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Better Business bribes? Rating group under investigation

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PORTLAND, Ore. – Businesses are accusing the bureau of demanding money in order to change a grade. They say even if a complaint has been resolved their grades don't change unless they pay.

This comes as an ABC News investigation uncovers the Better Business Bureau indeed appears to be bumping up grades in exchange for cash. However, the Better Business Bureau boasts of its almost-100-year reputation as a consumer watchdog and its president

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denies it runs a "pay to play" scheme.

But others disagree.

Here in Northeast Portland, Mark Davis wants to run a top shop. So, as owner of Specialty Auto Care, he went through AAA – instead of the BBB – to investigate the equipment at his place.

AAA polled dozens of his customers, checked on his mechanics and the cleanliness of his store, and made sure he offered a special warranty. Finally they gave him their seal of approval.

So he was surprised to find out the Better Business Bureau rates him a B-, even though it has no complaints.

"I really think it's a disservice to the consumer," Davis says of being labeled as a B- by the BBB. "That's what I think is really happening."

Another repair shop, in Southeast Portland, gets an A+ – even though it has seven complaints where customers felt they could not get their issues resolved at the shop level and took them to the BBB. Seven is more complaints than almost every other repair shop of its size in this area, according to BBB data.

What's the difference?

Specialty Auto is a not a Better Business Bureau member. The second shop is – which means it has paid to join and has agreed to resolve complaints through the special BBB process, among other things.



"If that many people had to go and register a complaint about our business," Davis said, "I would really have to examine our policies and personnel and how we approach our customers and obviously how we resolve problems."

A spokesperson for the BBB admits, Niki Horace, that "sometimes we make mistakes and we want to know about it."

But this is not a mistake. Horace says Specialty Auto gets a B- because it did not answer a questionnaire sent out by the BBB. She says the BBB needs that questionnaire to have reliable information on the businesses it ranks.

Davis says he got the questionnaire, but the questionnaire letter says if you don't fill it out you will likely get no rating at all.

"I'd be fine with no rating," Davis said.

Since he is not a BBB member, he did not think he had to fill it out. He said he did not want to join and did not know they would grade him anyway.

"We do the best we can with what we have," the BBB spokeswoman said, "and those unfortunate businesses that are unhappy with us

or don't feel we're fair or have a bad grade when they shouldn't have a bad grade *per se* ... that's one of the things we deal with daily."

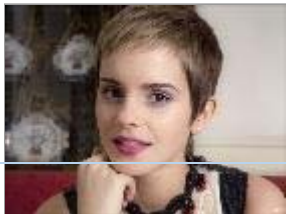
"It's the nature of our business," she said. "We do our best, but ... we service such a large area that it would be impossible for us to be 100 percent accurate."

Davis believes the result is that consumers who follow the BBB's grades, for picking a business to work with, may end up with a company that could be better, or worse, than they expect.

"The BBB is, in a sense, they're misleading the people who rely on them for reliable info about whether a business should have a high-rating or a moderately poor rating," he said.

Workers at the local BBB do not believe they are misleading. They tell us you should not *just* go by their grades. They say you should instead use those grades as a "part of the bigger picture" when you're checking into a business.

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