

BUSTED: "Dateline NBC" Exposes Garage Door Technicians Precision Door of Phoenix in National Spotlight

By Tom Wadsworth, Editor

On Sunday night, May 15, "Dateline NBC" turned its hidden cameras on garage door technicians in a special "Hansen Files" episode on the reliability of home repairmen in the Phoenix area.

Two technicians were caught on camera attempting to sell items that the homeowner didn't need. Adding insult to injury, the technician from Precision Door of Phoenix used profanity on camera after being exposed by NBC's Chris Hansen.

No, it's not the image of our profession that we'd like broadcast on national television to four million viewers.

Door & Access Systems could ignore this story and pretend it didn't happen. But our industry can fight this problem only by facing it head on. Fighting the problem openly has been our constant approach ever since "Dateline NBC" first exposed the problem in January 2002.

In this feature report, we will reveal what happened in this new "Dateline" episode, how Precision Door has responded, and we'll bring other key details to light. Our goal, as always, is to lead the industry to higher levels of professionalism.

Behind the "Dateline" Cameras

The May 15 episode turned its hidden cameras on home repairmen for pool equipment, air conditioners, and water heaters. Why did they also choose garage door technicians?

"Nearly all homeowners have a garage door," said Dan Slepian, producer of the May 15 "Dateline NBC" show, "but my guess is very few understand how the mechanism works or what it should cost to repair."

He told us they selected the Phoenix area because a homeowner (Jenny) in Scottsdale was willing to open her house to their crew. The taping of the garage door technicians took place on March 24 and 25.

Andy Pomroy, Windsor Door Sales

For the garage door segment, "Dateline" secured a garage door expert, Andy Pomroy of Windsor Door Sales, an IDEA-accredited company in Albuquerque, N.M. Pomroy has been in the industry for 15 years. He told us he was selected partly because he had no axe to grind against anyone in the Phoenix market.

Slepian said, "We searched across the country for someone we thought was the most




Andy Pomroy
"Dateline's" garage door expert

objective, informed, and honest expert with a great reputation. Andy rose to the top of that list."

Fix Two Simple Problems

Pomroy created two common and minor problems that would require a service call: (1) one photoeye was tilted so that the two eyes were out of alignment, and (2) the vacation button was pressed to disable the remote controls. The technician simply needed to press the vacation switch and straighten the photoeye.

"I'm confident that most folks in our industry would agree it does not get any more basic than a lock button or a bumped photoeye," Pomroy told us.



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To make sure that nothing else was needed, “Dateline” also installed a new opener on the day before the shooting. It was dusted up to look older, and Pomroy told us that a 2007 sticker was placed on the back of the unit so it wouldn’t be obvious that the opener was new. Pomroy added that the door also had new 10-ball rollers and two new springs installed just prior to his arrival on March 24.

Before each technician arrived, Pomroy inspected the entire system to ensure that it was in perfect working order ... except for the vacation switch and the photoeyes. Hidden cameras were placed in several garage locations to capture all the action.

Selecting the Technicians

In all, Jenny called 10 garage door companies to come fix her garage door. Pomroy didn’t help with the selection, but he did send NBC a copy of “Bad Bob’s Yellow Pages Scheme,” an article from our spring 2003 issue.

“We selected the companies randomly through their advertisements,” said NBC’s Slepian. Pomroy thought that the companies

were selected from the Internet or the Yellow Pages.

Eight Out of 10

The good news is that eight of the 10 door technicians correctly diagnosed the problem. “None charged Jenny more than \$75 for his time,” reported Hansen on the show.

“There are a lot of good door people out there,” Pomroy told us. “This is my chosen industry; I want us all to look good.”

Bad Tech #1: Shawn

Two technicians, however, didn’t look so good. The first one’s name was Shawn, but the name of his company was not revealed on or off the air. Slepian: “We cannot provide that information, although I can tell you that Shawn advertised on Craigslist.”

Pomroy thought that Shawn “really didn’t know what he was doing.” Although the cameras didn’t show it, Shawn was there about 45 minutes. “He finally got on the phone and spoke to someone who obviously told him what to look for,” Pomroy told us.

Without telling Jenny, Shawn replaced the photoeyes. “Remember, nothing is wrong

with them,” said Hansen on “Dateline.” “They are brand new.”

Shawn charged Jenny \$190 for the two photoeyes plus \$35 for the service call. “In all, \$225 for repairs that didn’t need to be done,” reported Hansen. “So I sit down with Shawn.”

Hansen walked into the garage, told Shawn that he’s on a “Dateline” story about repairmen, and accused him of charging Jenny for work that didn’t need to be done. “What do you say for yourself?” asked Hansen.

“Nothing,” said Shawn as he hastily made his exit to his truck.

