

can a bigger and better BBB serve a friend to the beleaguered consumer? Absolutely," Cole says. "We would not have lasted 95 years if we had no regard for the public."

The Business of the BBB

The Better Business Bureau walks a fine line trying to serve two often-warring masters: disgruntled consumer and business owner. Below, some of its more controversial issues:

Follow the Money

Companies pay between a few hundred dollars and \$10,000 to be a BBB-accredited member, and as the bureau grows, so does its reliance on those funds. Across its 112 regional offices, dues and advertising fees make up, on average, 90 percent of revenue. Some see a conflict of interest, but council CEO Steven Cole says the BBB wants members — not consumers — to pay for its programs.

Says Who?

The BBB says it "resolves" 70 percent of its complaints overall, but according to whom? BBB reps consider most cases settled when a company responds in some fashion — regardless of the consumer's satisfaction. Says council Senior VP Nora Carpenter, "At some point, someone has to say, 'We've all done our very best here, and we're done.'"

Here, There and Everywhere

Consumers check the bureau's reliability reports some 47 million times annually to scope out a business's track record. But the BBB lets many firms keep their records scattered among regional offices, rather than funneling them through one central bureau, blurring the full picture of their complaints. A homebuyer looking, say, to purchase from Lennar Homebuilders (which operates in 17 states) might see a "satisfactory" rating in Greenville, S.C., and miss the "unsatisfactory" one in Houston. "That's a legitimate criticism," says BBB spokesperson Stephen Cox.

Membership Has Its Privileges

Instead of declaring a firm "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" in its reliability reports, the bureau is quietly considering a new label: "accredited," which any business can acquire by becoming a BBB member. Cole says the business will still have to meet certain standards, but some chapter presidents are howling that troubled companies could use the label to hide problems.