

Empowering Consumers to Create Stronger Businesses: The Role of the Better Business Bureau

Written by Celeste Taylor
Photography by Brian Ambs

Since 1926, Cincinnati's Better Business Bureau has been helping the business community by encouraging ethical business practices. The agency's founder, Samuel Dobbs, noticed that a lack of truth in advertising coupled with unethical business practices was hurting both consumers and businesses by weakening business culture overall. As a result, the Better Business Bureau was founded in an effort to promote empowered buying decisions, stronger business practices, and deeper investment within communities.

"We believe business is essentially good, and (businesses) show on a day-to-day basis that they are good," says Jocile Ehrlich, president and CEO of Cincinnati's Better Business Bureau. In fact, a mere 20% of the businesses registered with the BBB have any complaints on file. This, says Ehrlich, "is a tremendous statement about our community and about business is general.

"We want businesses and charities to be strong. We want them to really succeed. If we can mesh consumers and businesses so that both can trust each other, then we have really strengthened our community. If you believe in the community that you are doing business with, you are going to build the community itself. People are going to make stronger buying decisions, they're going



to have stronger businesses, and they're going to invest emotionally in our community. The best way we know how to empower people is to create more trust in the marketplace, and our code of business practices provides the framework for building that trust."

The BBB has a variety of programs that encourage the growth of good business practices. "There are just so many facets of BBB that people don't realize, and I think that that is our biggest challenge and it is our greatest opportunity, to let people know the many things that BBB is involved in," Ehrlich says. "Most people think of us as a place to go if you have a complaint."

Although the BBB does assist in complaint resolutions between customers and businesses ("Locally, we have an 89% success rate in resolving complaints. I am very proud of that number," Ehrlich says), complaint resolution "is not really what we do. Our focus is to be an information provider." This includes providing information and resources to existing businesses, startups, and consumers from all walks of life.

"Education is our top priority," Ehrlich says. "Alerting people to problems before they fall victim, not after the fact," and assisting businesses in making sure that they are making ethical business decisions make up a large part of the agency's mission. "We are a great first stop for new businesses that are just launching. We can provide a tremendous amount of information to help them get started on the right path." The BBB also helps existing businesses review their policies and advertising to ensure that they adhere to the BBB's Eight Business Standards.

"Across the country, people used our website about eight million times a month," Ehrlich says of 2012. Just last year, the BBB provided more than 1.5 million business reviews for businesses in the Cincinnati area. The BBB has partnered with University of Cincinnati for an In Pursuit of Ethics program that educates businesses and college students on how to make ethical business decisions. The BBB is also in the midst of developing industry expert panels, "that will be able to tackle ethical issues within an industry...and set standards within a community as to how (ethical) problems will be addressed from this point forward."

The BBB also offers unique services such as Request a Quote, which allows consumers to request a quote for a service from an accredited business. Coming soon is BBB ASAP, which is for consumers who "need somebody right away to come and do something," such as fix a burst pipe or clear a fallen tree.

Other BBB projects include customer reviews in which the BBB "validates that those are in fact true customers,"

unlike other customer review sites; BBB Military Line, a partner program with the Department of Defense Financial Readiness Campaign and Joining Forces Initiative, which provides BBB services and education to military members who are seeking to reintegrate after leaving the service; an ambitious public awareness campaign about the importance of privacy standards; and an increased social media presence to assure that people, especially millennials, can find and contact the BBB quickly and easily.

"When we started in 1926, we were basically going after snake oil salesman at that time," Ehrlich says. "We were reactive more than proactive, and I would say the greatest evolution of BBB is that we have become proactive." By working from the roots of the business community, the BBB is changing the way Cincinnatians do business.

BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU'S EIGHT BUSINESS STANDARDS

Build Trust: Establish and maintain a positive track record in the marketplace.

Advertise Honestly: Adhere to established standards of advertising and selling.

Be Transparent: Openly identify the nature, location, and ownership of the business, and clearly disclose all policies, guarantees, and procedures that bear on a customer's decision to buy.

Be Responsive: Address marketplace disputes quickly, professionally, and in good faith.

Tell the Truth: Honestly represent products and services, including clear and adequate disclosures of all material terms.

Honor Promises: Abide by all written agreements and verbal representations.

Embody Integrity: Approach all business dealings, marketplace transactions, and commitments with integrity.

Safeguard Privacy: Protect any data collected against mishandling and fraud, collect personal information only as needed, and respect the preferences of customers regarding the use of their information.

The Better Business Bureau is located at 7 W 7th St #1600, Cincinnati, Ohio 45202. You can reach them at 513.421.3015 or visit their website at www.cincinnati.bbb.org.