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Overcoming the Threat of the Bump Key: Protecting Your Self-Storage Facility From This Theft Device

Over the last five years, a device called the bump key has surfaced in the media of specialized industries such as self-storage. If you operate a self-storage facility, be prepared to answer questions about this device from customers and help arm them against this threat.

May 01, 2010



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mentioned in locksmith magazines and bulletin boards (especially those frequented by “lock hackers”), it was featured in several local newscasts and even mentioned on the USA Network TV series “Burn Notice” (Season 3, Episode 5).

Consider these two important questions: How many of you have locks at your facility that can be opened with a bump key? And what can you do to prevent this from happening at your site? The answer to the first is easy: Almost all facilities contain locks that can be easily opened with a bump key. Every operator ought to be able to answer the second question, since it addresses customers’ security concerns. First, here’s a little more background on the device itself.

What Is a Bump Key and How Does It Work?

The bump key is a tool that allows even a novice to quickly compromise a pin-tumbler keyway in a padlock or disc lock. It can open a pin-tumbler disc lock just as easily as it can open a pin-tumbler padlock.


The bump key was highlighted in *Newsweek*’s August 2006 Web edition, in an article titled “Beware the ‘Bump’ Key.” The story featured Barry Wels of The Open Organization of Lockpickers, a group whose members partake in the hobby of locksport, the study and defeat of locking systems. Wels said members pick locks “not with criminal intent, but more in the spirit of puzzle-solving.” He and an

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A standard pin-tumbler keyway is based on  a set of five to seven pins as shown in the accompanying image. The teeth of the key raise and lower the pins. When the key lines up the pins, the “shear line” is aligned, and the cylinder rotates to open the lock.

The teeth on a bump key are ground down to the lowest level. The filed down key is inserted into the lock, held with tension, and then struck with a hammer. (You can even buy a special bump-key hammer online.) The pins bounce, and the lock opens. You can see how this works in dozens of video demonstrations on YouTube.

Even if you don’t think a bump key is common knowledge, it’s still critical to understand how it works and how to prevent it from being used at your facility. You may have customers who are familiar with or hear about it and have concerns that there’s a tool enabling thieves to enter a unit without evidence.

According to cryptographer Barry Schneier, “Lock-picking information, until very recently, has been hidden, not from the bad guys, but from us, the consumers. There’s no economic motivator for anyone to make a better lock because you, the consumer, don’t know [how vulnerable your lock really is].” Thanks to the Internet, however, your customers—along with those thieves who missed the boat

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and security experts believe it to be a significant security upgrade to the padlock.

That may have once been the case, but if the disc lock uses the same kind of key and keyway as a standard padlock, the bump key has changed the game. It easily opens any lock that uses a pin-tumbler keyway, the keyway found on most disc locks. With a bump key, disc locks are just “round padlocks” to a thief. You need to know this, and you need to have a response for your customers.



A bump key can open a pin-tumbler disc lock just as easily as it can open a pin-tumbler padlock.

Locks That Cannot Be Bumped

The bump key compromises the standard pin-tumbler keyway found in the vast

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Fortunately, there are locks that cannot be bumped. These work through rotating detainer discs and a sidebar rather than pin tumblers. The detainer-disc keyway, developed nearly 100 years ago, is built around a series of seven to 11 discs. Each must line up with a sidebar to rotate the cylinder and open the lock. There are no pins or springs to bump. A detainer-disc keyway works in a padlock, a disc lock or a cylinder lock.

A lock such as the Medeco “biaxial,” which requires the pins to be lifted and rotated precisely, is described as “bump- and pick-resistant.” Medeco developed the biaxial in 1985 to defeat the bump key. With teeth and pins cut at angles, the pins must be rotated just so to open the lock.

This year, Master Lock introduced its version of a bump-resistant keyway. It’s important to note that both the Medeco and Master Lock solutions are recent developments, and there are hackers who insist they have defeated the Medeco biaxial. Only the detainer-disc sidebar system has been successfully field-tested for nearly 100 years. According to Frank Minnella, CEO of Lock America International, the system was invented in Finland in 1914, and has never required modification to prevent bumping.

Meet the Challenge

Google the term “bump key” and watch the videos. Then contact a lock

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money involved. Operators should employ empathy and remain focused on the customer experience.

Scott Lewis | Jun 17, 2020



Self-storage performed extremely well during the Great Recession, and one of the key reasons the industry is so stable, even during economic downturns, is consumer demand stemming from the three Ds: death, divorce and displacement. These relate to stressful, often negative, periods in customers' lives; so while they may be good for the bottom line, facility operators must act with care and diligence to ensure they provide the best possible service and experience. Let's take a closer look at these life-changing events and how you can help your tenants through what is surely a difficult time.

Death

When a family member dies and the heirs wish to preserve the person's belongings, self-storage operators can help in two ways. The first is with understanding and compassion. If you discover that a new tenant has contacted you due to a death in the family, a card offering condolences placed inside the unit prior to move-in can go a long way in showing kindness. A small amount of

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DIVORCE

Divorce usually results in the splitting of a household, which frequently requires the use of self-storage. Though there isn't much you can do to ease the customer's suffering, you can make sure your processes and procedures protect the tenant. Divorce is fraught with ill feelings and can sometimes lead to one spouse attempting to steal items from the other.

Again, make sure your lease is up-to-date and adheres to state law. If the couple had a unit with both spouses named on the lease, one may try to clear out the space without the other's consent. Even in the case of a new lease, the spouse may try to enter the unit. In either situation, your duty is to protect the tenant's belongings. Ensuring you have good contact information for both spouses and solid processes in place will protect everyone involved—your business, too.

Displacement

The third D—displacement—isn't always undesirable. In fact, it can be quite positive. Regardless, it's almost always stressful. When a customer decides to move into a new home, downsize to a smaller residence, get married, head home from college for the summer, etc., he needs a safe, secure place to store belongings.

In these cases, you have the opportunity to create convenience and ease for

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good experience. With death, demonstrating compassion can make a tremendous difference. With divorce, you can ensure proper leasing procedures that avoid one spouse stealing from the other. In a displacement, you can make your facility a place of calm and convenience to ease the chaos and burden of moving.

With each of these Ds, there are some lease guidelines and legal angles to consider. Make sure you contact a self-storage attorney, as each state has different laws. You wouldn't want to undermine your good intentions by making a painful legal mistake.

Be compassionate and do everything you can to ensure you and your self-storage staff are providing the best service and experience possible. When prospective tenants who are under stress visit your facility, they should have all the tools and materials they need to successfully move and store their items right at their fingertips.

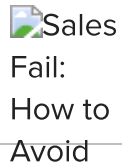
Scott Lewis is the co-founder and chief executive officer of Spartan Investment Group LLC (SIG), where he's responsible for developing business strategies and overseeing all operations and business activities. Scott has led several successful real estate projects ranging from single-family flips to ground-up self-storage developments. He's also a major in the U.S. Army Reserves and a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. SIG has completed \$9 million in development projects, with \$70 million underway. For more information, call 866.375.4438; e-mail

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