Bad Tech #2: Rick

“The next day, here comes Rick from Precision Garage Doors, an independently owned franchise in Phoenix,” announced Hansen on “Dateline.” After looking over the problem, Rick came inside to break the bad news to Jenny.

“Your circuit board’s gone bad,” Rick said on hidden camera. “It’s giving your sensors issues basically.”

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Rick then proposed to replace the opener and told Jenny the bill would come to \$527.32.

"Five hundred and twenty-seven dollars to replace a perfectly working garage door opener that's less than a week old," said Hansen's voiceover on "Dateline." "I head downstairs to speak with Rick."

Trapped in the Garage

On hidden camera, Hansen entered the garage and asked Rick to explain the problem. "The circuit board is starting to have issues," explained Rick. "... It's causing the sensors to burn out."

Rick walked over to one of the photoeyes and kicked it off with his foot.

"And what did you just do there?" asked Hansen, still on hidden camera.

"I've taken these sensors off. You're getting new ones," Rick confidently announced.

"So the whole thing is shot then?" asked Hansen.

"It's going, yeah, it's not worth ... it's not worth repairing," said Rick.

With Rick on a ladder at the opener, Hansen finally came to the point: "You want to know what I think? I think you are trying to replace something that is working perfectly well," said Hansen.

"But it's not," objected Rick.

Still on hidden camera, Hansen said, "Well, you know, I know it's in good shape because I had it inspected before you got here, by experts."

You Lied to the Homeowner

Hansen then revealed, "There's something you need to know. I'm Chris Hansen with 'Dateline NBC.'" Two cameramen emerged as Hansen explained his view of what Rick did.

"What I think we just saw you do," said Hansen, "was take a perfectly good unit, lie to the homeowner ..."

"I didn't, though," objected Rick.

"Well, you *did*," said Hansen. "You took a brand new unit and you wanted to sell her something she didn't need."

Rick got off his ladder and began to pack up and leave.

"Wasting My ----- Time"

Hansen and the cameras followed Rick to his truck.

"Clearly, Rick wasn't happy that we put him to the test," said Hansen's voiceover.

"You're wasting my ... (censored by NBC) ... time," said Rick.

"Well, I think you wasted your own time,

if you want my opinion," replied Hansen. "If there's anything else you want people to know, we'd be happy to hear it."

"You should be busy out finding pedophiles, rather than doing this ... (censored by NBC)," said Rick, apparently in reference to Hansen's long-running "Dateline" episodes, "To Catch a Predator."

As a farewell, Rick said, "Have a good ... (censored by NBC) ... day."

Hansen: "You, too."

Precision Door Responds

On May 16, the day after the show aired, we called Precision Door of Phoenix to get their side of the story. We talked with Frank Hoffman, the general manager, who admitted that the technician (Rick) "behaved unprofessionally ... he should've never swore." But Hoffman adamantly contended, "We handled the diagnosis correctly."

Hoffman had three claims that weren't shown on the "Dateline" episode: (1) The opener was not new; it was a 2007 model. (2) The force settings were set on 8, both for up and down. (3) The opener had a 1/3-HP motor, but "it should be a 1/2-HP."

Contention #1: A 2007 Model

Since "Dateline" put a 2007 sticker on the back, we could understand why Hoffman contended that the opener was four years old. Yet, both "Dateline" and Pomroy confirmed that the opener was "brand new."

Regardless of whether it was 2007 or 2011, "Why would you replace a 2007 opener?" we asked Hoffman. "That opener should be fine."

Contention #2: Force Settings

"Rick found that the force settings were set on 8," he replied. "And he felt that the 1/3-HP (motor) was not adequate."

"So, why didn't he just reset the force settings?" we asked.

"With some openers, you can't adjust the force settings," Hoffman said. "So he felt that the circuit board was not working properly. It's a subjective call."

Yet, if Rick could tell that the force setting was on 8, it was probably not an opener that has self-learning force settings.

Andy Pomroy doubted that the force settings were on 8. He believed they were set on 2 or 3.

In addition, "We tested the door after each (technician's) visit to see if it would reverse properly," said Pomroy. "If it had been set on 8, it would've failed that reverse test."

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Contention #3: 1/3 HP

Was a 1/3-HP opener wrong for that door?

“No, it was perfectly fine,” said Pomroy. “The door was a non-insulated double-car garage door that balanced perfectly. There were no problems with the opener.”

We talked to three veteran engineers with leading operator manufacturers in the industry. They all confirmed that a 1/3-HP opener is adequate for that size door.

\$500 for an Opener?

“Dateline” announced that Precision Door’s bill for a new opener was \$527.32. Andy Pomroy told us that he was surprised at the price.

“It is certainly more than what we would charge,” said Pomroy of his dealership in Albuquerque. “We charge about half of that.”

Pomroy revealed that Rick actually offered Jenny a 1/2-HP opener for \$500 or a 3/4-HP opener for \$750. That information was not presented on “Dateline.”

