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More changes coming to Better Business Bureau

Organization reacts amid allegations it rigged ratings

November 19, 2010 | By Gregory Karp, Becky Yerak and Wailin Wong, Tribune reporters

The Better Business Bureau said Friday that more changes are coming to its operation, a reaction not only to fallout from critics who say the venerable organization rigged its rating system to favor dues-paying members but also to increased competition online.

Starting in January, businesses will have the ability to post pictures, videos and maps on the nonprofit's Web site, and some local Better Business Bureaus will provide consumers with the text of filed complaints. Those are new developments for the nearly 100-year-old organization, but they mirror information provided by many Internet sites, from Angie's List to Yelp.

"The bottom line is, the marketplace is changing, and we want to provide more information so consumers can make smart purchasing decisions," said Better Business Bureau spokeswoman Alison Southwick.

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There was a time when a frustrated consumer's last and best threat was to report a business to the bureau. But that near monopoly ended in the Internet era. Trying to respond to consumers' growing appetite for more information about businesses, the Better Business Bureau changed its pass-fail system, declaring a company either satisfactory or unsatisfactory, in January 2009 and started giving out letter grades.

This week it revamped that system after ABC News reported that the Better Business Bureau improved the rating on companies, including fictional ones, that paid several hundred dollars in membership fees. The bureau said it will no longer limit its highest rating, A-plus, to those firms that pay to join. Any business will be able to get the highest rating.

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The organization also said it will streamline the process for receiving complaints and investigating them, as well as review its process for accrediting businesses. It will use an independent third party to help with that review, it said.

Steve Bernas, president of the Chicago-area Better Business Bureau, said the changes were necessary.

Bernas said he fought the national organization about using membership as a criterion for rating companies, even though it accounted for only about 5 percent of a company's grade. He said he didn't think it was a bad metric necessarily, but that it created the perception of "pay to play" — if you pay your dues, you get a higher ranking.

"I believe this is the way it should have been initially," Bernas said of the changes. "I still believe the BBB is an organization that delivers a service to consumers and businesses both."

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