A License To Steal

Walter T. Shaw is considered the world's most notorious (former) jewel thief. His long-awaited memoir, “A License To Steal,” chronicles the saga of his father, probably one of the most important inventors of our time, who was ripped off by corporate America and the mafia, and how this drove Walter himself to become one of the country's most infamous jewel thieves, having taken an estimated $70 million from the rich and famous from Long Island to Florida. Below are some of Walter’s Home Security Tips.

Stop blabbing

"Americans tend to tell everyone they're going on vacation, a weekend getaway or a business trip," Shaw says.

And chances are you've told the person cutting your hair, standing next to you on the sidelines of your kid's soccer game, bagging your groceries, cleaning your carpet or changing the oil in your car that you're heading out of town. Shaw has sage advice: Shut up.

"Stop treating strangers like they're your best friend," says Shaw, who was in the burglary "business" from 1969 to the late 1980s.

He says thieves have informants everywhere. In fact, some of Shaw's best tipsters were carpet installers, hairstylists and bank workers. "These folks were often told about a customer's upcoming trip and gave us the details, making it very easy to plan our 'visit' to the house," he says.

Protect your rear

Whether it's for show or you truly are monitoring your property, it's common to plant a sign in the front yard warning that your home is protected by a security system, or to stick a decal on a few windows in the front of your house, just in case a would-be burglar is strolling by.

Shaw says homeowners often forget that thieves typically case out -- and enter from -- the back of the house.

"Adding those decals and signs to rear flower beds, doors and windows might make a thief think twice about finding out whether there really is an alarm or not," Shaw says. "The No. 1 way into a home is through the French doors or sliding doors in the back."

Shaw says he and his crew always came in through the back and left that way, too. "The police come from the front. So I go via the back to avoid running into them."
Speaking of alarms, Shaw says homeowners should activate them at all times, even when they're home.

"Homeowners don't turn their alarms on when they're at home, which is nuts. Why wouldn't you want that safety, since many burglars will rob you even if you are home? In fact, 90% of the homes we went into had alarm systems that weren't on."

**Don't underestimate daylight**

Bright sunlight offers homeowners a warm sense of security. After all, daylight makes it easy to spot someone entering your home through a window or busting down a door, right?

Shaw says sure, but that's not the way most thieves get in. In fact, a pro can get into your home in less than 30 seconds and do so without making a lot of noise or creating a ruckus.

"Thieves are doing more and more day jobs than ever before, because that's when homes are empty. Usually men are at work, and if a woman isn't also working outside the home, she's at the grocery store, running kids around town, doing errands and other things that take her away from the home," Shaw says.

"That makes daytime jobs preferable because there's a great chance no one is home."

**Fix your doorbell**

If your doorbell or buzzer is broken, how can you hear a thief posing as a solicitor at your door -- especially when you're upstairs or in the basement?

Shaw says burglars ring doorbells to see if anyone is home.

"Thieves, especially desperate ones who are junkies looking for something to sell to fund a fix, love to go through the motions of getting solicitor's permits -- or faking them -- to case out neighborhoods and see who's home during the day," Shaw says.

If you don't answer because you don't know someone is at the door, you may run into an unwelcome visitor in your home who thought you weren't there.

"An empty house is an inviting one to a crook," Shaw says.

**Don't believe Hollywood**

Makers of movies and TV shows have it all wrong, Shaw says. Rarely do thieves don president-lookalike masks, pantyhose, face coverings or clown suits to pull a job. And they generally don't wear gloves, either.
“Thieves are arrogant; they don’t think they’ll be caught. And they’re not the least bit worried that a neighbor will be able to get a good enough look to give a description to the cops,” Shaw says.

However, they do have an Achilles’ heel. “They don’t have the time -- or in many cases the talent -- to disable surveillance systems,” Shaw says. “And they don’t want video surveillance of them rummaging through your home winding up in the cops’ hands or worse, on the evening news for their own neighbor to finger them.”

Video surveillance systems are a crook’s kryptonite. So make sure those alarm signs, stickers and placards you decorate your front and back yard with include the note that you have video surveillance equipment.

Shaw says burglars don’t know where the feed is being recorded, so they’re likely to pass right by your home.

"The footage could be captured offsite, so the moment they enter the home, it's too late. They've been caught on candid camera,” Shaw says.

Let your dog bark

A dog’s bark -- not his bite -- is scary. But not the dogs you think.

Don't waste your time or money buying and training big, ferocious-looking attack dogs.

Score one for the cuddly faces of Bichons and other little dogs, because Shaw says it’s the little yappers that send thieves running with their tails between their legs.

"Little yappy dogs are a huge turnoff. I would never go into a house that has one. They're a huge deterrent because they just don't stop barking and can be heard by neighbors or their owners if you're checking out the house a day before going in," Shaw says.

So give Fluffy a bone for keeping the house safe.

Your kitchen is a sanctuary

"I always kept my safe in the kitchen; because that's the absolute last place robbers go. I never went into a kitchen," Shaw says.

That's because kitchens are typically in the middle of the house, and going into them takes too much time and there are too many places to look for valuables in there. "We wanted to be in and out quickly," Shaw explains.

If the kitchen is the last place a thief will stop, what's the first? The master bedroom.
"That's the first place thieves go, because that's where the jewelry, smart phones and other electronics are kept," Shaw says.

So stash your valuables inside cereal boxes and fake soup cans. That's the last place burglars will look, Shaw says.

**They pick trash**

It might seem convenient, but taking your trash out the night before trash day gives the bad guy's time to see what you bought last week.

"People love to flaunt what they have. They toss the box from a new flat screen out on the curb and even throw bills and statements in the trash. That's asking to have your identity stolen and tells thieves you've got great electronics inside they can sell," Shaw says.

Even a new appliance tips off crooks that you have valuables. "If you can afford a new high-end washer, what other high-priced things are in your home?" he says.

Shaw says if you have anything delivered; make sure the company that brings it hauls everything away. "The same truck that delivers the new stove should haul away the box and packaging."

**You're in control**

Shaw says "little things" will protect homeowners. For instance, lock your doors and windows, don't let newspapers pile up when you're on vacation and trim bushes so they don't become screens for thieves to hide behind.

"Robbers love it when homeowners forget to do the easy little things that make their jobs easy," Shaw says.