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## State board sees drop in complaints against CPAs

Nationwide, 1,708 complaints were filed with the Better Business Bureau

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Despite loads of sophisticated software available for tax preparation, most tax preparers take an old-fashioned route in ensuring quality service.

That is, they make sure returns are reviewed by more than one set of eyes before they're out the door. They return phone calls promptly. They keep up with training and often do customer-satisfaction surveys to head off complaints.



"We build very close relationships with our clients," said Mike Evans, a tax partner at [Anders Minkler & Diehl](#). "We want to be one of their most trusted advisers.

"We're selling our knowledge, and we're selling our client service, and we work very hard to keep the quality of our work very high. I couldn't tell you the last time we had a complaint as far as our service goes or the quality of our product goes."

Nationwide, complaints against tax preparers appear to be few. In 2007, 1,708 complaints were filed against tax preparers with the Better Business Bureau, according to its data. That's more than double the 816 complaints filed in 2002, but still a small number, considering that H&R Block alone prepared 23.5 million returns for 2007.

Yet that's no reason to be complacent, warns the Council of Better Business Bureaus.

"The number is small, but any time we see an increase in complaints, it's troubling," said council spokeswoman Alison Preszler. "We want consumers to be aware of the pitfalls when you hire a tax preparer. Tax preparation is a very serious topic and when things go wrong, people get extremely upset."

According to a recent BBB analysis, some 32.5 percent of complaints maintained that the tax preparer made a mistake in the tax return that often required the consumer to pay fines or fees to correct the problem.

Most of the BBB complaints involved tax preparation chains such as H&R Block and [Jackson Hewitt](#), Preszler said, adding that complaints against CPAs typically are referred to state accounting boards.

The Missouri State Board of Accountancy processed 72 complaints against CPAs in fiscal 2007, according to Pamela Hill, its executive director. There are roughly 18,200 CPAs in the state. The number of complaints is down from 112 in fiscal 2002.

"It is our goal to deliver a quality product. In order to do this we leave no stone unturned" when preparing tax returns, said Robin Bell, head of the tax practice at [Brown Smith Wallace](#). "All returns are reviewed twice and sometimes three times."

Brown Smith Wallace also surveys clients on key areas including competence, responsiveness, quality of service, value for service and meeting expectations. Its average rating for 2007 was 3.8 out of 4, Bell said.

At Conner Ash, tax returns also are reviewed as many as three times. Before a return is even begun, an extensive checklist is gone through to see, for example, if there are 1099 dividend forms present that were not included in the previous year and whether the cost basis is available for stock sales and documentation is provided for charitable contributions, said President Howard Rosen.

And clients are also surveyed for satisfaction. Scores have been in the mid-90s on a 100-point scale, according to Rosen, who added that the surveys cover not only the quality of the tax return but the tax planning the firm does throughout the year.

"Next year we're going to an online questionnaire, which will make it easier," he said.

At Anders Minkler & Diehl, Evans said the firm usually tries to match tax preparers with clients according to industry group, such as construction or medical services.

"We certainly have a quality control process," Evans said. "It starts with a good continuing professional education for our staff."

Licensed Missouri CPAs are required to complete 120 hours of continuing education over a three-year period, according to the state accountancy board. Evans said most CPAs at his firm complete 60 hours per year, on top of having an accounting degree and CPA license.

Meanwhile, at H&R Block, St. Louis District Manager Arnita Jones said training is also a priority. "We ensure that our tax preparers receive the

highest level of training,” she said, adding that her tax preparers average eight years of experience and 450 hours of training.

As to the BBB increase in complaints, Jones said: “My immediate reaction is that we want to reassure our clients. We will stand behind the returns that we do.” That means eating any penalties assessed as a result of an error in a tax return — as part of H&R Block’s standard guarantee, she said.

H&R Block does not do formal written client surveys, Jones said. Instead, the firm calls clients randomly to inquire about the quality of service they received. Locally, H&R Block did 145,000 tax returns in the St. Louis metro area for 2007, the firm said.

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