When they do, you'll find they are more likely to pay their bills with fewer reminders.

Think of it like this: A large invoice presented by a man in a clean uniform who drives up in a good looking truck and does quality work is going to be paid more readily than one for \$25 presented by a guy in grubby jeans who drove up in a 10-year old decrepit truck.

With so many technological changes occurring within this field on an almost monthly basis, it's to your advantage to stay on top of what's happening within the locksmithing field. This means subscribing to some of the better trade publications. You should be attending the various Locksmithing Association promoted seminars and workshops that offer on-going help in both the technical and financial side of this business. In other words, you should plan to keep yourself up to date with a program of continuous learning.

There are several ways to get started in this business. You can buy an existing operation from a retiring craftsman. Ask him to help you with the technical side of the operation while you spend most of your time actively promoting and managing the business. Or, you can hire the

technical help you need, and the sales force to build the business while you do the managing. You can enroll in one of the popular correspondence courses, become involved in the business as you learn from the various trade publications, and progress at your own speed. Our recommendation is that you learn the fiscal and management side of the business, and hire others to handle the mechanical or technical side. Thus the purpose of this report is to indoctrinate you on the business side. To explain the technical details of this business would take volumes, and probably much of the information contained would be out-dated by the time it came off the press.

However, we will provide you with an outline of the most common types of jobs a locksmith should be able to handle.

**RECOMBINATION LOCKS:** A customer may want to change an existing lock to work off a new key - the most common type of lock being the key-in-the-knob cylinder or pin tumbler lock. When the proper key is inserted in the keyway, spring-loaded pins are pushed up and out of the cylinder, allowing the plug to turn, and opening the lock. When recombining, you're changing the depth of these pins so that a new key is the only one that will work. Most house, auto and padlocks are the pin-tumbler variety. Different brands of locks use different depths, spaces and keyways. But with a given brand of lock, up to 50,000 variations exist. Thus, it's not always necessary to change to a new lock.

**COMBINATING ALIKE:** Some customers will have a house or a business with several different locks and keys, none of them alike or using the same key. Sometimes these people will want to change to a system that will require the least number of keys to carry around. Here, you'll be required to change the key coding so that one key works all the locks. Sometimes this requires the installation of common door hardware; however, in most cases, you'll find the same brand of locks are used throughout the building.

**MASTERKEYING:** Apartment owners and other commercial accounts may want dual key access. This is done by using locks with dual pin tumbler sets. One works with the apartment key, the other with the master key. Keys are spoken of in terms of code numbers. These are sets of digits reflecting the depth of serrations. A given lock in a master key setup might respond, for example, to keys with code numbers 1-2-3-4-5 and 6-7-6-9. Mathematical progressions are used in master keying .

**LOCKOUTS:** Frequently a person finds himself locked out of his home, office, warehouse, car, etc. Invariably this happens at odd hours of the day or night. So opening locks at odd hours of the day and night will be a role you'll definitely play in the lives of your customers. A typical pin tumbler lock can generally be picked open in about 30 seconds, using either picks or a single piece of spring steel and good wrist work. All locks have tolerances and variations in manufacture which allow you to push the cylinder pins up out of the way while exerting a turning pressure on the cylinder itself.

**AUTOMOBILE LOCKOUTS:** This problem occurs frequently and will require a different procedure. A tool called a "Slim Shim" is often used here, and works on most domestic and many foreign cars. This is pushed down between the glass and the weather stripping on the door far enough to reach the back of the lock cylinder on the door. You simply push down or pull up . A "button popper" is also used, worked through the weather stripping on vent windows in the older cars, and angled back to the latch button.

**LOCK INSTALLATION:** Much of your time will be spent installing new locks and door hardware. In many cases, homeowners and business people will want to upgrade their security with the latest model hardware for older homes, offices and other buildings. Many locksmiths get involved in new construction of apartment houses, condominiums, shopping centers, and the like. Often you'll be adding more security to an existing door, such as installing a deadbolt lock .

**PANIC BARS AND DOOR CLOSERS:** Many locksmiths working the commercial or industrial market get involved in the repair and installation of panic bars in public access areas. Panic bars are those large metal bars you push on to open the outside doors of many public buildings. Door closers are those hydraulic devices mounted at the top of these doors which return the door to the closed position after it has been opened.

**ALARMS, SAFES and VAULTS:** The sale and installation of alarms are a natural adjunct to the locksmithing business. Many larger locksmithing operations move into this area, which is somewhat specialized. Alarms can be the "perimeter" type, which sound when a door is opened after hours, or "area" alarms. "Space" or "area" protection is generally preferred, and involves infrared, ultrasonic or microwave sensors triggering alarms by detecting movement.

