Getting tough with burglars

New technology provides protection

The crime statistics may say that burglaries are down from a decade ago. But public perception is moving in the other direction, and so is business at Acadia Alarm Systems.

That concern about personal and property security, plus a marketing idea adapted from the electronics industry, are keeping Raymond Dore in front of his computer screen and Shane Guilbeau in several local attics this summer.

Dore monitors alarm calls for Acadia Alarm. When somebody breaks into a covered home or business, Dore determines whether the alarm was tripped by accident — a power failure, a cat, an absentminded homeowner — or a burglar.

Guilbeau is an installer. He runs the wires that connect in-home sensors to a control panel in each home.

Guilbeau does that a lot these days. Acadia Alarm recently began offering homeowners a basic alarm system worth about $900 in exchange for the homeowner's three-year commitment to use Acadia Alarm's monitoring service at $30 a month, the commitment is about $1,000.

The gamble is that the homeowner will stay with the company beyond the three-year commitment.

Larry Comeaux, the sales manager, wouldn't discuss how many people have signed on recently with Acadia Alarm. But July's residential installations were on course to double the number of sales before the installation offer began.

Skyscattering homicide rates, inner city violence and a new tendency by the media to report local crime nationally have fueled the perception that crime as a whole is increasing.

In Lafayette, that's true, when all the major crime categories are considered together. And since Acadia Alarm owner Andy Speyer's started the company in his garage in 1981, even small cities have seen troubling trends in crime — car-jackings, crack cocaine, gang violence, guns at school.

But the numbers of Lafayette home and auto burglaries, thefts, rapes, and stolen cars are all roughly the same or down slightly from 1986.

At the same time, the technology that drives computers, radio and telephone communications, and miniaturization has advanced by large leaps. So homeowners have new tools to protect their premises.

Robert Harris, Acadia Alarm's public relations man, says the tools include motion sensors that back up wired doors and windows, rate-of-rise thermometers that go off when a rapid increase in temperature indicates a fire; and auditory sensors that are tripped by the sound of broken glass.

Another piece of important equipment is low-tech; The sign that identifies a home as an alarm-system customer.

"Burglars want the easy way," Harris said. "They want to get in and out easy... Our business is not catching burglars. Our business is deterring burglars."

The company's business is also marketing. Harris, a sometimes commercial actor who has also recorded a Cajun Christmas album, visits schools for anti-crime talks. He's accompanied by someone wearing the costume of Pichon the Protective Pissum, the company mascot.

Salesmen are billed as security consultants who will develop fire-escape plans and suggest security improvements that have nothing to do with alarms — buying timers for lights, having neighbors pick up mail during vacations.

The day begins with a meeting of the installers. Some will pre-wire houses under construction. Others, like Guilbeau, will do the wiring and control-panel installation for a new customer not far from Acadia Alarm's

Please see Getting, A-5
Getting: Tough

headquarters at 300 Mecca Drive. I'm supposed to help Guilbeau. He's moving too fast for me.

Guilbeau opens half a dozen spools of wire, pulls the ends through the attic door and moves around the attic, putting the wires where they belong and managing not to stick a foot through the ceiling in the process. My work is mostly freeing wires snagged by 2-by-4's.

Guilbeau works according to a plan developed by the family and the security consultants. They consider factors such as whether a burglar is likely to enter from the front or back, whether he'll break a window or pry it open, and whether a hedge or a broken light would shield a burglar while he works.

Harris said burglars use doors to get in 92 percent of the time.

When Guilbeau is done, the family is connected to Acadiana Alarm's monitoring station. An activated alarm alerts the station, where a dispatcher calls the homeowner back to make sure the alarm is an accident.

If the dispatcher can't confirm the mistake, he or she calls the police. Acadiana keeps a file on each customer, and the file can tell officers about the layout of the house and other information.

The monitoring station has its own generator, and radio transmitters in homes back up the phone link. Power failures and downed phone lines don't disrupt the monitoring.

If all the redundant systems fail, the dispatchers can communicate with police by cellular phones using information from computer printouts updated frequently.

The station itself is like a small fort. The single entrance is guarded by an electronic lock and an iron gate.

On the wall is a shotgun. I ask Dore whether he had to take a gun course to work in the station.

"Nope," he said. "The Marine Corps took care of that."

The security measures give the station a sort of "Andromeda Strain" feeling, but on my afternoon there the biggest problem was a nearby thunderstorm that tripped alarms by disrupting power.

"One lady wanted to know if your TV would set off the motion detector, with the people moving around," Dore said. "I said no. ... And I asked her why she just didn't shut it off, and she said, 'I had to leave it on to record a program.' I was through with that."

Another call came in to the station while Dore and Troy Dalbor were on duty: "She burned some toast. I know you probably have to send somebody, but you don't have to send the whole nine yards."