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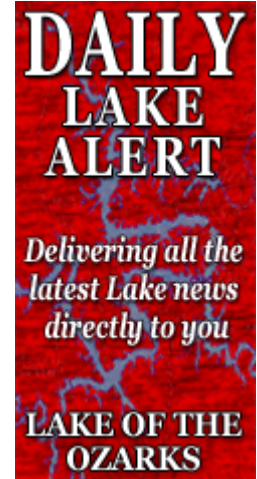
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Better Business Bureau backs up on alleged pay-to-play practices

By **Matthew Hathaway**/St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MCT)
Published: Friday, November 19, 2010 12:49 AM CST

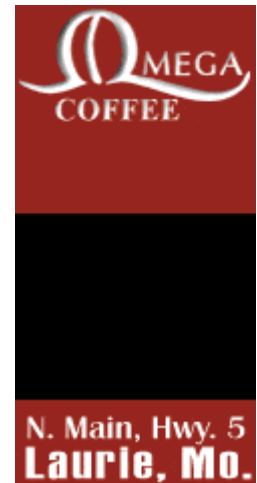
When grading companies, the nation's Better Business Bureaus will stop giving extra credit to those that pay membership dues, the Council of BBBs announced today.

The change is part of a restructuring of the BBB's business-review process that was dismissed as a "pay for play" scheme by some companies.

The executive committee of the national council also announced it would:

- Develop an online complaint site for businesses and charities to gripe about BBB sales practices, and establishing a process for investigating those complaints;
- Review its process for accrediting businesses and, if needed, make changes;
- And hire an independent third party to assist in the review.

Council President Steve Cox said the BBB is taking the steps to maintain a public trust developed over nearly a century.



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"Given the feedback, we feel it is our duty to take immediate steps to address the concerns raised," Cox said in a prepared statement.

In January 2009, the BBB scrapped its custom of rating businesses as either "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" in favor of a school-style grading spectrum that ranged from A-plus to F.

BBB critics said the new system was arbitrary and seemed designed to encourage businesses to join the BBB as dues-paying members. Membership -- or "accreditation," as the BBB prefers to call it -- was one of 17 factors the group considers when assigning a letter grade.

BBB membership accounts for about 4 percent of a company's score. While that doesn't sound like much, it's enough to make it impossible for a nonaccredited firm to get an A-plus grade. Annual membership dues vary around the country; in St. Louis, they can cost as little as \$350 for small businesses or up to \$10,000 for big companies.

According to the BBB council, there are no plans to modify the 16 other factors used to determine a business' grade.

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