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New BBB grade card 'a can of worms'

By T.J. GREANEY of the Tribune's staff

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The Better Business Bureau recently announced it has given grades to 66,000 businesses in its Eastern Missouri and Southern Illinois district, including Columbia.

Each business is ranked "A plus" through "F," based on 16 weighted factors that include the number and severity of complaints made by customers and whether companies resolved those complaints.

Michelle Corey, president and CEO of the St. Louis-based BBB, said the ratings help make the data they collect more accessible to the public. "In the past we had provided a lot of detail about a company in our liability report, and then we ranked it either 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory,'" she said. "And the public wanted more information on 'What does that mean?' And everyone understands the letter system because of school."

All of the results announced this month are searchable on the group's Web site, stlouis.bbb.org.

But does the BBB have enough information to make its assertions?

In the eyes of some local businesspeople, the criteria seem rather flimsy.

For example, Columbia Transmission Service at 600 Vandiver Drive received a "D minus." The BBB reports receiving one unresolved complaint about the transmission company over the past 36 months, listing that as the reason for the low grade and noting the company "did not respond" to the complaint.

But Lee Ailworth, general manager of Columbia Transmission, said Friday the firm was not aware of the complaint and had only received a call last week from the BBB, which said a mailed complaint had been returned to the sender. "How can we respond to something we haven't even received?" Ailworth asked. "That's kind of crazy."

Ailworth said he is not happy the transmission company was besmirched because of one unconfirmed complaint. "We work very, very hard to please everybody that comes through the door, but, as you know, you can't please everyone," he said. When asked what he thought about the letter grade, he said, "Wow, I'm just in utter shock."

Big hits

The Better Business Bureau in St. Louis received a record 25,795 complaints about regional businesses last year, up 4.5 percent from the previous year. Seventy-nine percent of the complaints were resolved.

Here is the BBB list of industries with the highest volume of complaints:

1. Television cable/satellite contractors (4,506)
2. Telephone service/cellular (2,865)
3. Internet sales and services (2,421)
4. Used car dealers (1,180)
5. Extended auto warranty processing (1,116)
6. Home construction/remodeling contractors (810)
7. Auto repair shops (553)
8. Auto renting and leasing (552)
9. New auto dealers (512)
10. Weight control services (337)

Source: BBB

Corey said that in some cases one complaint is sufficient to downgrade a company. "If it was your complaint, you'd probably agree that it would be" important, she said. "We feel that every company should at least make a good-faith effort to resolve a complaint."

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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