



## The Lock America Story

It is important to recognize that Lock America entered the retail lock industry from the security lock business. Security is their foundation, and that foundation informs all of their decisions for their retail division, and it always will. Lock America's CEO and co-founder, Frank Minnella, entered the security lock business as Market Development Manager for Abloy Security Locks, in the late 1970's, just when the vending and amusement business was ready to boom, with the first blockbuster video game—Pac Man. Pong and some primitive video games had made a splash, but once Pac Man hit, as many as 20,000 units a month were being put on location all over North America, and they all needed locks. Frank saw the opportunity to provide maximum security for those machines. "You couldn't use shipper locks.

They were fragile and unreliable and there was no key security. These amusement machines were making a lot of money and every operator wanted to protect his coin box. I told them that shipper locks were all keyed the same. They realized that they had to replace these locks with high security locks that guaranteed their own unique keycodes. Our business took off, and vending and amusement began to replace coin-operated laundry as our major market."

And that's when the concept of Lock America was born. "I thought, if I can do this well in a corporation, why not go out on my own."

And in 1982, that's what he did. He set up an independent security business with Steve Shaio, currently Lock America's President, becoming the exclusive North American distribution and assembly facility for an established security products manufacturer. Working with Steve, who warehoused and assembled the product in his garage, each day, Frank would go out and sell locks, and Steve would out go to his day job as a "plant pathologist." Each night they would meet in Steve's garage and assemble locks from 6:00 pm to 10:00 pm. Eventually they rented a small warehouse, and became a real business, with Steve in the office and Frank out on the road.

From that point, what would become Lock America began to grow. In those days, Frank would go out on five week road trips, recognizing the critical importance of actually visiting customers and prospects to learn the security problems of operators and coming up with solutions. Nowadays, the "road trip" can get pretty expensive, but Lock America's Sales Reps still "hit the road," in between trade shows, which have of course grown in importance since Lock America's early days.

"We still need to see, first hand, what is going on out there, if we are going to design products that will improve the level of security our products can provide. Even with all the shows, and we make most of them, I don't want to stop visiting customers. I'm old school. To me, selling in the security business is more like consulting, and that type of relationship still needs to be person to person."

In 1984, Frank and Steve bought their first computer, becoming one of the first companies of their size to recognize the value of customer data. The system was so well designed that much of it is still the basis for Lock America's present customer service program. "All of our customers have registered keys, and that is what separates us from other companies in the lock business."

Frank never forgot the value of learn-

ing from the road. "At Abloy, I learned how to prospect a territory, and in the early years, I'd hit the road in a car, and make twenty calls a day. No cell phone, no Blackberry, no Mapquest, not even a lead list. I'd get to a city, buy a map, get a hotel room, and map out every company that I thought could use 'high security' locks. For the next five days, I would try to see everyone on that list. We still supply locks to a lot of those original customers."

As the business grew, Frank and Steve retooled and redesigned products, re-

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organized the product line, and added new retail packaged lines such as Champion and Mr. Lock. They added inside and outside sales reps, and incorporated as Lock America in 1989.

In addition to the core security lock business in vending, amusement and laundry, Lock America is also a presence in the self-storage industry, delivering a range of security products from high end locks based on the vending and amusement products to mid-range padlocks and retail packaged locks. Lock America even publishes an industry quarterly magazine, The Self-Storage Telegram, with a circulation of over 20,000 readers. One of Frank's goals in the future is to publish a security lock magazine for Lock America's other markets.

But before starting another publishing venture, Lock America will be growing its international business. In 1996, they set up their first international distributorship, Lock Distributors of Sydney [Australia] to service the Australasian market. In 2000, Lock America opened its second international service center, in Guadalajara, Mexico, and a third opened in 2005 in Europe.

Customer service has always driven the company. A number of employees have been with Lock America for ten years or more, in the manufacturing and customer service areas. "We try to be fair to our employees and to our

customers, by giving them the tools they need to do their jobs."

Frank adds that "We listen to our customers. It's their feedback that helps us to redesign and refine our products. . . It is important that our customer service people stay with us. It takes a long time for them to learn how to counsel a customer who has a security problem. Our people are not taught to take orders. They are taught how to solve the many different security problems that our clients will run into over the years." Supplying locks to these various types of clients has taught Lock America that every client is unique.

Treating customers and employees with respect and courtesy is a key to Lock America's success, and so is knowing the customer. That knowledge is built on a database of over 58,000 accounts, not simply of names, but of sales history and key code registration. Key control is essential for a lock company that services the vending, coin-op, gaming and newspaper industries in addition to self-storage. Key control based on that database gives Lock America's customer service reps the tools they need to service their customers. "I didn't get into this business to make money. I got into this business to build, and we built Lock America one customer at a time, and every one of them is important to us. Sometimes we don't hear from them for a few years, but when we do, there they are, right on the database. We never forget about a customer. We listen to them, and give them what they need. That's the philosophy we started with, and that's the only one we'll ever have."

