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cover story

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR

MOVING EXPERIENCE

So far so good, right? Despite nationwide reports about a sluggish housing market you secured the big move and are just about ready to roll.

Roll? Oh, right! Who's going to pack the contents of all those rooms, wrap furniture, load everything, haul it cross-town or cross-country and set you back up for the business of living – all, hopefully, without a major hitch?

Some folks'll warn you: "Prepare for a nightmare."

The statistics and the stories, they say, depict an industry that's ripe for consumer rip-offs and customer dissatisfaction. The numbers are in: Last year complaints to the Better Business Bureau against movers totaled 8,951 nationally, ranking it 16th amid hundreds of industries listed.

And who doesn't know someone who knows someone who's been "scammed?"

Hold that thought, said local professionals.

Complaints about local movers to the Better Business Bureau of Greater Hampton Roads Inc. totaled only 67 in 2008, ranking a distant 75th overall, according to Rosemary Nye, the agency's vice president.

The difference? An educated consumer plus a reputable moving company, minus common oversights, Nye said.

While scam artists exist in every industry, would-be predatory packers could easily be licking their chops these days as folks seek to stretch their budgets. Doing your homework first – before the initial inquiry – is the best protection.

"Moving is an emotional experience," Nye said. "Try to keep a clear head. Make sure you have all your bases covered; it's just like any other business transaction."

Finding a reputable mover



« Top photo: Movers with Absolute Moving Co., from left, Dayon McClary, Brandon Meck and Mark Felicia, pack up a Virginia Beach home.

« Second from top photo: Cross preps a piece of furniture while loading the truck for a family's move.

Do your research, Nye said. The BBB Web site, www.norfolk.bbb.org, offers information like name, location and phone numbers of area businesses, as well as BBB ratings reported by companies and the public.

While a lower-than-A rating can be due in part to insufficient data – leaving the BBB unable to grant a more favorable grade – a high rating indicates compliance with BBB standards and a willingness to resolve customer concerns or complaints.

Combine findings from agencies like the BBB and the Chamber of Commerce with word-of-mouth recommendations, said Rick Taylor, co-owner and general manager of Absolute Moving Company in Virginia Beach.

He and partner Jeff Burdick attribute Absolute's A-plus status with the BBB to such trust-building factors as good client/company communication, clearly defined expectations and a history of reliability – all of which can be sustained, Taylor said, "when you deal directly with the owner."

Avoid online quotes and companies whose location cannot be determined, Burdick said. Often, "they'll take the information and farm it locally."

Those companies don't necessarily care about the customer, Taylor said.

"They (simply) call the local businesses in that zip code and try to

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sell us the job.”

Look for signs of professionalism right away.

“If a company’s not proactive in responding to your call from the get-go, they won’t be proactive if there’s a problem later on,” Burdick said. “And if they show up in an unmarked truck, or looking un-presentable or un-professional, be wary.”

Be sure a company is properly licensed, insured and bonded. Insurance should cover potential problems on the homeowner’s property as well as on the road. Discuss policies about loss and damage, including that which may occur at storage facilities.

Get at least three quotes –not estimates – based on onsite consultations.

“A representative needs to make a physical inspection in order for you to get a fair, accurate price,” Nye said.

Telephone or online estimates are destined to disappoint, as the scope of the work cannot be determined off-site and estimates, by nature, leave too much room for growth. A firm, written quote leaves the least cause for worry.

“To determine the scope of the

work involves both parties,” and factors boil down primarily to time, materials and distance, Burdick said.

These include specifics on packing, loading and unloading, disassembly and reassembly and trucking, as well as the size and quantity of furniture and appliances and items from the yard, attic and garage, which sometimes go unmentioned.

Things like walking distance between the truck and the entry and the number of floors matter also matter, Burdick said.

The resulting contract or quote should include itemized details of the job, total price, dates, times and damage claim procedures, experts advise. This can help settle potential quarrels before they arise, as in cases of unforeseen circumstances, like storage charges incurred for off-load delays.

A successful move

The certainty of a \$495 quote beat the unreliability of lower estimates in the minds of Dustin and Ciara Morse.

Before moving from Virginia Beach to Chesapeake recently, the couple spent about a day researching local companies. Some, they found, “had quite a few complaints” listed with the



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H.A. Cross with Absolute Moving Co. packs up the home of a Virginia Beach family.

BBB, Ciara Morse said.

While price mattered, she said, their main concern was trustworthiness and that their belongings be delivered “to where they needed to be, in the same condition they were when they left.”

The Morses wanted no surprises regarding professionalism, timeliness or price, she said. They chose Absolute’s flat-rate quote – at about \$100 more than the lowest estimate, but

worth the price for peace of mind, they said.

Professionals also suggest inquiring about the status and quality of employees. Are the people who will handle your possessions trained employees who’ve had a criminal background check? Always accompany the mover at inventory time, the BBB urged.

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points to ponder

In-state moves Virginia law requires local moving companies to have an Intrastate Operating Authority Permit from the Department of Motor Vehicles, indicating that the company carries the appropriate cargo and liability insurance for a household goods carrier and a move within 30 miles, according to the BBB’s Web site. Check on this permit by calling the Motor Carrier Services Hotline in Virginia at (866) 878-2582 or by visiting www.dmvnow.com.

Out-of-state moves For out-of-state moves and those beyond 30 miles, a license from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration is required. Call (800) 832-5660, or visit www.saftersys.org.

In North Carolina Movers of household goods in this state require a certificate from the Utilities Commission. Call (919) 733-4036.

To check on moving companies Call (888) DOT-SAFT for potential complaint records pertaining to long-distance movers.

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