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Playing It Safe

Danger, Danger Everywhere, But Take Heart-there's A Gadget, Device Or Contraption To Ward Off Any Threat

May 27, 1990 | By Stan Sinberg.

You're about to have a very bad day. You're jolted awake by a tremendously loud siren. The smoke is as thick as bad Los Angeles smog, but your Light Alert fire alarm automatically shines a beacon that guides you to the door. Covering your face with your Emergency Face Mask, you frantically attempt to make it to your child's room. All seems hopeless, but you look down and there she is. She found you by listening to Vocalert, a talking fire alarm with a programmable computer voice that calmed her down and directed her straight to your room.

Still, you're on the 10th floor, the fire-department crew hasn't arrived yet and the flames are drawing nearer. Suddenly, you remember an item in your briefcase-the Exit Traveler, a portable fire ladder. This contraption, which you've lugged from hotel to hotel, weighs only a few pounds but unfolds to reach 12 stories down. Hooking it onto your window, you get on it, and its automatic pulley system slowly lowers you and your child to the ground.

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A futuristic fantasy? A 21st Century wish list?

No. Talking fire alarms and portable fire ladders are only a couple of recent entries in the booming safety- and security-products market that are rapidly appearing in all areas of everyday life.

How many times, for instance, have people recoiled in shock and even actually been burned when the water coming out of their showerhead suddenly reaches scalding temperature? But you've provided against that with Shower Guard, which automatically maintains a safe mixture of cold and hot water. In your haste, you slip on the soap but avoid falling because you held onto your Shower Guard Rail and you've sprayed the bottom of your bathtub with Slip Stop, an anti-slip product. Before leaving the house, you check your Radon Gas Detector and Microwave Detector to make sure you don't return to a radioactive home without your knowing it.

Making your way past Mrs. Rafferty's menacing pit bull, you calmly flick on your Dazzler, an ultrasonic dog deterrent that drives Bowzer away with a high-frequency sound. As you get into your car, you note the presence of Security Bear on the back seat. It looks like a child's harmless teddy bear, but should anyone try to break into the car, it emits a shrieking, piercingly loud alarm that can scare away would-be thieves who wouldn't even know where the alert is coming from.

Whether we're actually living in more hazardous times or it just appears so because of never-ending crime shows, sensationalized news broadcasts and an increased awareness of environmental issues is open to debate. What's certain, though, is that people FEEL more threatened than before, and the market for safety- and security-related products is growing by leaps and bounds.

Just ask the couple who opened The Safety Zone, a store in Woodbridge, N.J., that stocks nothing but safety and security products. The owners, Tony Lee and Melanie Franklin, two transplanted Britons, came up with the idea when they kept encountering friends who were having accidents and mishaps.

The bright ``We're here to help you`` atmosphere of The Safety Zone represents a fundamental change in the way security devices are marketed. You used to find them stacked on the back shelves of cluttered hardware stores, or you had to call security companies to come in and install various alarms and devices.

The very existence of The Safety Zone elicits ambivalent reactions. There is the ``What is the world coming to?`` crowd that is saddened that such a store is even necessary. To this group, the success of the store is a testament to how deeply crime, environmental mishaps and all kinds of threatening situations have spread throughout society. On the other hand, there are those who thank the store for opening and allowing them to feel that protecting themselves and their loved ones is not a manifestation of paranoia but a perfectly reasonable and even noble course of action. There are, apparently, many people in this group; the store is doing such brisk business that it may soon go national.

Although the shop is cheerful enough, a red neon sign with continuously changing messages reminds everyone that danger is never far away: BICYCLE-RELATED INJURIES CAUSE MORE THAN 500,000 EMERGENCY-ROOM VISITS A YEAR. . . . AN ESTIMATED 35,000 EYE INJURIES ARE CAUSED IN SPORTS EACH YEAR. . . . A BURGLARY OCCURS EVERY 12 SECONDS IN AMERICA. . . . PROTECT YOUR HOME. . . . 5,300 PEOPLE DROWNED IN 1987. . . . EACH YEAR THERE ARE 187,000 INJURIES FROM ACCIDENTS IN TUBS AND SHOWER STALLS. . . .