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To make a bad move, hire a rogue company

A growing number attract customers through the Web. Once your goods are on the truck, charges often soar.

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Rogue movers operating coast to coast, primarily marketing themselves on the Internet, are increasingly blending into the crowd of legitimate movers and luring unsuspecting consumers.

Their Web sites show moving trucks, happy customers, and supposed letters of recommendation. Come moving day, the picture changes dramatically.

When a rental truck rather than the one depicted on the Web site shows up, it is often the first sign that something is about to go seriously wrong.

Once household goods are on the truck, a \$1,500 estimate can turn into a \$5,000 demand. And if you do not pay, you do not get your things.

Lori Burch Canorro of Columbia, Lancaster County, for example, found that her bill rose 411 percent above the estimate when she moved to Pennsylvania from Illinois two years ago.

"I thought this was it, I'm never going to see my stuff again," she said.

Nearly 6,900 complaints were lodged with Better Business Bureaus against movers in 2001, up from 5,097 in 1999 and 2,970 in 1996. Federal officials logged an additional 4,000 in 2001. Consumer watchdogs say only 1 in 10 complaints actually gets lodged for the 1.5 million households moved each year.

It's not tough to open a moving company. All it takes is minimal liability insurance and an easily obtained interstate motor carrier permit.

Federal officials, who intend to create a publicly accessible complaint database, report receiving dozens of complaints a week. The primary places for consumers to learn of problem movers are Internet sites created by victims.

Problems with rogue movers have gotten the attention of the FBI, U.S. Postal Service, and state and federal regulators, although virtually no action has been taken so far.

One congressman who has been hearing the complaints for years plans to introduce a bill to help. U.S. Rep. Thomas E. Petri (R., Wis.), chairman of the subcommittee on Highways and Transit, is working on a bill allowing states a more active role in regulating interstate movers.

Law enforcement officials first began seeing the problem companies in the New York metropolitan area, South Florida and California. But as the number of bad movers and their victims began to grow, so did

attention from lawmakers and law enforcement in those areas.

The result was the discovery by the movers that, if they conducted business across state lines, the moves fell under federal jurisdiction.

Since the Interstate Commerce Commission was disbanded in 1995, minimal federal resources have been allocated to consumer protection for those moving. Using that opening, rogue operators began expanding their operations from regional to national over the last three or four years.

"These folks are in this to rip people off," said David Longo, spokesman for the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

Despite thousands of complaints, law enforcement response has been muted. A two-year FBI investigation that has yet to deliver an arrest has frustrated consumer advocates. The motor-carrier agency focuses on safety, and does not have the staff to police movers.

At one time, the ICC had 50 investigators in its Philadelphia regional office alone. Now, three investigators with the motor-carrier agency scattered around the United States are responsible for looking into complaints nationwide, and they have additional responsibilities.

"They know how the game works," Longo said of the problem movers.

For online shoppers in particular, differentiating between legitimate movers and the aggressive minority that prey on consumers is difficult. Problem companies operate under a variety of names.

The industry is so contaminated that the U.S. Postal Service decided to exclude movers from the 68 million "Movers Guide" advertising packets distributed each year at the nation's 38,000 post offices.

"We found out that this industry is pretty much unregulated," Sue Brennan of the U.S. Postal Service in Washington said.

Canorro discovered just how out of control the industry is.

The Lancaster County woman called the Better Business Bureau in Chicago, where the movers she had hired claimed they were based. They weren't, which explained the lack of complaints against them there. They also claimed to be the agent of Bekins Co., a major national mover. They weren't.

"The people I talked to had been so nice," Canorro said. "I feel like an idiot, looking back on it."

For her move from Branson, Mo., Canorro hired Advanced Moving System, of Sunrise, Fla. The company, among the most complained about, heavily markets on the Internet and has been the subject of investigations in Florida, North Carolina and Wisconsin. Criminal charges were lodged against Advanced workers in North Carolina.

Canorro's move largely matched the circumstances in thousands of complaints. Victims tell nearly identical stories of believing they were paying one price, only to be presented with a monumentally higher bill once goods were loaded.

Her original quote of \$1,644 swelled to \$8,400.

Canorro's case was somewhat unusual in that she was able to interest local police. Police typically cite a

lack of jurisdiction.

After several months of wrangling with Advanced, Canorro awaited delivery along with the Susquehanna Regional Police. Police charged her movers with theft by extortion, but later dropped the charges when the driver and helper cooperated and made statements against the company owner, Zion Rokah.

Rokah blames consumers, small-town attitudes, and small-town police.

"We move the stuff all the way to Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania, they say it's stolen," Rokah said. "The police over there took the law into their hands. That's something they're not supposed to do."

He referred to police in Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Wisconsin - where his crews have been stopped by police - as xenophobic and racist.

Like Rokah, most movers in these cases are Israeli nationals. Law enforcement and regulatory officials said they were uncertain why Israelis dominated the dark side of the moving business.

Rokah said he knew what authorities could and could not do in a disputed move. Some have tried to cross the line, he said.

He also asserted that he had kept the Advanced name while competitors shuffled names every few months, making him an easier target. Rokah acknowledged he operated under other names but refused to disclose them. Internet registration and Florida incorporation records show they include Better Moving Services and Movers Directory, a Web site.

Federal motor-carrier safety officials fined Advanced Moving, Rokah's best-known company, \$98,000 last summer for paperwork issues related to dealings with consumers. A handful of companies a year are fined, but federal officials acknowledge that few - if any - end up paying.

New Jersey and Pennsylvania officials said their power was limited in interstate moves.

"We just simply do not have the jurisdiction," said Genene Morris, spokeswoman for the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs.

New Jersey officials turned away 121 formal complaints against interstate movers from 2001 through fall 2002.

Pennsylvania does not keep the same statistics. Both states, however, have sued moving companies whose principal place of business is within their state borders.

Pennsylvania Assistant Attorney General Thomas Blessington said he had seen his share of devastated victims.

"There's real sad stories where people lost everything," he said. "The children's trophies, war medals. You name it."

Other customers pay the inflated price.

"When you're standing on the sidewalk with all the stuff you own on a truck, and they ask for another thousand dollars, they have a lot of leverage," he said.

Alida Nattress learned about leverage when she moved from New Jersey to California in 2001. She thought the price from America's Best Movers would be \$1,095. On moving day, the movers from Majesty Moving & Storage of Plantation, Fla., (under the same ownership as America's Best), showed up, and the bill kept growing, she said.

Weeks of phone calls demanding cash followed.

"Most people cave in and pay the money, and I refused to do that," Nattress said. "We figured we'd just have to kiss our stuff goodbye."

The company's owner, Yair "Yanni" Malol, could not be reached for comment. In the past, he has disputed consumers' allegations, and has said that nearly every complaint of the dozens lodged against him had no foundation.

The motor-carrier safety administration fined his companies \$71,000 last summer for problems in its dealings with consumers.

The agency has yet to comply with a formal Freedom of Information request made in early October to report which of his companies, if any, have paid their fines.

Nattress said Majesty finally relented, giving her the name of a nearby storage facility. She said she showed up to find a room full of goods belonging to several other families, along with her television, love seat and DVD player, all of which were destroyed.

Although Nattress estimated her loss at \$100,000, she said she could not imagine paying Majesty. "I would not give them the money," she said. "They owed me money. I am not going to give in to them."

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