

By Tom Wadsworth, CDDC
Editor, *Door & Access Systems Newsmagazine*

Run Local Garage Door **EXPOSED**

Complaints Abound
for New Nationwide Repair Company

NOT CAMERA SHY: Detroit investigative reporter Rob Wolchek interviewed Agababayev near his operation in Center Line, Mich. Courtesy of Fox 2 News Detroit



Yes, this story exposes another garage door repair operation known for overcharging and taking advantage of customers. Why does it deserve your attention?

- (1) It's harming the reputation of honest garage door dealers throughout America.
- (2) It's a new operation, launched less than two years ago.
- (3) It's nationwide, purported to be in 41 states.
- (4) It's probably targeting customers in your market.
- (5) It's attracting hundreds of harsh complaints.
- (6) It's different and probably not a spin-off of any existing door repair business.
- (7) It's using savvy online tactics that you need to know.
- (8) You can learn some valuable marketing lessons from this story.

Who Is Run Local Garage Door?

We first noticed Run Local Garage Door in 2012 when viewing Google results for “garage door” searches in larger U.S. cities. In March 2013, a dealer in North Carolina notified us of consumer complaints about unethical tactics by Run Local. After we started researching the company and hundreds of online complaints, we realized that this story was bigger than we could imagine.

Based on information and records available online, Run Local Garage Door (sometimes listed as Run Local Garage Doors) appears to have been launched in late 2011 from its home office in Center Line, Mich.

Unlike many disreputable garage door repair companies, it appears that Run Local did not originate from another garage door repair firm. Instead, it appears to have sprung from Run Local Locksmith, another business

continued on page 42

continued from page 41

that targets people who are desperate for a technician to come quickly.

“Founded in 2008 by owner Meni Agababayev, it is now the leading company in the industry,” brags the Run Local’s corporate website at www.runlocal.info. As of 2012, the site says, “We have more than 500 employees in over 9,000 cities worldwide.”

When Run Local Locksmith started, “It had one technician, one dispatcher, and only one area to cover and with no official office,” says the site. “This whole operation was conducted from one computer and one cell phone.”

In one of dozens of self-promoting articles posted online, Agababayev reveals the reason why “Run Local” was chosen as the name for his businesses. He says, if a customer calls him, “I must rush to him and if required run to reach him as soon as possible ... so all my services are on the run!”

The operation has caught the attention of the Better Business Bureau, the Federal Trade Commission, and state Attorneys General.

The Run Local Group of Companies

The same website also identifies 23 different businesses in the “Run Local Group of Companies,” including Run Local Locksmith, Run Local Garage Door, and a wide range of other services from Run Local Flowers to Run Local Towing to Run Local Web Hosting. They all appear to be based at one small call center in a strip mall in Center Line, Mich.

Even though phone numbers are provided for each of the 23 businesses, it’s unclear if many of them have actually been launched. It appears that only three of its companies are actually operational: the locksmith and garage door companies and Run Local Carpet Cleaning.

Notorious

Run Local Locksmith has been notorious for surprising customers with large fees and shoddy work. Floods of complaints nationwide have attracted bad news stories throughout the country, including several hidden camera sting operations that expose their practices. On Facebook, one of the company’s female employees in Center Line, Mich., even described her job as “ripping people off, one car at a time at Run Local Locksmith.”

The operation has caught the attention of the Better Business Bureau, the Federal Trade Commission, and state Attorneys General. But no one appears to be angrier

than the Associated Locksmiths of America (ALOA), now known as the ALOA Security Professionals Association.

Trade Association Fights Back

Sometimes, trade associations can be a major force in fighting unethical practices in their industries. ALOA has created a Locksmith Task Force Committee that seeks to “protect the general public against abuses by promoting ALOA’s Code of Ethics and the enforcement of legal business practices.”

The committee’s website describes the issue as a “national problem.” These “illegal locksmiths” are said to use “illegal marketing tactics,” “false” addresses, “phony” locksmith names, “bait and switch” methods, and tax-evasion schemes. These tactics are said to cost “honest locksmiths and consumers millions every month.”

