



## Security Alarms – The Basics

Readers may recall that in 2011 I wrote two articles for the Algarve Resident on how to select an alarm company and the many matters that you need to take into consideration.

A number of people have recently contacted me asking the same question, seeking truly independent advice. Clearly any alarm company can certainly provide expert and professional advice, but are not in a position to give “independent” advice, which compares different companies and the services they provide.

Safe Communities Algarve does provide general independent advice, which is based on information provided by the companies themselves; the feedback from users of alarms, and the views of the police. This article is therefore based on this collective knowledge and addresses the most frequent questions that have been raised.

Firstly in deciding to purchase an alarm it is important to realise that an alarm used on its own does not prevent crime. Its important role is alerting someone in an emergency situation, providing some deterrence and informing you when someone is about to or has entered your property. It is important therefore to view an alarm as an important part of a package of measures to ensure your property is secure. This would include having strong doors and windows with proper security locks and adopting security practices when going out etc.

The GNR advice, which reflects that in other countries, is that it is wise to install an alarm. The questions are however, how do you decide which company to select and what type of alarm is suitable for your needs? This feature deals with the first basic question.

Firstly it is important to have very clear objectives of what you would like the alarm to do for you. Do you wish it to alert you when you are overseas that someone has broken into your house; are you trying prevent burglaries; or are you worried about personal safety; or is it a combination of all three? A good security company will ask you this question at the outset, because the system that is supplied will need to take this into account.

### Selecting a Company

There are a number of security alarm companies here in the Algarve that provide monitoring services with a response (intervention) capability. It is recommended that an alarm system should always be remotely monitored 24/7 using a company with a monitoring centre and a response (intervention) service. Such companies need to be licensed and in Portugal this is strictly regulated with frequent inspections by the authorities. Unfortunately there have been occasions where people have been sold

alarms by companies claiming that the alarm is monitored, but has turned out to be the owner of the company or an employee using a mobile phone to receive the alarm signal.

Care is also needed in ensuring that what is being offered does not fall into the category as being “too good to be true”. Readers will recall the case last year where a UK based alarm company was attempting to sell alarms by misleading people that this would be paid for by the local councils here in the Algarve!

Over the last year Safe Communities Algarve has received a number of reports about what can only be described as bad practices by one or two companies, such as: (i) approaching people in the street and trying to get them to purchase an alarm; (ii) entering a restaurant/bar and approaching bar staff in front of customers (iii) turning up immediately after someone has been burgled and trying to pressure them into purchasing an alarm when they are at their most vulnerable (iv) trying to conclude a deal without having seen the property and (v) demonstrating their equipment in a bar full of customers not bothering who could be watching! This would not be tolerated in the medical profession and should not be in any respectable profession which involves public security.

**Thankfully however this does not reflect the industry as a whole and in particular those companies which do provide a high quality of service**

### **How Security Companies with Monitoring Centres and Intervention Services Operate.**

The main purpose of an alarm is to alert someone that an intruder has entered or about to enter your property. This someone can be you, a monitoring centre and/or the police. What is essential is that in an emergency situation help arrives as quickly as possible. An emergency means that someone is actually attempting to break in or is actually on the premises. If you come home some time after a burglary has occurred this off course is very upsetting **BUT** it is **NOT** an emergency!

An alarm activates when a detector has detected movement within the property – this is known as an “intruder signal”. If you operate a panic device in an emergency this sends a “panic signal” to the monitoring centre.

So in selecting an alarm company the important thing to establish is what action it takes when either an intruder or panic alarm signal is received. From my contact with various companies their responses can be divided into three main groups, although there are some variations:

- Company A - For both panic and intruder alarms signals, the company attempts to contact you first of all, but if you cannot be reached they inform the police either through a recorded message or by making a telephone call and rely on the police to respond.
- Company B - In case of an intruder alarm the company attempt to call you before responding themselves. If all is OK they do not respond, but if they cannot contact you they respond and having arrived at the scene establish whether there is an intruder on the premise and then call the police if there is. In case of a panic alarm they call police straight away.
- Company C - For both panic and intruder alarms the company respond straight away. On the way to the scene they attempt to contact you to establish all is OK. If they contact you and all is OK they will then resume patrol. If there is no reply they continue to the scene and if they find intruders on the premises call the police. In case of a panic alarm they call the police before leaving.

In the case of Company A more reliance is placed on police, who have many other duties. In discussing this with police it is clear that around 90% of all calls are false resulting from either a) user error, b) the house is unoccupied and something has triggered the alarm- possibly a dog if an outside alarm or c) poorly installed devices. This results in a considerable waste of time to the police, poor use of their limited resources and detracts from other priorities. Owners should note that in repeated cases of a false alarm they can be fined.

For Companies B and C the situation is better and in the case of C this preferred in terms of speed of response.

Despite claims by certain companies, according to police, alarm companies do not have any special contractual arrangements with them in the Algarve (except for certain commercial premises) in reporting an intrusion compared to a report made by any citizen.

**Emergency Response Times**

It is important to establish what the likely response time is in the case of emergency. It should be noted that in most cases the responding vehicle does not come from the company's base but instead is a vehicle on patrol. This is known as the company's operating area. As such the response time is dictated by the distance the patrol vehicle is from your home at the time a call is received. Important questions to ask alarm companies are therefore a) what is the size of the patrol area and b) how many vehicles are on patrol at anyone time. From this it can be ascertained up to what time a vehicle could take to reach you. Clearly the larger the area and the lower the number of vehicles the longer it is likely to take.

As you can see selecting an alarm company and a suitable system needs to be treated in the same way as health insurance and financial investments. Firstly, it is essential to obtain independent advice beforehand, always have clear objectives of what you want the system to do for you; do not be pressured into buying an alarm by the first company that comes to your door and importantly ask the right questions. Reading this article together with those already on the Safe Communities Algarve Website will help you ensure you select the right company for your circumstances to protect your investment.

If you have any experiences good or bad in dealing with security alarm companies please let us know on [info@safecoommunitiesalgarve.com](mailto:info@safecoommunitiesalgarve.com) .

.....