Dial Combination Safe Locks vs. Digital Safe Locks

There are hundreds of combination and digital safe locks being manufactured. There is no way to determine which lock is better without having each type lock available to compare. Below are some examples of why it is hard to compare the two types of locks and also ways that the consumer can evaluate the better lock to choose.

1) A imported digital or combination lock most likely will not be as secure and reliable as a name brand UL listed group II digital or combination lock.

2) When choosing an imported lock, there is no way for an everyday consumer to tell whether they are getting a secure and reliable digital or combination lock. Some may have a fail ration of 80% while some may be reliable for the entire life of the safe itself. The only hope is that the safe company has done all of the research of which import digital and combination lock is being used on the safes being manufactured.

3) When choosing a name brand UL listed group II lock, it will give more security and reliability over an imported generic lock. The two most popular and reliable group II locks are Sargent & Greenleaf (S&G) and LaGard (LG). At any time a safe is purchased with these name brands on it, there will be a better sense of confidence, reliability, and security to the safe.

Advantages of Digital Locks vs. Combination Dial

1) Digital locks are Users Friendly. The keypad offers a quick and simple way of just pressing the buttons and then allowing the safe door to be unlocked. Compared to a combination dial lock, it may be more confusing without the directions when opening the safe and not to mention the numbers are small and hard to read.

   Example: Instructions for opening of LaGard Digital Keypad
   1. Enter a valid six (6) digit code
   2. The lock will signal a valid code entry with a double signal
   3. Within four (4) seconds, turn the handle to the open position.
   4. Pull door open.

   Example: Instructions on opening a LaGard Group II Combination Lock with combo set to: 10-20-30
   1. Turn the dial to the LEFT at least four complete times to clear the dial lock.
   2. Using the OPENING INDEX, turn the dial LEFT and pass 10 three times and stop exactly on 10 the fourth time.
   3. Turn the dial to the right and pass 20 two times and stop exactly on 20 the third time.
   4. Turn the dial to the left and pass 30 once and stop exactly on 30 the second time.
   5. Turn the dial to the right. When the lock is open, the dial will not turn to the right anymore.
      *Note: If a number is missed by one digit, this process will have to be restarted.

2) In most cases, especially group II locks, the digital lock is more secure. A digital lock can utilize the entire 1,000,000 possible combinations where as a combination dial locks have dead zones. Dead zones are numbers in the combination dial that will not work in a combination due to complications that may occur. Another complication that may occur with combination dials is when numbers such as 1, 2, 3 or 51, 52, 53 are set close together. Also when the third number of the combination is lower than ten this may cause the combination lock to open on one number or even lock up completely.

   Most digital locks will shut down and lock out anyone trying to “guess” the combination. Try punching in a million combinations being locked out for four minutes every other try. Meaning that someone trying to guess at a digital lock is most likely a guessing game for awhile as in the combination dial there will be no interruptions as well as fewer possibilities.

   Digital locks (group II) are more secure against professionals as well. Most all group II dial combination locks have the same drill points used by professionals to open the safe without the combination. An experienced safe tech does not even need to measure the drill points. Group II digital locks can have different drill points for every different manufacturer and model. Therefore this requires the safe tech to be highly knowledgeable or call the safe manufacturer to acquire the drill points of the particular safe.

3) Programming and Changing Combinations. Digital locks are equipped that the owner of the safe can be able to set/change combinations as many times as needed at no cost. Dial combinations require a certified locksmith to change combinations or
warranties from the manufacturer may be voided. This typically may cost someone up to $150.00 each time. The ability to program a new combination on a digital lock allows that person to be the only one with the combination.

Disadvantages of a Digital lock vs. Combination Dial

1) Digital Locks Use Batteries. In most cases the batteries in a digital lock will need to be replaced 1-3 years. Batteries are usually located on the outside of the keypad and usually only takes a couple of minutes to replace.

2) More Susceptible to Water Damage. Even though both digital and combination dials can be damaged to water, the digital lock is more susceptible due to the electronic components. Combination dial locks may also be damaged by water if the water reaches the wheel pack and this causes the wheel pack to corrode and malfunction.