With the escalation of this nationwide problem, the Federal Trade Commission has issued a warning about Run Local-type tactics. “Some locksmiths advertising (locally) may not be local at all,” says the FTC website. “They may not have professional training. What’s more, some of them may use intimidating tactics and overcharge you.”

Connecting Locks and Garage Doors

Run Local Garage Door has been widely accused of these same tactics. Since Run Local Garage Door and Run Local Locksmith are based in the same office in Center Line, Mich., it’s likely that the two companies use the same phone operators, the same marketing tactics, the same operational procedures, the same management, and possibly the same technicians nationwide.

The hundreds of complaints against Run Local Locksmith are remarkably similar to the complaints against Run Local Garage Door. However, one key difference between the two companies is that the locksmith operation had a three-year head start in saturating America.

An Online Strategy

Run Local Garage Door owns at least three domains, www.run-local-garage-door.com (and similar spellings), www.garagedoorservicerepair.com, and www.garage-doors-openers.com. All these sites promote the same toll-free number (1-800-772-0599), contain basically the same essential data, and mention no particular brand

INDUCTED: In a Feb. 6, 2013, investigative report on Detroit television, Agababayev was placed into reporter Rob Wolchek's "Hall of Shame."

Courtesy of Fox 2 News Detroit

Hall of SHAME

of doors or openers. It's clear that repair is the focus of the business.

Run Local Garage Door's website lists the states they service, and the list encompasses 41 states. The only states not mentioned are Alaska, Delaware, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

When you click on a state, you then can browse through an alphabetical listing of all their alleged locations in that state. We say "alleged" because they list 349 locations in the state of Ohio alone. Each location has its own local phone number with a customized name that follows this formula: "(city name) Garage Door Company."

In other words, if you thought that Run Local Garage Door does not intend to compete in your market, you're probably wrong.

"Mobster"

Meni Agababayev is variously listed as the owner, president, or CEO of Run Local Garage Doors. From extensive online information about him, he is described as "the king of online business," a model, and a movie actor whose stage name is Meni Aga. In an upcoming 2013 movie named "Mobster," Aga plays the lead role of Jacob Hadar, a "brilliant and ferocious" Israeli Mob boss.

In a 9-minute video, "The Making of Mobster," posted on Vimeo in May 2013, the narrator says, "Jacob Hadar is played by actor Meni Aga, a man who has had some experience dealing with real mobsters."

Aga, speaking as himself, says, "I grew up in Israel, and there's a lot of mobs in Israel. Some like each other, don't like each other, and (I was) friends with all of them."

This statement was interesting because a few online complaints claimed that Run Local had connections with the Israeli mob. Such accusations, however, are difficult to verify.

We had several questions for Agababayev, but our calls to him at his Michigan office were not returned. As it turns out, another reporter had already asked him several good questions.

Inducted Into "The Hall of Shame"

In a detailed 8-minute TV news report, Rob Wolchek, the investigative reporter for Fox 2 News in Detroit, caught up with Agababayev near Run Local's headquarters in Center Line, Mich. Wolchek's report, aired Feb. 6, 2013, is one of a series of reports titled "The Hall of Shame," which expose shameful business practices.

"Aren't you the Locksmith King?" asked Wolchek as Agababayev walked to his car in the parking lot.

"Yes, I am," Agababayev proudly replied for the TV camera.

Wolchek talked about Run Local's "hundreds of unhappy customers all over the country," but Agababayev quickly defended himself.

"Legit Business Owner"

"I'm a business owner like every single legit business owner in America," he replied in his signature broken English. "I don't create business to crush others. I create business to success. And God bless me."

Wolchek said he wanted information about the Run Local business.

"So what, you want it?" replied the Run Local CEO. "That doesn't mean you can have information from me about my business in the middle of the street, surprising me like I'm the killer."

Yet the budding movie star seemed to like the camera, and he didn't walk away. So Wolchek continued to ask questions. "How'd you get into the locksmith business?"

