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## Better Business Bureau membership skyrocketing in recession

The Business Journal of Milwaukee - by [Stacy Vogel Davis](#)

Kathy Sidders has seen many landscaping companies start up during the recession, and she doesn't believe all of them are reputable.

So she joined the Wisconsin **Better Business Bureau** (BBB) in May in an effort to differentiate her business, **Lake Country Landscaping Inc.**, Delafield.

"We wanted to make sure that people who were going to contract with us know we're a reputable business," she said.

Many business owners are getting the same idea. The Wisconsin chapter of the BBB has seen its membership skyrocket in the last few years, the result of a national advertising campaign and business owners looking to reassure consumers during a tough economy, said Randall Hoth, president and CEO. Membership has more than doubled since 2004 to 6,200 accredited businesses.

"It's good business to be accredited by the Better Business Bureau," Hoth said. "It's really starting to resonate with business owners."

The increased membership has increased revenue for the Wisconsin chapter from \$1.34 million in fiscal 2004, running from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30, to \$2.44 million in 2009. Hoth expects \$3 million in 2010, all of which is reinvested in member and consumer services, he said.

The bureau has 37 employees at its Milwaukee headquarters and Appleton regional office. It plans to open a Madison office by the end of the year, Hoth said.

In 2005, the national bureau created a unified advertising campaign with the slogan, "Start with trust."

That message is more important than ever as consumers consider even more carefully how they spend their money, said Dennis Garrett, a member of the Wisconsin bureau's board and an

associate marketing professor at **Marquette University**, Milwaukee. Views of the bureau's online reliability reports jumped from 22,000 in July 2004 to 99,000 in July 2010.

"It has tremendous credibility with customers," he said. "Studies have shown that the BBB brand is one of the most recognized names among consumers."

The private nonprofit judges potential members on eight "standards for trust," such as honest advertising, transparency and privacy safeguards. It spends one to two weeks checking a company's financial, criminal and licensing history before accrediting it.

Annual accreditation fees range from \$390 for a small company to \$10,000 for a corporate sponsorship.

The accreditation is especially helpful for local companies working in contracting, car sales or other industries where the customer might not know much about the company, Garrett said.

David Solochek has found membership in the BBB helps reassure potential customers of his residential contracting business, Budget Builders in Brown Deer. He has been accredited since 1998 and has an A+ rating.

"I want people to check me out," he said. "To have a third party telling them how good I am is nothing but good for my business."

Solochek has been so pleased with the results of accreditation that this year he paid to be a sponsored listing on the Wisconsin BBB site, meaning his business is listed near the top in searches for keywords such as windows, roofing and siding.

Russ Pickhard, president of **Alliance Group Inc.** in Germantown, said he hasn't seen any concrete results from joining the BBB in January, but believes it's good for his business. The company supplies water treatment chemicals for boilers and cooling towers.

"When you're neck and neck with a competitor, it might be the thing that decides (who gets hired)," he said.

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