Choosing the Right Digital Safe Lock

Make sure that the digital lock is always a name brand UL Listed Group II digital lock such as Sargent & Greenleaf (S&G) or LaGard (LG). These brand locks are more secure and dependable than an imported lock.

How Can The Consumer Tell The Difference Between a Name Brand Group II Digital Lock and an Import Digital Lock?

1) A name brand lock will usually have its logo on the front of the keypad. A Sargent & Greenleaf will have “S&G” and a LaGard will have “LG”. Many imports will look identical but without the logo.

2) If the digital lock has a key bypass built into the lock it is most likely an imported lock. A group II UL listed digital lock will generally not have a key bypass for it will lessen the security on the safe. Think about the fact that the owner of a newly purchased solid steel safe has all the features built into it but can be easily opened with a simple key. This makes the safe to be most likely unlocked within a few minutes.

3) Batteries can be located on the inside on the safe and have to use a battery back up to open the safe when the batteries need replacing.

4) Most imports are completely made of plastic including the entire keypad. Even though the group II locks may have some plastic parts, it is usually just the mounting plate and not the keypad.

If You’re Only Choice Is to Purchase a Safe with a Import Digital Lock

1) These two requirements are a must!

   a) Make sure that the lock features a non-volatile memory. Many imports have a volatile memory that looses the combination if power is lost by the batteries dying or either the batteries are removed, the combination will go back to the factory default.

   b) Make sure the keypad only functions as the keypad only. All the memory and functional electronics should be located on the inside of the safe so that they may not be easily tampered with. Many imports house the entire electronics and memory in the keypad on the outside of the safe. This may allow someone to break off the keypad and notice that the only two wires that are going into the safe is one red and one black. Simply by placing a battery to these two wires will easily open the safe door in seconds.

2) Make sure the manufacturer can convince that the track records of the locks have been very dependable. Unfortunately, because many import locks have no name and no past history this will make them harder to research.

3) If the digital lock has a key bypass, make sure that the key lock is a high security type key that resist picking and drilling. Keys that are double bitted or dimple cut keys are some examples of higher security keys. Many key locks that look similar to a house key, round like vending machine key or small like desk can be picked in seconds. Remember this is a very important fact that will play a big role when purchasing a safe with a bypass key because the contents in the safe should never be jeopardized with a key lock.

Choosing the Right Combination Lock

When purchasing a safe, make sure that the combination dial is a name brand group II lock such as Sargent & Greenleaf (S&G) or LaGard (LG) to insure dependability and security.

How Can The Consumer Tell The Difference Between a Group II Combination Dial Lock and an Import Combination Dial Lock?

1) A name brand lock will usually have the logo on the front of the dial and/or dial ring. A Sargent and Greenleaf will have “S&G” and a LaGard will have “LG”. Many imports will look identical but without the logo.
2) U.L. listed group II locks generally will use these instructions:

**Example Combination: 10-20-30**

1. Turn the dial to the LEFT at least four complete times to clear the dial lock.
2. Using the OPENING INDEX, turn the dial LEFT and pass **10** three times and stop exactly on **10** the fourth time.
3. Turn the dial to the right and pass **20** two times and stop exactly on **20** the third time.
4. Turn the dial to the left and pass **30** once and stop exactly on **30** the second time.
5. Turn the dial to the right. When the lock is open, the dial will not turn to the right anymore.

If the operating instructions are unlike the group II directions, this may be a good sign that it is an import combination dial.

3) The combinations on U.L. listed group II dial locks are able to be changed by a safe lock change key only. The combinations on most non-group II locks are not changeable but the few that the combination can be changed requires disassembly on the complete lock.

**The Final Breakdown**

As discussed, there are many types of locks and many options, but here is a good breakdown of what is suggested.

1) If purchasing a safe with a digital lock, look for the brand name such as “S&G” or “LG”. If purchasing a safe with an import digital lock, make sure that it offers a non-volatile memory, the memory and functional electronics are located inside the safe, and the key bypass is a high security type of key.

2) If purchasing a safe with a dial combination lock, look for the brand name such as S&G or LG group II U.L. listed lock. If the dial does not have these name brands, research and trust the information of the manufacturer or the distributor of that safe only.