The question seems harmless enough, but Agababayev replied, "That's something I don't want to answer."

Unaffected by Complaints

Wolchek cited 199 complaints against Run Local that had been reported to the Better Business Bureau, but Agababayev seemed unimpressed.

"We service 5,000 customers a week," he revealed. "That's almost quarter million customers. You come into me with 199 complaints from Better Bureau Business?"

continued on page 44

ASSURANCE OF DISCONTINUANCE AND VOLUNTARY COMPLIANCE

IN THE MATTER OF THE RUN LOCAL LOCKSMITH, INC., AND MENI AGABABAYEV, individually, and AL HASSAN, individually.

This Assurance of Discontinuance and Voluntary Compliance ("Assurance") is entered into between the State of Colorado, *ex rel.* Attorney General John W. Suthers, through the undersigned Assistant Attorney General ("State") and Run Local Locksmith, Inc., and Meni Agababayev, and Al Hassan, in their capacity as employees of Run Local Locksmith, Inc., (hereinafter collectively referred to as "Run Local" or "Respondents"). This Assurance is entered into pursuant to the Attorney General's powers under C.R.S. § 6-1-110(2), and is being agreed to by the parties in lieu of the Attorney General filing a complaint against Respondents for the conduct described below.

PARTIES

1. John W. Suthers is the duly elected Attorney General for the State of Colorado and has express jurisdiction to investigate and to prosecute violations of the Colorado Consumer Protection Act ("CCPA"), C.R.S. § 6-1-101, *et seq.*
2. Respondent Run Local is a Michigan corporation incorporated on January 9, 2008 with a principal place of business at 26636 Van Dyke Ave., Center Line, Michigan 48015-1222. Run Local advertises mobile locksmith services nationally via the Internet. Run Local contracts with locksmiths operating in Colorado and is registered with the Colorado Secretary of State.

1

COLORADO TAKES ACTION: After the Colorado Attorney General claimed that Run Local's ads were misleading, Agababayev agreed to pay \$20,000 and promised to change his advertising in that state.

continued from page 43

(Yes, he said, "Better Bureau Business.")

Instead of being worried about hundreds of complaints, Agababayev was brazenly proud of his company.

"Do you know what's the problem in America?" he asked. "Just because Mr. Meni grow up and be success, just because he legit and servicing everyone, holidays, day and night, no sleep, just to service you with your little baby at 3 o'clock in the morning when you lock out of the car in the snow. That's me come and saving you and your baby when you outside the door."

The interview ends with Agababayev getting into his black Porsche Cayenne Turbo SUV with its "RUNLOCKS" Michigan license plate.

Wrapping up the story on live TV, Wolchek noted that Run Local does refund a lot of money every year to their customers. Yet, that didn't deter Wolchek from closing his taped report by saying, "Hey Meni, I've got a place for you, and a locksmith's not gonna get you out ... of the Hall of Shame!"

In the News

Negative news stories about Run Local Locksmith have been published around the country in newspapers and on television. On June 5, 2013, ABC's "The Lookout," a new prime-time newsmagazine show, aired its hidden-camera investigation that exposed Run Local's tactics.

ABC interviewed a disguised former "locksmith" who revealed that "many of

the guys in this game are recent immigrants recruited from Israel, given minimal training in locksmithing, but a thorough training in what they call 'sales.'" The whistle-blower said that American customers were viewed as "stupid, naïve."

ABC's Bill Weir revealed that Run Local "answers over 100,000 calls a year. So *someone* is getting rich, and his name is Meni Agababayev." Weir also said that Agababayev spent some of his Run Local fortune and used some of his gorgeous cars to make the "Mobster" movie.

Weir lured Agababayev to a personal studio interview under the pretense that the interview was about his upcoming movie. When asked why he chose the role of the mobster, Agababayev replied, "I like that one. I can make it happen the best ... 'cause in Russia and in Israel, if you're not a biter, you will get a bite."

