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Don Laird, president of the Columbia Chamber of Commerce, said this type of uncertainty is precisely why his organization has never rated companies even though it has been asked. "I would have to say if they go into that, I think they're opening a can of worms," Laird said.

Laird chuckled as he searched the BBB online list for grades of local operations, including the city of Columbia Department of Finance (C), Bass Pro Shops (B minus) and Amega Mobile Home Sales in Ashland (B minus). Amega received that mark in spite of having been sued by the Missouri attorney general and having a list of seven customer complaints in the past 36 months.

Laird said the system is fraught with potential problems. "Who's to say a competitor couldn't write a crummy review and sort of torpedo their competitor?" said Laird. "I don't think it's fair."

In addition, many businesses with the highest grades (A plus or A) also appear to be BBB-accredited, meaning they pay a minimum \$350 annual membership fee to the BBB. Corey said these businesses must uphold high ethical standards and are terminated from the BBB if they don't.

One of the accredited businesses, Columbia Hearing Center at 1306 S. Old 63, received an A. Owner Robert Northup said the BBB helps resolve customer complaints from time to time. "Any business is going to have a disgruntled person once in a while, and they intercede with us," he said, adding that he usually resolves disputes with BBB help.

Northup said his family, which owns businesses in Columbia and Versailles, had not been aware of the new grading system and plans to display the company's score. "When you put that in your advertising, that gives people confidence that we're going to honor their rules of conduct," he said.

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