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TicketNetwork Pursues Lawsuit Against Better Business Bureau

November 23, 2010 | By JANICE PODSADA, jpodsada@courant.com, The Hartford Courant

TicketNetwork in Vernon said Tuesday it will pursue its lawsuit it has filed against the Better Business Bureau, despite the bureau's announcement last week that it would stop awarding higher ratings to businesses that are fee-paying members.

"We think more issues will come out of this investigation," Don Vaccaro, TicketNetwork's chief executive, said Tuesday.

"We see this as a bigger issue than just us. This is a nonprofit organization where executives are making a six-digit salary."

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TicketNetwork filed the lawsuit in September, claiming member businesses are charged anywhere from hundreds of dollars to thousands of dollars by the BBB for accreditation.

Vaccaro credited state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal with bringing the issue to national attention and forcing the BBB to respond to the charges.

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Last week, the BBB's executive committee approved the changes to its rating system in response to Blumenthal's demand that it abandon a "pay-to-play" system.

The BBB pledged to stop giving additional points to businesses that have paid for accredited status; conduct a review of its accrediting process; and engage an independent third party to assist in its review process.

But there are more issues to address, Blumenthal said.

"Beyond the pay-to-play element is a more fundamental defect," he said. "The present rating system which grades businesses from F to A-plus may be deceptive, unhelpful to consumers and unfair to businesses.

"The BBB lacks the adequate resources to verify and review self-reported information. ... A business may receive an 'A' rating without the BBB actually confirming whether it has lawsuits pending, or other information such as a record of services or possession of required state licenses."

Blumenthal said he plans to meet with the BBB and suggest that it return to its former rating system, which assigned either a "satisfactory or unsatisfactory rating" to companies.

The BBB switched to its current letter grade system in January 2009.

TicketNetwork's lawsuit alleges that the BBB has misled the public: "Despite holding itself out as a neutral and unbiased consumer resource ... companies who pay the BBB fees to earn the designation of 'Accredited Business' ... are routinely assigned higher grades."

The practice misleads consumers, Vaccaro said, and the suit alleges that it "encourages them to engage the fee-paying Accredited businesses over unaccredited businesses that have not paid fees to the BBB."

A telephone call to the Connecticut BBB was not returned Tuesday.

Businesses in California, Nevada and Missouri filed lawsuits this year related to the BBB's practice of giving higher grades to its dues-paying members. The BBB has 108 chapters nationwide.

Vaccaro said TicketNetwork's problems with the Connecticut BBB began in 2008.

"TicketNetwork refused to pay the accreditation fees, so they sent out a negative press release about us," Vaccaro said. "The BBB sent the negative press release to Richard Blumenthal. When Mr. Blumenthal investigated our company, we told him about our lawsuit against the BBB.

"I think at the end of the day there are a lot of businesses that may feel better paying their fees to their local Chamber of Commerce — which can actually bring them business — rather than their local BBB."



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