When Weir quickly turned the discussion to Run Local's tactics, Agababayev's expression turned sour. "We're talking movie only," he objected, and he then refused to answer several of Weir's questions.

Another Sting in Denver

On Feb. 14, 2013, the Fox TV station in Denver ran the story of a hidden-camera sting operation they filmed in 2010 and again in 2013, in which a female reporter posed as a driver locked out of her car.

In the 2013 story, a Run Local phone representative quoted her a \$15 service charge

and gave the impression that the total charge would be about \$50. But when the Run Local locksmith arrived in a plain car with Florida plates, he tried to charge \$150. The reporter then called another local locksmith who charged only \$55 to open the car.

On Jan. 6, 2013, the Hernando Today newspaper in the Tampa, Fla., area ran a lengthy story about Run Local Locksmith operating similarly in that area. A female driver was locked out of her car, but when a Run Local locksmith arrived in an unmarked car, he didn't seem to know what he was doing, charged \$119, and gave her a receipt that had no address, no phone number, and only listed his first name.

The article reported that many locksmiths in Florida are pushing for legislation to "get these people out of business." The story also quotes Karen Nalven of the Better Business Bureau who said the BBB had received 328 complaints about Run Local Locksmith of Michigan over the previous 36 months.

Some states are taking action. On May 1, 2013, the Alarm and Locksmith Advisory Committee of the Oklahoma State Department of Labor denied a license to Run Local Locksmith, even though Steven Papo, Run Local's vice president (and brother-in-law to Meni Agababayev), and his company attorney were present and argued in favor of the license.

F Ratings From the BBB

We looked up the Better Business Bureau's reviews of all Run Local companies. Even though the company's websites indicate that Run Local has hundreds of locations nationwide, it appears that most of the local businesses are nothing more than someone in a car with a cell phone. Thus, we could find reviews of only 10 Run Local businesses.

Of the 10 Run Local companies, eight locations earned "F" ratings from the BBB, the worst rating possible. The rating for the headquarters location in Center Line, Mich., was also an "F." The BBB report for that location notes that www.run-local-garage-door.com is one of its Web addresses.

The BBB reports identify hundreds of consumer complaints against Run Local. The most common complaint was Problems with Product/Service, followed by Billing/Collection Issues and Advertising/Sales Issues.

The report notes that, since February 2012, Run Local has been working to clean up the backlog of complaints. As of June 2013, the

continued on page 46

EVERY INSTALLER • EVERY DEALER • EVERY HOMEOWNER • EVERY UNIT



EVERY ONE COUNTS

RESIDENTIAL GARAGE DOOR OPENER INSTALLATION SWEEPSTAKES

In November 2013 a single Genie residential garage door opener will make
one installer, one dealer and one home owner each a winner...

\$10,000 CASH **\$10,000 CASH**

**INSTALLER
GRAND PRIZE**

**DEALER
GRAND PRIZE**

HOW IT WORKS:

- 1 REGISTER**
Go online and register at: www.GenieRegistration.com
- 2 INSTALLER: INSTALL**
Install as many Genie residential garage door openers as possible
DEALER: PROMOTE
Encourage your installers to install Genie residential garage door openers
- 3 SUBMIT**
Submit the serial number of each installed garage door opener on-line.
Each installed Genie opener will count as **one entry** in the sweepstakes.
Submit entries to: www.GenieRegistration.com
SWEEPSTAKES RUNS: May 8 – November 22, 2013
DRAWING: On or about November 29, 2013

WINNING

ON OR ABOUT NOVEMBER 29 **ONE ENTRY**
WILL BE DRAWN AT RANDOM.