Over the last nine years of our investigations into unscrupulous garage door repair companies, we’ve heard dozens of reports of companies that push their technicians to get the repair bill around \$400 or even \$500.

Roy Bardowell, a garage door industry veteran who has lived in the Phoenix area for 16 years, recalled seeing a classified ad in Craigslist from Precision Door of Phoenix. The ad’s wording stunned him, and it stuck in his mind.

He said the ad read like this: “Experienced installer, serviceman wanted. If you believe that a residential service call can be done for under \$500, do not apply.”

The Icing of the Pricing

So, we raised that issue to Frank Hoffman of Precision Door of Phoenix.

“When I interviewed Danny Edwards, the president of Precision Door, in 2006,” we said, “he told me that the average service call for Precision Door dealers nationwide was \$423. What’s your average ticket?”

“We’re less than \$423,” said Hoffman.

“Does that technician get a commission on the size of each ticket?” we asked.

“Yes, he does,” admitted Hoffman. “All our technicians do.”

Reprimand or Terminate?

Since Hoffman affirmed that Rick shouldn’t have used profanity, we wondered if Precision Door chose to discipline Rick.

“I reprimanded him for his behavior,” said Hoffman, “but not for his diagnosis.”

“I’m not going to fire him for this,” he

added. “I’ve told him that if this happens again, there will be more-final consequences. He’s a very good technician, and he’s been with us for many years. We’ve never had a complaint about him before.”

The Response From Precision’s Headquarters

Precision Door of Phoenix is one of 70 Precision Door franchises throughout the nation. In 2006, we visited its headquarters in Titusville, Fla., to ask several direct questions about common accusations against the company. (That interview was the cover story of our fall 2006 issue, available on our website.)

“What he did is not what we teach – that’s not how we conduct business or want to be known.”

After we spoke with Precision Door of Phoenix, we called the Titusville headquarters and talked to Bill Walden, company president, and Ron Boyter, director of operations.

When we told them that Rick had been reprimanded, they said, “The jury’s still out on that.” Two days later, on May 18, Ron Boyter emailed us the message: “The technician has been terminated.”

“It Looks Very Bad”

Walden and Boyter were clearly upset about how their company had been portrayed on national television.

“To me, it looks very bad,” said Walden. “The technician’s conduct is absolutely intolerable. What he did is not what we teach – that’s not how we conduct business or want to be known.”

“It’s just plain sad,” added Boyter, “as hard as we’ve worked to put customer service and ethics standards in place to ensure that nothing like this ever happens.”

One Bad Apple

Walden said that all Precision Door franchises were notified about the “Dateline” show.

“They’re very upset,” he said. “It obviously doesn’t reflect positively on the company. One bad apple can spoil the whole bunch.”

“Our competitors are sending video clips around,” he added. “We’re not happy that the behavior of a single technician in this

one incident is being used against our other franchise locations.”

“He (Rick) is just one technician out of approximately 400,” added Boyter. “We’re a different organization now than we were five years ago.” He added that “99.9 percent” of the technicians who were with Precision Door at its founding in 1999 are no longer with Precision Door.

“We will probably issue a default against this franchise,” stated Walden. He explained that a default means the franchise is “put on written notice that you’re not adhering to our standards. If you get three, you’re terminated.”

The PDS 1/3-HP Policy

While talking with Walden and Boyter, we wanted to know if Precision Door technicians are trained to replace 1/3-HP openers with 1/2-HP openers.

“Not necessarily,” said Boyter. “We recommend 1/2-HP on a 16x7 if that’s what the manufacturer recommends. But a 1/3-HP opener can be fine. We don’t change out openers to a 1/2-HP model just because it’s a 1/3. It depends on the balance (of the door).”

“Dateline” Training

Walden said that the “Dateline” program has prompted Precision’s headquarters to push for several changes. Specifically, their plans include mandatory standards training for all employees and a review of customer service protocol and the hiring/employee screening process.

“I hope that every one of our technicians watches this (“Dateline” episode),” concluded Walden. “We’re going to use that clip as part of our training moving forward.” ■

To comment on this story, send an e-mail to the editor at trw@tomwadsworth.com. As of this writing, the “Dateline NBC” clip (Part 4 of the May 15 “Hansen Files” episode) was available at www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032600/#43033148.

Editor’s update: On May 16, we sought input from Charan Gohlwar, owner of the Precision Door of Phoenix franchise. He replied to our emailed questions 10 days later, after our stated deadline and after this story was finalized. Gohlwar said he did not agree with Frank Hoffman’s comment that Rick’s diagnosis was correct. Gohlwar: “The technician completely misdiagnosed the problem.” Gohlwar also confirmed that Precision Door’s headquarters had issued a notice of default against his franchise.