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BBB hands out letter grades

One quirk: Top rating goes to member firms

BY SUSAN TOMPOR • FREE PRESS COLUMNIST • MARCH 1, 2009



The Better Business Bureau rolled out a new grading system last year that replaced the old "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory" ratings.

Rankings that range from A+ to F theoretically should help consumers and competitors.

Be aware the system has limits and, some say, a few quirks. The A+ is reserved only for accredited dues-paying companies that belong to the BBB.

Some anomalies exist

I found some odd grades at www.bbb.org. Type in Townsend Hotel -- the tony Birmingham hotel where Shaquille O'Neal stayed during the NBA playoffs in the days when the Pistons mattered -- and this hotel flunks out.

Type in Leonard & Co. -- a Troy-based brokerage that received a \$225,000 fine from a nongovernment regulatory group in January for several violations, including the illegal sale of shares of some stock -- and you'll find an A+ rating. No mention of the fine, which can be found at www.finra.org, the Web site of the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority. Leonard & Co. has been a BBB-accredited business since 1998. Businesses pay fees relating to accreditation.

Peter Wilde, managing director of the Townsend, told me Thursday that the hotel learned of the F grade when I called. He politely said that any kind of feedback that an organization gets is valuable. The BBB said it had two complaints in 36 months, one regarding advertising issues and one regarding billing. The BBB site said the hotel failed to address one complaint and resolved the other.

Wilde said he was not aware of the complaints and the hotel will likely follow up on the matter. The hotel does not pay fees to the BBB.

OK grades questioned

Some companies that get OK grades are asking: Why?

"If I can buy my way to an A, what does that mean?" asked Marcy Hayes, president of C&B Scene Inc., a 19-year-old public relations firm in Southfield. Her grade is a B-minus; she'd like to give the BBB a C. Her business had no customer complaints in a three-year period, according to the BBB report. C&B Scene is not accredited with the BBB.