

## Battle brews over business accreditation in Windsor

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By Ellen Van Wageningen, The Windsor Star



Joe Amort of IntegrityLink Tuesday October 18, 2011.

### Photographed by:

Nick Brancaccio, The Windsor Star

WINDSOR, Ont. -- Who do you trust?

Consumers seeking answers to that question often turn to the local Better Business Bureau for answers. It's not often the bureau is the target of competition that claims to be the better source.

That's the case in Windsor, Essex County and Chatham-Kent where the former bureau, which lost its right to use the BBB trademark, changed its name and now operates as IntegrityLink. Meanwhile, the London-based Better Business Bureau of Western Ontario has been asked by headquarters to take over service to IntegrityLink's territory.

So now there are two organizations signing up local businesses seeking accreditation and taking complaints from consumers. Both rely on annual membership fees paid by accredited businesses and help settle disputes between customers and businesses. How a business responds to complaints can affect its rating by the agency and lack of response usually results in loss of accreditation.

Joe Amort, the president and CEO of IntegrityLink, said if residents want a local office his is the only option. Amort, who was the face of the BBB in Windsor for more than three decades, blames the loss of the designation on new priorities at the U.S.-based organization. He points out that the BBB in the Los Angeles area - the largest bureau in North America - has kept its licence despite scandal over allegations last year by businesses that they were forced to pay for a membership to improve their rating and criticism of the top bureau executive's salary.

Offices in Hamilton, Montreal and St. John's also had their licences to use the BBB trademark yanked in August by the U.S.-based Council of Better Business Bureaus. It said all four Canadian offices failed to meet the council's operating standards, which are monitored through regular audits.

Due to confidentiality agreements, the council won't reveal which standards IntegrityLink failed to meet, said spokesperson Katherine Hutt. "All I can tell you is that we have 23 standards and they did not meet nine of them -. The conclusion was they hadn't been meeting the standards for awhile and it was just not likely they were going to meet them any time in the near future."

Amort said the Windsor office met all the standards and simply wasn't big enough.

So he and the board decided to rebrand the non-profit office as IntegrityLink and urge the 700 member businesses to stick with them, he said. With four full-time employees, including Amort, and two part-time bookkeepers, IntegrityLink has a Windsor footprint that the BBB now lacks. It also has a local board, though Amort would not reveal the names of members for publication, except for chair Anne Mittermier. (The BBB of Western Ontario lists its board members on its website.) Member businesses can all have a say in board membership and review audited financial statements, Amort and Mittermier said. To date, businesses have been renewing their memberships and offering support, they said.

Ross Clarke, president of Clarke Surveyors Inc., said he was upset to find out Amort was dropped by BBB after years of representing its brand.

"I just don't like how they handled it," he said. Clarke is opting to pay his dues to a local organization with local employees.

Overcoming that perception won't be easy, conceded Jan Delaney, president of the BBB of Western Ontario.

Delaney has been working for the London-based BBB office, which also serves the Sarnia, Woodstock and St. Thomas areas, for 28 years. Taking over Amort's territory wasn't something she relished. "The problem was if we didn't provide the Better Business Bureau service in this area, who would?" she said.

The BBB of Western Ontario has hired Eric Smith, who works from home in Windsor, to be involved in local organizations and make contact with businesses, she said during a recent visit to the city. "As we get a little further along we'd hope to have an office here."

All complaints will be handled through the London office, which has a staff of five, Delaney said. It has three other representatives working in its territory and over 1,500 member businesses.

Since August, 67 businesses in the Windsor-Essex and Chatham-Kent regions have joined and the bureau office has taken more than 100 consumer complaints from the area, she said. "So they're finding us." The BBB has also joined the chambers of commerce in Windsor and Chatham-Kent.

The Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce will continue to use BBB accreditation when vetting new members, said board chair Jennifer Jones. The advantages of the BBB are its North American network of 116 local offices and a large database of business information, she said.

The challenge for IntegrityLink will be overcoming the loss of the BBB brand, said Noah Tepperman, whose family-owned furniture business is a member of both agencies.

"We put a lot of value in that BBB accreditation," he said, and that will be a factor in whether it renews its IntegrityLink membership. Tepperman said he received no information about the split until it came out in the media.

IntegrityLink is doing the right thing by emphasizing its deep local roots as it goes up against the powerful BBB brand, said Robin Ritchie, a Carleton University assistant professor of marketing whose expertise includes consumer trust. "Effectively what you've got is: what do you trust, the organization or the brand?"

"If the Better Business Bureau or something like it didn't exist, we would have to invent it because it's so important to have a trusted source of information on the reliability of local businesses. In the end, because there's such a need for it, because it's so important, any organization that wants to tackle this has an opportunity in the marketplace."

To find out more about IntegrityLink go to [integritylink.ca](http://integritylink.ca) or call 519-258-7222. For the BBB see [westernontario.bbb.org](http://westernontario.bbb.org) or call 1-877-283-9222.

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