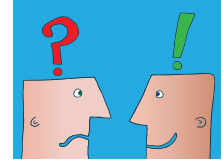


...choosing a security company

Unless you have received a personal recommendation, choosing a security company can seem daunting. Searching on the internet can present you with a wide choice of companies, all seeming to provide what you want. So how do you decide which one to choose? Your success in making the right choice depends on two key activities: thoroughly researching what functions and service you will get in return for your investment, and correctly assessing the expertise and professionalism of the company you choose. Here are the top ten criteria you need to investigate along with the questions you need to ask to be confident of making an informed decision.



1 Reputation **How long have you been in business?**

A company that has been in business for some time will be well-tested and have a relatively large customer base. It is also more likely to be able to weather a difficult economic climate and less likely to fold leaving you to repeat your selection process or write-off any of your investment. Can the company tell you how many customers it has? Can it provide you with customer testimonials?

2 Product knowledge **What product ranges do you use?**

Products and technologies are constantly changing. Try to establish how knowledgeable your prospective security company is, what product options and choices are available to you, and how the company embraces new technologies. Ask what areas of security it covers – alarms, access control, CCTV, and so on, and be confident that they can meet any future requirements you may have.

3 Customer-centric advice **How do you decide what is best for me?**

A company that sees itself as a trusted advisor should help you decide what's right for you and not try to impose a one-size-fits-all solution – the right solution might not necessarily have all the features that are available. Make sure when you receive your estimate that the company has really listened to your requirements and taken into account your budget and any other constraints you have stipulated. If you are in a listed building, you might want to deal with an installer that has experience working in this kind of environment and understands the challenges it may present.

4 Breadth of service **What sort of ongoing customer care do you provide?**

Regular maintenance of your security system will ensure peace of mind and should avoid the need for expensive emergency call-outs. Reputable companies will offer a range of service levels to suit your budget and the system being installed. They should be able to offer a committed date and time for maintenance visits. Ask whether there is a dedicated customer service function and find out how they handle customer calls out of office hours – do you have to call a mobile number or is there seamless continuity of service via a landline? Will they come out at weekends? Do they guarantee 24/7 support 365 days a year?

5 Tailored security **Can you offer a system design service in-house?**

If you have more complex security requirements, you will probably want to choose a security company with a specialist design team, experienced in producing bespoke solutions. These specialists should also be able to advise you on legal requirements (such as privacy issues related to CCTV), and health and safety issues. The better companies will be able to create CAD (Computer-Aided Design) drawings so that you can properly visualise the final installation and can accurately assess the impact and viability of different options.

6 Staff quality

How do you ensure your employees are trustworthy and competent?

The staff of your chosen installer may come into your home or business and have access to passwords and security codes to physical areas and computer systems. You need to be absolutely certain that they are trustworthy. Does the company carry out police checks on its staff? Equally important is the staff's ability to resolve problems and deal with any issues you may have. How does the company train its staff? Is it endorsed by any third parties such as Investors in People, the national standard for investment in training and development? You may also want to check how the company complies with health and safety requirements, and the levels of public and product liability insurance it carries.

7 Responsiveness

How quickly can you get back to me?

Asking for a quick turnaround on your quote can be a simple and effective way of assessing how rapidly the company is likely to respond if you need to call on it in future. Can they give you a price the same day or next day? Ask what their process is for responding to emergencies. Do they guarantee response time?

8 Total cost of ownership

What additional charges am I likely to incur?

Don't automatically plump for the company which comes in with the lowest quote. It is highly likely that a company charging more will also give you more in the long run. Ask for a detailed specification of the equipment and ask whether you will own the equipment or be leasing it. Secondly, find out if the cost covers other customer and support features such as technology upgrades, handover training, and ongoing maintenance and monitoring. You should also check how long the warranty lasts and what exactly it covers. What, for example, will happen if something goes wrong and you need to call someone out as an emergency – how much will you be charged? For commercial installations, can the company provide training to new staff in the future?

9 Industry validation

What industry accreditations do you have?

If the company has a sound foundation and follows best practices it will no doubt have some sort of industry accreditations. There are several badges that you could look for but some of the best are Gold awards from the NSI (National Security Inspectorate) which promotes compliance with relevant British and European Standards as well as the requirements of the police and the insurance industry, and membership of the FSA (Fire and Security Association) which works to improve professionalism in the industry by supporting the development of technical and occupational standards, apprenticeship schemes and training programmes. A reputable company will not have any problem with you asking for this information.

10 Testimonials and references

Can I speak to your existing customers?

There are two advantages to being put in touch with a company's existing customers. One is that it demonstrates the company's confidence in its work and service. The other is that it gives you an opportunity to delve a bit deeper into what level of service you can expect. Clearly the company is unlikely to get you to speak to someone who says they wouldn't recommend it, but you can look into how smooth the whole process was by asking about aspects such as how the company behaved if they were going to be late – did someone phone to let the client know? Was anything damaged during installation and, if so, did the company make good? Most importantly, would the customer use the company again?

Chris Lewis Fire & Security designs, installs and maintains a complete range of fire and security systems for residential and commercial customers. The company's experience, dedication to customer satisfaction and innovatively designed solutions are reflected in a host of industry awards, including both Best Security Installer and Best IT Initiative accreditation at the Security Excellence Awards.