Safe and vault work is another specialty. Some locksmiths have major banks and savings and loan associations as clients. They spend a good deal of their time changing safe deposit box locks and maintaining vaults and the like. Gaining in popularity is the sale and service of safes for home and business use. You will be exposed to all these specialties and to new technology at seminars, conventions and workshops .

**HIGH SECURITY work:** A typical locksmith is a "general practitioner," while the high-security locksmith is a "specialist." High security work is often done for major corporations, government institutions, large banks, race tracks, museums and wealthy private individuals who desire maximum security. Often this work involves access control systems using card readers or voice print equipment, possibly combined with electronic push-button locks that work off a combination of numbers known only to a very few individuals.

In addition to these major areas of activity, locksmiths the world over do key duplicating and impressioning, which is the replacing of lost keys with custom made copies, and a wide variety of other types of sales, repair and service work.

In order to achieve maximum profitability as a locksmith, you must be able to offer all these services to your customers. Locks and security are of prime concern to your customers, and it follows that when a customer wants help in this area, he wants it taken care of immediately. Thus, you must position yourself to handle his job immediately, or lose him to a locksmith who can take care of his needs on the spot.

Do some market research. Analyze your local market area before you embark upon this business. This can be done via letters to the local locksmithing association, Chamber of Commerce, or even by checking through the yellow pages. As important as anything else, you'll want to know how many locksmiths are already operating in your area, and how much of the market you can expect to attract with your business. Most industry experts agree that any more than one locksmith for every 30,000 people tends to saturate the market. However, you should study the operations of the existing locksmiths to determine if you can capture a good portion of the existing market by offering more and better

service, especially with a well-planned effort towards the commercial and industrial accounts. In many areas, the established locksmiths have been in business for 20 years or more, and are not interested in expanding their businesses to include the newer and more intricate types of protection available.

Look your market over. Determine if there's been any real effort made to "sell" the market on upgraded protection. Door-to-door sales efforts; direct mail advertising campaigns; local "hard sell" newspaper advertising; home protection and business security seminars, are angles that can be used to launch your business. These approaches should prove to be especially profitable if the existing locksmiths have been sitting back and letting the people come to them when they have a problem. Get to know the building contractors and start bidding on the installation of locks on their building projects. You will get your share of the business, even though at first you may get contracts only from the new builders who have not had experience with other locksmiths.

For a fast start in this business, we suggest that you set yourself up with a van and take your business to your customers. It isn't absolutely necessary to buy a van off the showroom floor and outfit it with all the equipment you'll ultimately need for a full service locksmithing business. That would be nice, but it would probably run you close to \$50,000 or more. By shopping around, you should be able to pick up a good, late model used van for about \$3,000. You might be able to work an even better deal by leasing a new van, and writing off your payments as a business tax deduction. One thing you'll definitely want to consider is a van that has a raised roof in order for you to stand upright in it. After all, you'll be doing most of your work in it, and to have to stoop all the time would soon become quite tiring.

Generally, you can run a workbench down either or both sides of your van, building in adequate storage shelves and drawers under the workbenches. Above the workbenches, and on the sides of the van, peg-board works very well for hanging your tools and key blanks. You'll need 110-volt as well as 12-volt outlets for power. This is accomplished with either a power converter or ready-line generator. Definitely something to think about is the addition of an air conditioning unit.

Whether you do or don't start out with a van, you'll need a variety of equipment. Your first basic investment should be a key duplicating machine. This is the machine you'll be using to take one key and make copies. You'll also need a key-coding machine which will allow you to turn keys out to new codes. This machine will be essential for the combining work you'll be doing. These two machines will be the workhorses of your business - the basic machines you'll need to call yourself a locksmith. So shop around and be sure you get good quality, dependable machines to do the work for you.

You'll also need a wide variety of hand tools such as files, jigs, drills, screwdrivers, micrometer, and mortising tools. You may also want to check out the additional profit potential of your owning a hand key-coding machine. You should also have a pin kit, plus key blanks, locks, and padlocks. Depending on how aggressively you intend to pursue the different areas of the locksmithing business, you should plan to invest at least \$1,000 for a beginning operating inventory of spare parts, locks and key blanks. Before ordering your inventory, work with your area distributors or suppliers to determine the most frequently needed locks and keys.

By creating a professional image, turning out quality work, and having a van that enables

you to take your business to the customer, you'll be able to charge accordingly. It's just that simple. Because traditionally, locksmiths have located themselves in "hole-in-the-wall" storefront shops or more recently in shopping center parking lots, most have never charged more than a pittance for their work. In other words, they have been underpricing themselves.

The great advantage of being mobile is that you can take your services to the customer, and should be able to charge \$25 to \$35 per hour (or more) for an installation or repair call. A good way to upgrade your business is to take your services to the upper income areas, because they not only have more to protect, but are more likely to appreciate the value of your services, and pay promptly.