- ▶ **INSTALLER:**
If your submitted serial number
is drawn **YOU WIN \$10,000!**
- ▶ **DEALER:**
If the serial number your installer submitted
is drawn **YOU WIN \$10,000!**
- ▶ **HOME OWNER:**
If the serial number of your installed Genie residential
unit is drawn **THE HOMEOWNER WINS \$500!**

ABBREVIATED RULES
GENIE EVERY ONE COUNTS RESIDENTIAL GARAGE DOOR OPENER INSTALLATION SWEEPSTAKES
NO PURCHASE OR PAYMENT OF ANY KIND IS NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN THIS SWEEPSTAKES. PURCHASE WILL NOT INCREASE YOUR CHANCES OF WINNING. VOID IN PUERTO RICO AND WHERE PROHIBITED.
Sweepstakes begins 12:00:01 AM Eastern Time (ET) May 8, 2013 and ends at 11:59:59 PM ET November 22, 2013. Open only to persons who are Professional Installers and Dealers of Residential Garage Door Openers and are legal residents of the
United States and District of Columbia who are at least 18 years of age or the age of majority at the time of registration. Not open to general public. See complete Official Rules available at www.genieregistration.com for free entry information,
winner selection process, prizes and other details. Limit of one (1) registration per person. Limit of one (1) prize per person/family/household/business entity. Odds of winning depend on total number of eligible entries received.
Sponsor: GMI Holdings Inc. DBA The Genie Company, Mount Hope, OH 44660

Register Today!

www.GenieRegistration.com

continued from page 44

report says, “The rating for this business will remain at an “F” until such time as all complaints are addressed.”

Hundreds of Online Complaints

Run Local has attracted an extremely long list of online complaints. Hundreds of complaints have been submitted or posted to such sites as Yelp.com, Scam.com, RipoffReport.com, ComplaintsBoard.com, PissedConsumer.com, YouTube.com, Scambook.com, Facebook.com, BusinessConsumerAlliance.com, and the Better Business Bureau (bbb.org).

We reviewed records of almost 500 online complaints, and we analyzed all of the complete complaints against Run Local Garage Door. We found that gross overcharging was the most common complaint. The following paragraphs represent only a tiny portion of all the complaints, but they give you an idea of what consumers are saying about Run Local.

Gross Overcharging

For example, a consumer complained to the Better Business Bureau in July 2012, “Sonny (Run Local’s garage door technician)

Shoddy Work

The second most common complaint against Run Local Garage Door is shoddy work, and most of these complaints reported that Run Local’s work actually made the problem worse.

On March 31, 2013, Sam from Mesa, Ariz., complained on RipoffReport.com that four days after Run Local’s “repair,” his garage door was “more messed up than ever.” He added, “I really only wanted an estimate. And what I got was a bigger problem. (I) will never use or recommend them again.”

The large number of reports of shoddy work makes you wonder if these technicians have received any training at all. Several reports noted that the technician arrived in an unmarked car or truck with no identifying uniform. One complaint noted that the invoice itself was a generic invoice without even a company name on it.

Unmarked Vehicles

In March 2013, a 75-year-old man from Milliken, Colo., complained on Scambook.com, “The tech, and I use the word loosely, arrived in an unmarked truck and claimed (the problem) was the spring, even though

“Basically, this was a bait and switch,” said one Run Local Garage Door customer in Los Angeles, Calif.

Some technicians may be getting tired of surprising and angering Run Local customers. A California customer, writing in August 2012 from Monterey Park to the BBB, reported that, when he talked to the technician on the phone, the tech wanted to know what the customer expected to pay. “This is a very unusual question to ask the customer. When I told him (his office) said \$29, he said the office would call me and hung up.”

These surprise charges caught the attention of the Better Business Bureau of St. Louis, which took the unusual step of posting an article online warning consumers of Run Local’s practices. Michelle Corey, BBB president and CEO, “urged Run Local Locksmith and other businesses that use bait-and-switch tactics to be more honest with consumers about their pricing.”

Published on Feb. 22, 2012, the article made the extraordinary statement, “The Better Business Bureau suggests caution when dealing with the company, headquartered in Center Line, Mich.”

“Very, Very Rude”

Online complainants also often accused Run Local’s technicians and telephone personnel of being rude, and many techs were bluntly accused of lying. Rude behavior was the fourth most common complaint in our study of hundreds of complaints.

