

Pierce helps put business disputes to rest

By *ROGER BUTTON* BUSINESS COLUMNIST Venice Gondolier

In the past seven years Dave Pierce, director of the Better Business Department of the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce, has processed 911 consumer complaints against Venice area businesses; 755 were successfully resolved.

Consumer complaints filed against non-chamber members accounted for 90 percent of those received during 2009-10. Since Pierce took on this role in 2000 he has logged 690 nonmember complaints; however, these have slowed considerably during the past two years with the recessionary economy discouraging home remodeling, a major area of disputes.

Pierce recalled an incident in which a 91-year-old winter resident attended a local hearing establishment several times. It could not resolve her problems and promised to make restitution of \$3,600. After moving to Maine and being unable to return, she received no communication or response from the business despite sending letters.

In need of funds, she contacted Pierce to ask for his help. He sent the business owner a letter, which got no response, then wrote a second personal, stronger letter with more documentation. The owner responded with a check. He cautioned the woman it was not over until the check was processed by her bank and she received her money. "She was delighted, and since we have become e-mail friends," said Pierce.

The process starts with callers reporting problems, often a contractual agreement where there was no follow-through or the consumer was told the charges would be a lot less. Pierce said most issues can be resolved by providing advice about the initial steps of seeking restitution.

If that does not work, under BBD bylaws the complainant must complete a consumer experience report documenting the problems encountered. It's strictly confidential, and is the same form used by the Florida Department of Consumer Affairs.

Identifying the business decision maker, Pierce informs him or her that he is forwarding a copy of the report and a response is required within 10 business days.

"I cannot call the business to act on behalf of the consumer; I just act as the go-between," he said.

Sometimes receipt of the form will encourage a consumer to call the business and the problem is resolved.

Pierce's primary task is to resolve issues as quickly and amicably as possible. If there is no response to the report after the 10-day period, he calls again to discuss it, suggesting the business owner call the consumer to resolve the issue. He can offer another 10 days to allow time for that to happen.

He considers it important the business be aware he is assisting in resolving the issue. This avoids a complainant going to a newspaper or TV investigator, or the consumer picketing the store.

Consumers can ask if there have been any complaints against a member business. He keeps a log of complaints received, retaining records of every business involved in one since 2000.

“Most complaints refer to general home contractors, primarily carpet cleaning services,” said Pierce.

Roofers were a problem area, but complaints against them have dropped substantially due to the recession. Contractors and subcontractors remodeling pool cages and driveways and small, independent automotive repair shops also generate a significant number of complaints.

The Better Business Department was initially set up by the chamber to help businesses or consumers who had a small problem with a chamber member. Realizing there were seniors having problems with nonmember businesses in this area, the chamber expanded it to encompass other businesses. Complaints are taken from the service area of chamber — from Osprey south to Englewood and to North Port. It does not take employer/employee or landlord/tenant cases.

Pierce moved to the Venice area 25 years ago. In 1990 he became Venice MainStreet Inc. manager, and 10 years later joined the chamber as business development director, assisting start-up businesses.