When pricing the locks you sell, always mark your procurement cost up by at least 30 percent. Thus, if you were to buy locks at a wholesale price of \$14 you would charge your customer \$18.50 for the lock, plus your installation charge. If a key blank costs you \$1, your price to the customer would be \$1.65 plus whatever portion of an hour you figure it takes you to turn it out or duplicate it. What we're saying here is to always consider the base cost of your supplies, plus a profit margin for yourself, and then the installation charge. Thus a two-hour job to install a couple of deadbolt locks, with keys, might run the customer \$75 or \$80.

The best quality work, and the lowest prices in town, are of no value whatsoever if you have no customers, so you must aggressively seek out customers. Don't wait for them to come to you. Knowledge and concerted efforts in advertising, promotion, and personal sales will bring you customers. As mentioned earlier in this report, you can and should use door-to-door circularizing, direct mail, local newspaper, and seminar type sales efforts. And don't forget the tremendous advantage of using the telephone.

Run an ad in your local papers calling for commission sales people. Hire them to call on homeowners door-to-door and to sell the idea of up-grading their locks. You'll need a preplanned sales program along with a good breakdown on your costs versus expected income.

Direct mail campaigns can be as simple as making up advertising circulars or flyers and hiring students to deliver them, or hand them out to shoppers in busy shopping centers. The best angle here is to offer a free check of their locks. Show them how easily a burglar could open their doors; and then propose new locks for all their doors at a special price. You should feel no reservation about putting a little fear into the prospect; remember burglary is real, and frightening!

Local newspaper advertising can be as simple as a regularly run advertisement announcing your business location and phone number. However, it's best used to "splash" a special offer such as the replacement of all key-in-the-knob front door locks with deadbolt locks for half the regular price. Whenever you spend money to advertise, really go after new business. Once you've installed or replaced the lock on one door, it's only natural to check the adequacy of the locks on the other doors, and thus you should be able to realize some real profits from your advertised special offer.

Promoting and selling your services via Home Protection Seminars could work like this: You rent meeting space in a church, school, fraternal organization facilities, or even the meeting room of a popular motel. Run lots of flamboyant advertising in your local papers announcing your



seminar. Have brochures made up describing your services. Have your materials arranged so that you will get the name, address and telephone number of everyone who attends. Put on a short half-hour to 45-minute presentation first about the increase in the number of burglaries and the losses sustained, and then follow through with a presentation describing the proper ways to insure the security of a home or business. Contact your suppliers, and through them you may be able to come up with a slide presentation of a complete program detailing how their line of locks, alarms and other security devices will burglar-proof a home or business. Make sure that everyone in attendance gets one of your brochures, and then have sales people follow up on all who attended.

Via telephone, your sales people can sell homeowners and business owners on a free survey. Commission sales people to make the survey appointments. Then have a commission sales person call on these prospects and make a quick survey, then sit down with them and make recommendations on how they can improve the security of their home or business. From there, it's a natural lead-in to "we call do the job" for (whatever) amount of money.

The seminar and telemarketing angles can be very profitable for you, and if promoted properly, will build your business faster than all other plans put together. The important thing to keep in mind is that you must be aggressive and go out after customers. By all means, take advantage of the direct mail opportunities. Have a flyer or circular made up elaborating on your services, specifically the upgrading of current security and burglar-proofing of a home or business. Hire students to deliver these door-to-door, and commission sales people to contact and follow up via telephone.

Once you've got your sales efforts to homeowners and local businesses organized, hire a couple of sharp commission sales people to call on the government agencies and institutions such as hospitals and schools. By all means, buy a good-sized display ad in the yellow pages of your area telephone directory; and if possible, display advertising on buses or commuter trains. Use your knowledge of how easy it is to burglarize most homes and businesses to come up with angles to get your name, and the name of your business, written up in local newspapers and other publications. Make yourself available for interviews by local radio and television talk shows, civic clubs and fraternal organizations.

Innovation and persistence in marketing will be the keys to your immediate success. As we've stated in this report, most locksmiths are craftsmen who do good work, but just don't understand the merchandising and selling opportunities. With the business and marketing skills we've touched upon, plus quality workmanship (which you can hire others to perform for you) should be able to quickly establish a profitable business that will continue to grow and prosper.

**Associations, schools and publishers:**

Associated Locksmiths of America, Inc.  
3003 Live Oak St.  
Dallas, TX 75204

National Locksmith Suppliers Association  
95 E. Valley Stream Blvd.  
Valley Stream, NY 11580

Foley-Belsaw Institute  
Box 8525  
Kansas City, MO 64141

Locksmith Business Management School  
6301 Equitable Road  
Emeryville, CA 94608

Security Systems Management School  
1500 Cardinal Drive  
Little Falls, NJ 07424

Locksmith Ledger  
1800 Oakton St.  
Des Plaines, IL 60018