“The tech started swearing at me and hung up on me,” wrote a customer in Raleigh, N.C., on RipoffReport.com in November 2012. “(The) name of the company says it all – RUN! And run far away from these guys.”

“Their customer service line ... was very unhelpful and rude. They even hung up on me!” wrote Jacques in March 2013 on ComplaintsBoard.com. On Scam.com, a locksmith customer in Michigan accused the technician of being “rude, threatening, and violent.”

Usually, when a customer calls with a complaint and is bumped upstairs to a higher level, the company’s service is more professional. But we read several complaints that indicated the opposite.

“I was transferred to a supervisor who was very, very rude to me,” wrote Stephen of Lakewood, Wash., posting on RipoffReport.com in March 2013. In many cases, others said the company would not even call back after the complaint was made.

“Out-and-Out Thieves”

Besides the specific complaints mentioned above, many customers blasted away with some scathing

continued on page 48

The large number of reports of shoddy work makes you wonder if these technicians have received any training at all.

was asking \$900 for a new opener.” Run Local was sent packing, and “I had a new LiftMaster installed the next day for \$335.”

On Yelp.com in April 2013, Teresa K. of Corona, Calif., wrote, “Run as fast as you can away from Run Local Garage Doors. They charged \$505 to replace (the) spring, then tried to double bill us.”

In August 2012 in Somerset, Mass., another consumer complained to the BBB, “The company sent two young men to my home. They determined in two minutes that we needed a new opener. They said it would cost \$598.” Most dealers typically charge half of that or less.

In November 2012, Heidi J. of Poway, Calif., called Run Local Garage Door because of a flashing error code on her opener. She said, “The technician was an idiot” who claimed the motor was dead and wanted to sell her a new opener for \$525. She dismissed him, paid the service call fee, and later found that the transaction had been processed under Run Local Locksmith.

the spring was not broken.” The elderly man allowed the repair but noted that, “Less than a week later, (I had) the very same problem.”

Stephanie P. of Oakland, Calif., jumped on Yelp.com in January 2013 to write that a “very shady person who showed up in a generic truck with no ID (no shirt, no truck ID with company name or license number) asked for a ridiculous amount of money.” Desperate for a repair, she allowed it, but regretted it. “The person not only did not fix the problem, he broke the door in an additional place.”

In January 2013, one garage door customer in Chicago wrote on Scambook.com, “The guy showed up in a junky dented truck with ‘Plumber’ decals removed.”

The Old \$29 “Bait and Switch”

The third most common complaint focused on the \$29 service fee, as most customers were charged a great deal more than that. Consumers have often been led to believe that the service would cost only \$29, but were shocked when the bill was much more.

continued from page 46

remarks and harsh accusations. Since the volume of harsh complaints is so large, it's important that you see a sampling.

For example, in mid-May 2013, a customer from Taylor, Texas, wrote on RipoffReport.com: "This company is a fraud, and I wouldn't recommend them to my worst enemy."

On April 11, 2013, on Yelp, DJ of Mount Holly, N.J., wrote, "These people are out-and-out thieves." In DJ's case, the Run Local tech refused a check or credit card and made DJ drive to an ATM to withdraw \$320. When DJ later looked at the receipt, the numbers didn't add up, and he found that he'd paid \$71 for sales tax.

In a RipoffReport.com complaint from January 2013, Contessa of San Francisco said, "It doesn't get shadier than this." Also in January but on the East Coast, Eugene of Acton, Mass., warned on RipoffReport.com, "Beware of this company and avoid it any cost."

Laura N. of Lancaster, Ohio, jumped on Yelp in September 2012 after getting "scammed" by Run Local. "They are street

thugs (and) no better than a drug dealer," she wrote.

As part of Agababayev's agreement with the state, he paid a \$22,000 fine and promised to change his advertising in that state. If Run Local fails to meet the terms of the agreement, it will "pay an immediate penalty of \$100,000."

