In the course of opening your daily mail you see an ominous looking envelope from the Better Business Bureau. You should:

a. Not open it and instead immediately discard it in the trash
b. Forward it to your legal department for their action
c. Revise your resume because your career at this company just ended
d. Open it and calmly read the contents of the letter

Because you are a respected professional in the consumer affairs area, you would obviously choose option ‘d.’ Chances are your local BBB office is letting you know of a consumer complaint against your company that has been lodged with the BBB. But do not despair—even the best managed companies with the strongest customer satisfaction records will occasionally hear from the BBB about a consumer complaint.

While most everyone has heard of the Better Business Bureau, many consumer affairs professionals probably do not know a great deal about the precise functions of the BBB. Our purpose in this article is to explain how consumer affairs professionals can develop a productive and mutually beneficial working relationship with their local BBB office. Let’s focus on some of the more important questions you might ask.

Who Exactly is the Better Business Bureau?

First of all, many consumers, and perhaps some consumer affairs professionals, mistakenly believe that the BBB is a governmental agency. In fact, the BBB is a private, non-profit organization that derives most of its operating revenue from dues paid by member companies. There are approximately 120 local BBB offices that serve the U.S., each with professional managers and a board of directors who are executives from BBB member companies and non-profit organizations.

In broad terms, the purpose of the BBB is to foster better business practices. The BBB first started in 1912 to help ensure that the marketplace operated more effectively for the benefit of both consumers and businesses.

Whose Side – Consumers or Companies – is the BBB On?

The Bureau tries very hard not to take sides. Rather, they adopt a position of neutrality, particularly when it comes to disputes between consumers and businesses. The BBB strives to foster communication between dissatisfied customers and consumer affairs representatives so that mutually agreeable resolutions can be achieved. As the Council of Better Business Bureaus states on its website www.bbb.org:
The BBB's value to the business community is based on our neutrality. The purpose of the BBB system is not to act as an advocate for businesses or consumers, but to act as a mutually trusted intermediary to resolve disputes, to facilitate communication, and to provide information on ethical business practices.

What Should I Do if My Local BBB Office Notifies Me That a Consumer Has Filed a Complaint Against My Company?

Most importantly, do not ignore the complaint. Remember, this is an opportunity to save a customer. The BBB will send you detailed information regarding the identity of this consumer and the specific nature of his/her complaint. Start by determining if you have a record of this consumer’s complaint already in your files. Next, analyze how closely your data regarding this consumer’s complaint matches the information that the BBB provided to you. You may find that critical facts or actions from your records are not reflected in the BBB's information. Usually the BBB will also ask the complaining consumer to indicate what type of action he or she would like your company to take to resolve this complaint.

Do We Have to Give the Consumer What He or She Wants to Resolve This Complaint?

Not necessarily. As you well know, each dissatisfied consumer’s situation is unique. Therefore, you should assess this particular consumer’s complaint and determine what you believe is an equitable resolution. In many cases, consumers seek help from the BBB simply because communication has broken down and they have been unable to get any type of response from companies with whom they’ve had problems. Quite often their resolution requests are reasonable and consumer affairs managers are happy to meet their requests. But there may be some situations in which you conclude that consumers are indeed making wildly unrealistic demands which are simply not warranted. How you respond to each consumer’s complaint to the BBB is up to you. The Bureau cannot force any resolution upon you.

Do We Have to Respond at All to BBB Complaints?

Absolutely! If you ignore a BBB complaint, they will probably note that you have unanswered complaints on your record. In almost all cases, this will lead to an “unsatisfactory” record on your official BBB file. You do not have to meet each consumer’s demands in order to maintain a satisfactory record with the BBB. However, you do have to respond to the BBB to explain your side of the story.

In 2004, local BBB offices received more than 34 million company reliability requests from consumers seeking information before they did business with local companies. Think about it – if a consumer sees that your company has an unsatisfactory record with the BBB, but five of your major competitors have satisfactory records, who do you think is at a disadvantage?

What Does the BBB Tell Inquiring Consumers About My Company?

Every consumer affairs professional should check his/her company’s BBB report several times a year. Here is how to find and read your company’s BBB report:

1. Go to www.bbb.org and click the “find a local bureau” link.
2. Fill in your city and state. If your company has operations in multiple locations, you may want to check to see if multiple BBB offices have reports for your company.
3. This will tell you which local BBB office serves your geographical area. All local BBB offices are now online, so you can click this link and go directly to your local BBB office.
4. When you get to your local BBB office’s homepage, you should find a link to “company reports” or “reliability reports.” Click this link and fill in information regarding your company, using either name of company or telephone number.
5. You will see some variations among BBB offices, but many BBB reports will contain information regarding a company’s BBB rating (satisfactory or unsatisfactory), how many complaints have been filed in the past three years against a company, the types of complaints filed (sales practices, deceptive advertising, billing issues, etc.), and even how companies have responded to these prior complaints.
6. You may also want to check out what the BBB has to say about some of your major competitors and see how your BBB report compares to their reports.

What if Information is Incorrect in My Company’s BBB File?

By all means, contact your local BBB office. Each BBB office’s homepage will list mailing, phone, and email contact information. Contact your BBB office and discuss with them any inaccuracies that you detect in your BBB file. If your company has an unsatisfactory rating, they will explain what steps your company should take to clear your BBB record and regain your satisfactory rating.

What if your local BBB does not have a report for
your company? Don’t be alarmed. The BBB generates reports on companies when one of the following situations occurs:

1. A company joins the BBB
2. A consumer files a formal complaint with the BBB
3. A number of consumers contact the BBB seeking information on a specific company.

Recent research shows that about one-half of all local companies will have BBB reports.

**Should My Company Become a BBB Member?**

You are reading this article because you are a strong advocate of maintaining a positive relationship with your company’s customers. Joining your local BBB will certainly assist you in this endeavor. If you meet the BBB’s standards for membership, here are just some of the benefits your company will derive:

1. Your BBB company report will note that you are a BBB member. Research shows that consumers find this BBB designation to be a strong influence on their choice of companies with whom to do business.
2. You may display signage and logos showing that you are a BBB member. Again, this is a positive influence not only on consumers, but also on employees.
3. If your company has an online presence, you may also consider joining the BBB’s online reliability program. When consumers visit your company’s website, they will see the BBB’s online reliability seal and therefore have greater faith in the integrity of your company’s online systems.
4. You may take advantage of seminars and training aids that BBB offices provide to their members so that they can provide better service to their customers.
5. Please go to the Council of Better Business Bureaus’ website (www.bbb.org) and learn more about the wide variety of services offered by the BBB to assist you in your customer service efforts.

**Is Your Local BBB Your Friend or Your Foe?**

We hope that this short overview of the BBB has convinced you that the BBB is really your friend and ally in your quest to improve customer satisfaction and service in your company. The BBB is there to help you, so what are you waiting for?

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