

RAISING THE BAR IN SECURITY

Despite the good and often dangerous work carried out by the security industry in Ireland in general, the industry as a whole tends to have something of a bad reputation among the public. This reputation, often unfounded, is mainly thanks to a small number of rogue operators, either within the door security or alarm installer trades. But the establishment of the Private Security Authority (PSA) and the subsequent licensing of the industry should have the effect not only of regulating the industry, but also of enhancing its profile in general.

To date, companies providing door security and security guarding services, as well as alarm installers, have had to apply for a licence. Indeed, the crucial date for alarm installers to have applied for a licence was 1 August, and to date, about 350 installers have applied. And to cover them in the period while their applications are being considered, the PSA is providing documentation called Section 52 letters - so anyone looking to employ a company subject to licence should look for either a licence or a Section 52 letter, because to even employ a non-

licensed company is an offence.

"We feel that compliance levels are quite high, based on the applicant numbers that we have received," said Damien Ward, press officer with the PSA. "But we have inspectors out there, and have also set up an online facility for people to report companies who they feel are not licensed."

Still, according to some industry sources, licensing will count for little if it is not backed up by enforcement and efforts from within the industry itself.

"We're for anything that raises the bar within the industry," said Emmet O'Rafferty, chairman of Top Security, a leading Irish security company which employs about 2,000 people in Ireland and internationally. "And if licensing is enforced to the standards which have been set out, then it will be good for everybody. But if it is not enforced, then some companies will work hard to comply, while others may not comply, leading to an unequal situation."

Even with licensing, though, O'Rafferty believes that it is down to the industry itself to ensure that standards are maintained.

"To begin with, we would like to

see stronger representation from the security industry on the PSA," he said. "But overall, the perception of the industry by the market needs to be worked on by the industry itself, because licensing on its own won't up the standards. In general, the industry does provide a top service, but it is not perceived as that, and it is too easy to knock what is being done because of the actions of a few."

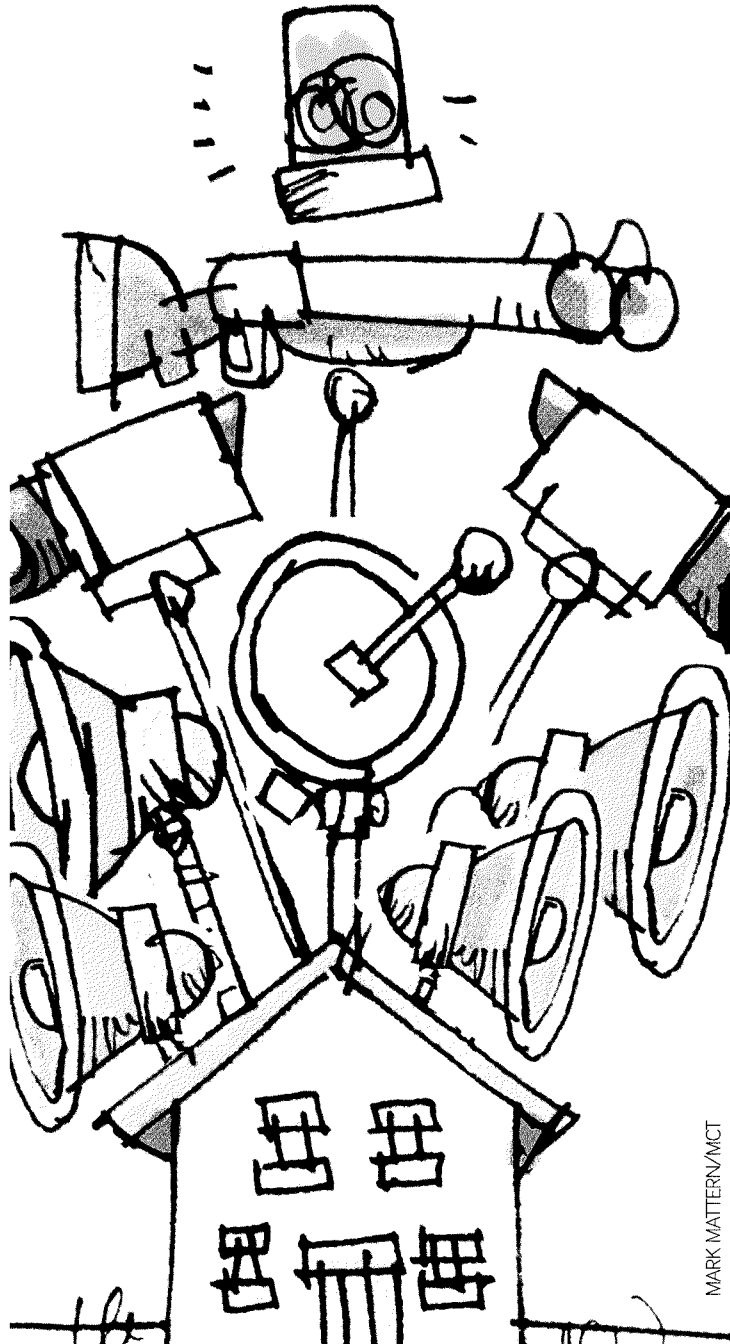
One area where the industry has upped its standards has been in the business of alarm installation - perhaps coincidentally one of the first sectors to require a licence. Indeed, in the last 12 months, the industry has reduced the number of false alarms by 80 per cent, thereby ensuring for the most part that gardaí respond to genuine calls.

"I feel that licensing will have a positive impact on the security industry in general," said Nick Quigley, chief executive of Eircom Phonewatch, probably Ireland's best-known provider of monitored alarm systems. "Any company which is serious about the business of installing, maintaining and monitoring alarm systems will benefit from it, in that the PSA will legitimise the whole security industry."

However, even licensing will not, in itself, force individual home owners to choose the best alarm systems for them

- although Quigley hopes that the obvious advantages of properly working systems and monitored alarms would encourage the public to make an informed decision.

"There are many people installing alarms who are not in the business for the long term," he said. "But if a system is properly maintained, it will last longer, and will work properly. Monitoring has been a huge seller for us, in that the Gardaí will not respond to an alarm which is not monitored and which does not have a unique reference number (a number assigned to the system upon installation which the monitoring station will quote to the Gardaí). And insurance companies will tend to offer a greater discount for a monitored alarm."



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