How to Overcome Bad Online Reviews

Run Local has made several innovative attempts to combat the large volume of complaints posted online. How? They do it by going to some of these same websites and posting glowing reports of Run Local to offset the negative ones.

However, others have caught on to the scheme and exposed the phony reviews. On Yelp.com in November 2011, an experienced reviewer named Elijah revealed that someone named "Fernande P." had posted an astonishing 25 favorable reviews of Run Local Garage Door. But Fernande made the mistake of writing a blatant ad instead of posting an honest review of the company's services, for which Yelp is known.

reviews." The issue of fake Yelp reviews again hit the media in May 2013, with Yelp saying it is running "sting operations to shame businesses participating in deliberate attempts to mislead consumers with fake reviews."

A Thousand Fake Posts

But back to 2011. During the same week that Stan Diel noticed the glowing reviews of Run Local on Yelp, a flood of glowing reviews began to appear on ComplaintsBoard.com. These posts are immediately suspicious because this site is intended to collect complaints, not flattering business reviews filled with syrupy praise. While Yelp.com is known for positive and negative reviews, who goes to ComplaintsBoard.com to post positive reviews?

Clicking on the IDs of these positive reviews reveals that all of them are almost certainly fake. We counted 1,660 positive reviews of Run Local Locksmith from 28 different (likely fictitious) people, or an average of about 60 reviews per person. Who goes to ComplaintsBoard.com to post 60 positive reviews about only one company?

Of the 1,660 reviews, only a few dozen were unique, since many were copied verbatim numerous times. These flattering reviews were placed next to all the negative reviews in an obvious effort to drown them out.

Indeed, these 1,660 glowing reviews make the 84 on Yelp seem like nothing. But, similar to the Yelp reviews, the 1,660 ComplaintsBoard.com reviews "seem to follow the same scripts and include the same misspellings and some idioms and syntax not rooted in American English."

It's true that all the positive reviews on ComplaintsBoard.com benefitted Run Local Locksmith, not Run Local Garage Door. But Run Local's extensive efforts to flood the Internet with positive statements reveal their commitment to using the Internet to their advantage, regardless of the ethics involved.

Battling in the Blogosphere

Another way Run Local is counteracting all the negative online reviews is by posting self-flattering articles on blog sites. Thus, when someone searches for a "Run Local" business, these self-glorifying articles will pop up in the search results. Many articles have been posted on free pages at Wordpress and Blogspot, with links to the articles on Run Local's Facebook page and elsewhere.

We found about 20 articles that brag about the company's "quickest garage door service in the entire U.S.," "indisputable service," "expert team," "the best garage door service," "humanitarian approach," "perfect" service,

It's hard for authorities to prosecute anyone for high prices, shoddy work, or even rude behavior.

thugs (and) no better than a drug dealer," she wrote.

Another Yelper, Melinda E. of Wimberley, Texas, wrote on March 4, 2012, of a confrontation she had with a Run Local Locksmith. When they wanted to charge her much more than promised on the phone, the on-site locksmith threatened to take down her license plates. Melinda then "told him to send the sheriff over because I had something to say to him as well. When I went back to my car, the 'locksmith' was speeding off."

Colorado Cracks Down

It's hard for authorities to prosecute anyone for high prices, shoddy work, or even rude behavior. But "false advertising" is often a verifiable offense that violates consumer protection laws.

The growing number of complaints against Run Local (Locksmith, in this case) attracted the attention of the state of Colorado. In 2012, the state's Attorney General's office brought an action against Meni Agababayev and Run Local, claiming that their ads were misleading.

The action said that Run Local's Colorado Web page in October 2010 advertised a "15 minute response" and a "\$15 service fee." Yet, the Attorney General interviewed more than 30 Run Local customers about Run Local's charges and its failure to arrive in 15 minutes.

"Call us at: (610) 616-3837 for affordable garage door repair ..." began Fernande's posts. He identifies his company as "Run Local Garage Door" and ends with their toll-free number, 800-772-0599. It appears that Yelp management later caught Fernande and deleted his posts.

