

Moving your worldly possessions

Finding a reputable mover is crucial as roughly one in four moving and storage transactions in Canada ends with a problem, JEFF PAPPONE reports.

When John Shoals (not his real name) negotiated an unbelievable deal to move his possessions from Alberta to Ontario, he assumed the mover had found innovative ways to cut costs and still turn a profit.

As it turned out, the mover had found a novel way to offer a bargain basement price: He quickly peddled the belongings to local pawnbrokers as Mr. Shoals patiently waited for a truck to show up thousands of kilometres away.

In the end, Mr. Shoals' insurance firm covered his losses, and the mover added another entry to his lengthy record after receiving a 14-month prison term for fraud and theft.

Mr. Shoals' case was extreme, but the industry's track record isn't exemplary when it comes to customer satisfaction: Roughly one in four transactions for moving and storage in Canada ends with a problem.

While a small group of wellknown long-haul companies transports the possessions of about 70,000 households annually, their work makes up only a small portion of all moves.

Statistics Canada's census figures indicate that roughly 2.4 million Canadians change addresses annually, with most of these moves being within their city of residence. The majority of these are self-moves where people rent a truck and hoist the boxes. A barbecue and free beer are usually the payment for the helpers' labour.

But, with the average Canadian moving 13 times in their lifetime, there's a statistical expectation of at least three moving-related consumer problems for every person in the country.

Occasionally, unscrupulous movers zero in on deal-seeking consumers who contact them after seeing their company's advertising on neighbourhood telephone poles.

"As long as the entry level for someone wanting to get into the business is a cellphone and a rental truck, you have to be careful as a consumer and understand that you have a responsibility to find a good mover," said John Levi, president of the Canadian Association of Movers (CAM). "People won't buy a car from fly-by-night used car dealers or go to an unlicensed doctor, but many will hand off all their worldly possessions to a total stranger."

This harsh reality is reflected in the Canadian Council of Better Business Bureaus' monthly list of the biggest consumer problem areas, which saw moving complaints attaining Top 3 status for 10 months in 2003.

In the capital region, moving and storage was third on the Better Business Bureau of Eastern Ontario and the Outaouais' list of top trouble areas with 5,864 inquiries and 51 complaints. Roofing and gutter contractors were on the top of the list while computer and Internet services placed second.

Many of the complaints in the capital region were concentrated among a small number of frequent offenders who dart and weave through the industry, using multiple names and phone numbers.

"We have a few companies that we monitor because we do have more complaints," said Diane Iadeluca of the Better Business Bureau of Eastern Ontario and the Outaouais. "The sector as a whole has a lot of companies that aren't as reputable, which hurts some of the others, but the larger companies, as well as our members, do help to self-regulate."

The most frequent complaints are related to rogue movers, damaged goods, overcharging, inaccurate estimates, and generally poor operation.

One of the more common scams is a low estimate combined with a contract stipulating that the customer agrees to pay additional charges as may be required. Signing such a deal essentially translates into the customer paying whatever amount the mover feels like charging before releasing the goods or shifting through badly damaged goods.

"If you have three quotes at \$4,000 and one quote at \$2,000, taking the low estimate usually means you will pay the difference in loss and damage — it's almost a guarantee," Mr. Levi warned.

Against this tide of trouble, CAM has joined forces with the Better Business Bureau and Industry Canada's Office of Consumer Affairs to develop a set of good-practice guidelines for Canadian movers, which are also the basis for a certification program for the moving association's members.

"It's one way to find a good mover but there will a number of reputable movers out there who may not be on the certification program," John Levi explained. "But, generally speaking what we are looking to do is to have all CAM members certified, and essentially that will guarantee to the public that they meet a certain standard of care and performance."

Whereas critics of the industry believe the threat of jail time is needed to force rogue movers to pack their bags, many movers feel that further regulation will only make the problem worse.

Graham Acreman, vice-president of Boyd Moving and Storage Ltd., said while some will be discouraged by stricter laws, they won't solve the problem and might create added opportunities for scammers.

"Something that's legislated can become much more costly for the companies and for consumers who ultimately pay the price for it," he said. "In the U.S., where things are more regulated, the cost of adhering to regulations can be staggering, which also creates more of a difference between what a consumer will pay for a reputable mover and a disreputable one."

Besides, he added, many people running scams understand that they are breaking the law and it makes no difference.

With roughly 140 moving companies listed in the Ottawa in the Yellow Pages, the best way that consumers can protect themselves is education, Ms. Iadeluca said, adding that it's not difficult to find an honest moving company.

"I'm not sure what it is that makes people go ahead without doing their homework but an informed consumer is a smart consumer, so beware out there," she said.

"The best advice I can give consumers is to take your time, ask questions, and get all the information you need before making a decision."



PAT MCGRATH, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN Finding the right movers, such as Chris Bartraw, left, John Forbes and Pat Belaire of Fred Guy Moving and Storage Ltd. in Ottawa, isn't difficult, but you have to be prepared to ask the right questions and get all the information to avoid hiring a fly-by-night moving operation.