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Better Business Bureau accused of biased ratings

CBC News investigation finds members score high, despite complaints

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By Kathy Tomlinson, [CBC News](#)



Dale Sketchley complained to the BBB about the accredited moving company he hired, but felt his complaint was not addressed. (CBC)

The Better Business Bureau in B.C. is being accused of favouring members over non-member businesses in its online rating system.

The consumer agency brought in a new international grading system two years ago, where both non-members and members are rated on its website, with a score ranging from A-plus to F.

"I think they need to look at how that rating system works," said Victoria resident Dale Sketchley.

A CBC News investigation found all movers in Vancouver and Victoria who paid for a BBB membership — also known as accreditation — had ratings no lower than A-minus, including some with several recent complaints against them.

Sketchley filed a complaint about a Victoria moving company that is an accredited BBB member in August. Almost three months later, the case was closed by the BBB, without being resolved one way or the other.

Complaint not addressed: consumer

"It was completely designed for the business," said Sketchley, "It was conveniently closed and none of my arguments were adequately addressed."

Records show the BBB sent a letter to Straight Line Pro Moving Services after Sketchley complained he was charged more than he expected to pay and was treated rudely and sworn at by the movers.

Initially, the mail was returned from the business address, so the BBB simply closed the case.

"When I saw the case being described as "unpursuable" — just because the letter was returned — I realized that this was not right," said Sketchley.

When he insisted to the BBB the movers could be found with one phone call, it re-opened the file. Ultimately, it closed the case again, saying there was no proof to support Sketchley's complaint because he didn't have a written contract.

Straight Line owner David Carlos told CBC News that Sketchley was an "extremely irate and unreasonable customer," whose complaint was exaggerated.

His company still has an A rating with the BBB, despite this and one other recent complaint that was also closed without resolution. Two older, unresolved complaints are also listed on the BBB website.

BBB maintains impartiality

Before she knew the results of CBC's investigation, Lynda Pasacreta, president of the BBB in the Lower Mainland, insisted all companies are treated equally in the ratings, whether they are members or not.



"We are impartial. We take — in the Better Business Bureau — a complaint that's unresolved very seriously. An accredited business that does not resolve a complaint is up for immediate revocation," said Pasacreta.

"If they don't respond to that complaint, they go to a D-minus."

BBB accredited businesses in B.C. pay an annual fee of \$368, for the smallest business, to \$1,600 for those with more than 250 employees.

CBC News looked at all the companies listed under Movers in Vancouver and Victoria on the BBB websites.

Members keep A ratings

Of the 32 accredited movers listed — all with an A-minus or better — two of the larger companies, MiniMove and Purely Canadian Movers, each had 12 complaints filed against them in the last three years.

Two of those complaints were "administratively closed," which means they could not be settled, like Sketchley's case. Both companies maintained an A rating.

Pasacreta said they are allowed several complaints because of their size.

However, Van City Moving, a small member, kept an A-plus rating, despite a complaint the BBB called "unpursuable" because the "company cannot be located."

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On the other hand, none of the non-member movers in Victoria rated higher than a B, while more than half in Vancouver also have a B grade or lower.

"Either you are with them and they take care of you — otherwise it looks like they just give you the worst rating and leave you for nothing," said Ed Pomalecki, who runs A Homart Moving and Delivery, a non-member given a D-minus rating.

Pomalecki has been in business for more than 20 years. His business was a BBB member in good standing until 2000 when he said he cancelled his membership because he no longer wanted to pay the annual fee.

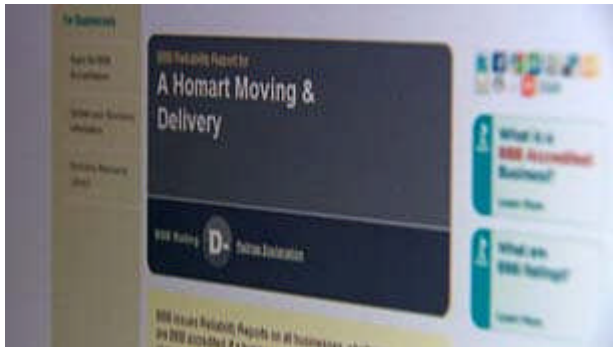
"I think it's very unfair that I have gone from an A to a D-minus," he said. "I don't think I deserve it."

The BBB received one complaint about his company, in 2008, but said he "failed to respond," so it downgraded the score.

Non-member says business hurt

Pomalecki insisted he heard nothing from the BBB about the complaint, but someone from there did call at one point, trying to sell him another membership.

He said he didn't know his company's rating had dropped until CBC News contacted him.



*A Homart Moving and Delivery, which is not a BBB member, was given a D-minus rating after a complaint the owner said he didn't know about. (CBC)*The BBB confirmed it didn't call Pomalecki about the complaint, but sent two letters.

"We typically do phone them, but in this case we sent two letters and he failed to respond," said Pasacreta.

"I would have fixed it if I knew," said Pomalecki. "It looks like [the BBB] was not interested in solving this — maybe to show someone else that this is what happens when you don't pay."

He said his business has dropped by 60 per cent in the two years since it got a D-minus rating and he now blames the BBB.

"They dropped me so drastically that it is like killing the business," said Pomalecki.

"At least if I had known that was the system, I would have chosen to pay \$400 [for a membership] but I didn't even know."

'You've caught me'

When CBC News asked Pasacreta what the difference was between Van City Moving, the member with one "unpursuable" complaint and an A-plus rating, and Pomalecki's case, she admitted there is a problem.

"You've caught me. And that's all I can say on that one. You've caught me," said Pasacreta. "[The rating system] is fluid. We have only been in business with the rating system for two years. The dispute resolution system, it is fluid."

"I didn't pay the membership and they did. That's the only difference that I see," said Pomalecki.

As a result of the CBC's inquiries, Van City's A-plus rating has been removed from the BBB website and it is now under review. Pomalecki's rating may soon go back up.

"When he resolves that complaint, his D-minus will move back up to an A," said Pasacreta.

Meantime, the Council of Better Business Bureaus in the U.S. has just announced it is changing its rating system because of complaints about favouritism there.



Mover Ed Pomalecki discontinued his BBB membership because he didn't want to pay the annual fee. (CBC) "By next week, the BBB ratings system will no longer give additional points to accredited businesses because of their accredited status," said a statement by the council on Nov. 18.

The Vancouver BBB said the statement applies to all bureaus in North America. It appears to confirm members were given preferential treatment, despite Pasacreta's claim everyone is treated equally.

The council said it is also changing how it investigates complaints and how businesses are accredited. The changes have already affected the rating for Pomalecki's business, which has been raised slightly, to a D.

"For nearly 100 years, the BBB has stood for public trust, and we are taking these steps to maintain that trust," said Steve Cox, president and CEO.

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