

Has The Better Business Bureau Outlived Their Usefulness?

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I came across a story posted at [Search Engine Land](#) pointing out that Google has an "unsatisfactory" record with The [Better Business Bureau](#). How can a company voted "[top global brand](#)" in 2008 at the same time have an unsatisfactory record with the BBB? Apparently because out of 331 complaints filed against the search giant over the past three years, 2 were listed as unresolved. that's right - just 2! Despite this, Google continues to lead the way in search and nothing on the horizon seems to be able to change that.

This got me thinking as to whether the BBB is still a useful resource in today's online world. Their mission is to be the leader in advancing "marketplace trust" which they accomplish by creating communities of trustworthy businesses, setting standards for marketplace trust, encouraging and supporting best practices, celebrating marketplace role models, and denouncing substandard marketplace behavior. Businesses have always been proud to display their BBB membership, which indicates they are "more trustworthy" than non BBB member companies.

Two things have me concerned however as to whether the BBB has outlived their usefulness, especially in the case of "online" businesses.

1. BBB Discriminates Against Online Business

When a company becomes a BBB member, they are given a certificate that announces their membership. Many will proudly display this in their offices or storefronts so that customers can see they are a member. They may also use the BBB logo in print advertising to identify their membership. However, should a company decide to announce their membership online via a web site for example, they can only do so through the BBB's [Online Reliability Program](#). Did I mention that this requires an extra fee?

I have [argued in the past](#) that the BBB's policy to charge extra when displaying the BBB logo online is a discriminatory practice against online business, especially those who have no other way to announce their membership (i.e. they don't have a physical location or storefront). Online businesses not only have to pay the annual BBB member dues which are based on the number of employees they have, they also have to pay a separate fee to announce that membership on their sites.

The Better Business Bureau needs to recognize that most businesses today have an online presence and that many of their existing or potential customers will visit them there long before

entering a physical location. As a BBB member, a company should have the right to announce that membership on their web sites, social media profiles, online press releases and the like, without having to pay extra fees. Until the BBB changes their policy on this, it is nothing short of discriminatory.

2. Do People Even Use The BBB Any Longer?

Since joining the Better Business Bureau in 1998, I can count the number of clients that have been referred as a result of them on both hands. On the other hand, the number of clients who have found us online via organic search results is phenomenal.

This leads me to wonder how much credibility consumers actually place in BBB valuations. It would seem to me that businesses should have much more concern over what people are saying about them online. I'm talking about online reputation. For example, conduct a search for any brand name - even your own. What do the first page of search results say? Are they positive, negative or even indifferent? This is the space where many consumers are now looking when qualifying whether they want to do business with a company or not.

Every time the BBB semi-annual billing statement has arrived in the mail, I have wrestled as to whether to continue my company's membership or not. So far, the BBB has won although I have refused to pay the extra fees for the Online Reliability Program for the last few years even though the BBB logo is present on our sites.

I am much more concerned over what the search results say about our company and if you are a business owner you should as well. If something negative begins to show up on the first page, especially above the fold, it can cause irreparable damage to your business. Many companies have discovered this the hard way which then forced them into the very often difficult task of having to repair their tarnished reputations.

A Better Solution?

One of the beneficial things about BBB membership, at least for consumers, is that you as a company agree to work out disputes with clients. This however is a defense mechanism. In other words, you do not react until the consumer is upset about something. A proactive approach is a much better solution in my opinion. How does one go about accomplishing this? There are several ways to do this with the main idea being "open yourself to communication."

This can be done with a company blog that is open to comments. Putting out quality content that is somehow related to your industry or even the specific products and services you offer is a good start. Allowing consumers to interact with you via the comment system is the icing on the cake. It will allow them to engage you of which they might praise you, probe you for more information or even criticize you. It also allows you to react to them, oftentimes long before negativity hits the search results or the BBB.

Getting involved with social media is also a great way to be proactive. Setting up profiles on all the major social media sites using your brand name(s) is a great way to [control what the search](#)

[results are saying](#) about you. But don't stop there. Get involved with social media, especially when people are talking about you.

It's all about getting involved in the conversation. Consumers want an open dialog with the companies they choose to do business with. So give them what they want.

This is what Google does so well. They give consumers what they want - relevant search as well as a wide variety of other products. They keep the door open for communication as well. That is why an unsatisfactory record with the BBB has not hurt them in the least. They continue to grow, acquire and dominate.

Our BBB membership comes due in December and to be honest with you, I think I might let it go this time around. I just don't see the value any longer when there are so many other productive things you can do to establish trust with consumers.