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Embattled dating firm turns tables on BBB

By MARY FLOOD

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HOUSTON - Barraged by complaints that it preys on the lonely and sells dreams of romance as if they were used cars, Great Expectations has heard just about enough.

The video dating service's file at the local Better Business Bureau is bursting with stories of singles looking for love and companionship but ending up with a heavy heart and a lighter wallet. Some 50 complaints have been filed in the past six years, a very high number, according to the BBB, and more than any other video dating service has received. And in accordance with BBB procedures, every one of them has been forwarded to Great Expectations for a response.

But now Great Expectations, turning the tables on the BBB, is simply refusing to accept any more complaints.

The first notice came in September from area manager Dennis Durante, who warned the BBB in a handwritten note that "Any further forms sent to us will be turned over to our attorney as harassment." This month, when Durante pointedly told a bureau official that he would stop accepting complaints, the BBB took him seriously. The bureau says it's the first time in 15 years that a business has refused to hear its concerns.

Durante - who initially denied in an interview that he had stopped taking BBB complaints, but acknowledged the move after being reminded of the September letter - says he signs up 3,000 customers a year, soliciting members through direct mail, telemarketing and infomercials. Fifty complaints over six years, he says, amount to a negligible percentage. (A bureau executive counters that for every person mad enough to come to the BBB, there are generally 20 others with similar problems who choose not to.)

But Durante's central argument isn't about numbers. It's about fairness. Why, he asks, should he have to accept complaints from the BBB if it won't accept his company as a member? "They have this prejudice against this segment of the business," he says, "and I think that's terribly discriminatory and unfair."

Indeed, while the Houston BBB accepts and investigates complaints about any business, it denies membership to dating services, credit-repair operations, pay-in-advance modeling agencies and other types of businesses that it considers to have too many suspect companies.

Houston's Great Expectations is part of a national network of franchised video dating services. These services maintain a library of videos and biographies of their members, and supply phone numbers to members who wish to meet. The Houston branch, owned by Robert Perkins, a Florida businessman, is one of the biggest and best-known dating agencies in the city, claiming 4,000 active members.

None of the other Great Expectations franchises in the state - in Dallas, Austin and San Antonio - has the same kind of brawl going with the local BBB; they get occasional beefs but not nearly as many as in Houston. The San Antonio branch is also barred from BBB membership but still responds to complaints.