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The best protection: What businesses need to know before hiring a security company

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Good security is a tangible service, and the absence of it can be disastrous for real estate managers and owners. When choosing a security company to protect both people and property, experience matters most.

While the 1992 New York State Security Guard Act helps to safeguard companies from the risks of on-site protection staff with questionable backgrounds, the best investment businesses can make is to choose a security partner based on trust and expertise.

Ask the following questions before contracting with a protection agency:

* Does the security firm have relevant security experience?

Each type of business has unique security needs. Commercial property protection is different from securing residential property. College campuses require different security services than manufacturing plants. A security partner needs to understand the specific risks faced by the particular client facility and have experience mitigating those dangers.

* Does the firm have solid connections with law enforcement and regulatory agencies?

A security company's relationship with local law enforcement is crucial, especially during emergencies. If a firm's employees are not well-respected by police officers or sheriff deputies, a business can be vulnerable to slower response times and uncooperative support. A security company's reputation with the New York State Licensing Division is also a key factor because it ensures that guards are properly licensed and trained.

* Does the security firm have strong and solid financials?

A check with Dunn and Bradstreet or another financial reporting agency will provide important information about a firm's financial strength or weakness. A security company that does not pay required payroll and state taxes can result in an unexpected interruption or cancellation of services. Reliable firms will eagerly furnish bank references and a letter of good standing. Strong banking relationships also mean the company may be able to offer better payment options, an important consideration given the current state of the economy.

* Are supervisors and management personnel accessible 24 hours a day in case of emergencies?

The unexpected always happens. When it does, clients need quick access and reassurance that their property is protected by a high-quality, rapid-response team that is available any time, night or day.

* How does the security firm supervise its employees?

Different security companies use different methods of tracking and supervising the work habits of their employees. The most effective and creative supervision includes unexpected rounding by different managers at various times of the day and night. Frequent supervisory visits allow for objective observation of how a guard is performing his or her duties in the field. And, if remediation

or removal is needed, the best security companies will make appropriate adjustments on behalf of the client.

* What types of background checks does the security firm perform before hiring an employee?

The state security guard mandate requires basic background checks and screenings before licensure. Security firms that go beyond the basics and perform more extensive screenings and assessments will provide clients with the highest quality guards. Integrity screening, such as drug testing and personal reference checks, combined with psychological assessments provide both objective and subjective information about a candidate's ability to provide high-caliber protection.

* What kind of training does the security firm provide to employees beyond state requirements?

Rigorous training programs, such as intensive on-site training and industry-specific instruction, prepare security guards to respond to a variety of challenges and situations. Because security guards are often the first person a visitor sees and talks with when they enter a building, guards need to be trained in customer service and public relations to best represent the client.

* Does management stay involved in security operations, even after the contract is signed?

The best security comes from continuous communication, both at the facility and through frequent dialogue between the client's management and the vendor's management. Regular interaction allows the security company to better understand client needs, quickly respond to questions and take corrective action as soon as problems occur.

* Does the security firm have a quality assurance program?

Clients should have an opportunity to provide feedback to a security firm through customer satisfaction questionnaires or quality audits. These tools provide the security firm valuable information to gauge performance ratings and make appropriate adjustments to enhance service.

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