Fake Yelps in Alabama

In Alabama, also in 2011, glowing Yelp reviews of Run Local Locksmith caught the attention of Stan Diel, a business reporter for the Birmingham News. On June 2, 2011, the newspaper published an article titled, "Yelp reviews of Alabama locksmiths don't add up."

Diel reported that "at least 84 positive reviews of Alabama locksmiths have been posted on Yelp.com in the past week." He noticed that all reviews "seem to follow the same scripts and include the same misspellings and some idioms and syntax not rooted in American English." He added that the "Alabama phone numbers listed in the reviews ring through to a Michigan company called Run Local Locksmith."

The story noted that the New York Times, about a week earlier, had reported on "Yelp's ongoing battle with overseas services that will, for a fee, write and post fake

“available in every state,” “cheapest service rates,” “best local garage door service that you can find,” “faster than all garage door services,” and on it goes.

Posted Praise for Meni

In addition to all the flattering Internet articles about Run Local, Agababayev has also posted more than 35 articles that praise himself. The articles, found at meni-agababayev.blogspot.com and www.meniagababayev.com (and .org, .net, and .info), provide gushingly positive personal information to offset negative criticisms. When other sites, such as his Facebook pages and others, link to these articles, their impact is multiplied for search engines.

Now, when suspicious customers search online for Agababayev’s name, they will find glowing adoration. In these posts, he is lauded as a “miracle man” known for his “honesty, sincerity, (and) good behavior towards customers.” He is compared to Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg and is (self-) praised for being “the king of online world.”

He labels himself “an inspirational figure for millions” who see him “as their idol and (who) worship the rules followed by him.” In contrast to hundreds of online complaints, these bragging articles claim, “He has never cheated any of his customers.”

In Agababayev’s extensive efforts to praise himself, he has also leaked some possibly true personal information. One of the articles says, “He had three kids with no prospects of education and home with no luxuries. He had a small ... shop at the corner of colony market. His menu was limited to this one snack, and his income was limited to 100 rupees per day. Every day, Meni withered in the agony of being poor.”

But now, “The entire online market is ruled by him,” he gushes. “He is adored by both his customers and employees,” yet “... he has never been arrogant in life.”

Lessons Learned

So what can reputable door dealers learn from this?

- 1. Three letters: S.E.O.** Your worst competitors are taking away your business by using Search Engine Optimization (SEO) techniques and online ads. If you’re not doing the same (with legal and ethical tactics), it’s time you started. Find a trustworthy local company that can help you with this.
- 2. Earn Genuine Good Reviews.** Online reviews from customers are playing an increasing role in winning new customers. Take care of your customers and earn these reviews honestly. Don’t cheat. Don’t post fake reviews. Don’t pay or reward people to post these reviews. You will likely be found out.
- 3. Distance Yourself From the Bad Guys.** Differentiate your business by being honest, responsive, and helpful to customers. Advertise your physical location and/or show a photo of your business on your website.
- 4. Warn Customers About Scams.** You don’t need to badmouth any specific business, but do your customers a favor by warning them about disreputable firms. Some door companies post links on their websites to online articles that warn about the activities of these firms, while others print these articles and distribute them to customers. ■

To comment on this story, send an email to the editor at trw@tomwadsworth.com.

The Curb Appeal Of A DEL DEN DOOR



IMPROVING

*** ROI & Home Appearance Since 1964**

From commercial steel to custom-wood, the quality and value of a Delden door is second to none. And that’s good news, since one of the best ways to improve a home, business or building’s appearance – **and its value** – is by replacing the garage door. Dealer’s prefer to give their customers a choice and Delden offers many.

** ROI = Return on Investment*



Toll-free: 800-821-3708
Local: 816-413-1600
Fax: 816-413-1699
www.deldenmfg.com



Serving the Heartland Since 1964



“Experience the Quality”

- Design Details • Textures • Color
- Heavy-Duty Hardware • Durable Construction

3530 N.E. Kimball Dr., Kansas City, MO 64161
Delden has 6 locations to serve you.

