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Cyclists: Bike locks easy prey for thieves



Kryptonite promises more secure product

By Ross Kerber, Globe Staff | September 16, 2004

Kryptonite, the large bicycle-lock maker, said yesterday it will speed the delivery of new versions of its burly locks following complaints that current versions can be picked open with flimsy ballpoint pens.

ADVERTISEMENT This week cycling enthusiasts have deluged the Canton business with concerns over the security of the locks. The apparent vulnerability is related to broader concerns that have arisen lately against makers of locks used to secure everything from laptop computers to coin-operated laundry machines.

Kryptonite is best known for its "U-lock" designs that consist of heavy U-shaped pieces of steel meant to be much harder to saw or pry apart compared with a traditional padlock and chain. Some of the U-locks use an "axial pin tumbler" in which a tubular key is inserted into a circular keyhole.

But at least since the summer, security specialists have raised concerns that pens inserted into the keyhole can jimmy the lock apart. Lately some specialists have become quite vocal and begun posting videos of themselves at the task.

"Your brand new U-Lock is not safe. Please read this RIGHT NOW," read an early message on the subject, posted Sunday on the bikeforums.net website. The writer identified himself in a follow-on e-mail exchange as Chris Brennan, a San Francisco computer-security specialist upset over the theft of bikes and parts over the years.

He doesn't think his Kryptonite locks failed to stop the thefts, but he says he grew angry when he heard of the pen technique from a friend.

Brennan's postings and others have become the talk of the online bicycle world, said Sheldon Brown, a well-known mechanic at Harris Cyclery in Newton.

"This is an extremely big deal. Kryptonite is the [Microsoft](#) of locks," said Brown, who estimates hundreds of thousands of the U-locks have been sold over the years. Kryptonite will not divulge sales numbers.

Brown praised Kryptonite as a product supplier, and said he wasn't able to pry open a U-lock with a pen during a few tries yesterday morning. "They've always been our first recommendation for locks," Brown said.

Kryptonite, which has about 30 employees and is a division of [Ingersoll-Rand Co.](#) of Bermuda, won't discuss the specifics of Brennan's complaint or say exactly when the company started receiving reports of problems.

But executives acknowledged the concerns, and in a statement issued last night they wrote that "The world just got tougher and so did our locks."

Specifically, Kryptonite said it has moved up some dates in its plans to introduce upgraded versions of the locks in question. These are the company's "Kryptolok" and "Evolution" lines of U-locks, selling for \$30 to \$55. They now use tubular keys, but the models the company planned to introduce at the Interbike trade show in Las Vegas in October will use "disc-style cylinders" in which cuts in the key are angled, which it calls a more secure design.

Now the company will speed delivery of these devices to distributors, said Tim Clifford, Kryptonite's director of sales. Its more expensive New York line of U-locks has used the disc cylinders since 2000, the company said.

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"Unfortunately, this takes some of the thunder out of the launch at Interbike, but we'll do what's right by the bicycle community," Clifford said.

Later, Brown, the mechanic, suggested the vulnerability might only be in some older versions of the locks. Kryptonite executives weren't available to discuss the idea.

The concern about the locks appears to be related to similar complaints that cropped up this summer regarding the tubular-keyed locks used to secure many computer systems.

Marc Weber Tobias, a South Dakota attorney who says his clients include lock makers and large purchasers, began posting criticisms this summer of tubular-keyed locks such as those made by Kensington Technology Group, a unit of Fortune Brands of Illinois.

"I've traveled to lock makers all over the world, and the problem is that engineers know how to make things, not to break them," Tobias said. He said he first heard of using a pen to open a U-lock while speaking at a computer hacker's convention in New York City over the summer.

Asked about the complaints, a Kensington spokeswoman sent a statement that "Any lock can be defeated by a trained thief or lock picker with modified tools."

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