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DARE TO BE DULL

2009 top dog in financial planning

Well, 2009 is yet another year that I've been shut out of the Colorado Springs Business Journal "Best of" awards in the financial industry categories.

The votes again went to the big guys. But I have something they don't have — a staff member with a plaque from the impressive sounding "Consumer's Research Council of America" that names him one of America's Top Financial Planners.

And even if they do have such an award, I'm willing to bet it wasn't given to their dog.

In my office, I have prominently displayed this beautiful plaque made out to "Max Tailwager" (actually spelled "Tailwager"), my dachshund puppy. As you can see, he looks pretty proud of his award. Note how similar the emblem is to the U.S. Presidential Seal.



About six months ago, I received an announcement in the mail from SLD Industries informing me that I'd been named a recipient of this "prestigious award." It was sent to a previous address and didn't actually have my name on it.



Even though this award was from an entity listing its address on Pennsylvania Avenue, the real deal typically doesn't just show up in the mail. I knew it had to be one of those "honors" bestowed upon anyone willing to send in some money.

So, I sent in the form, but named my dog as the recipient. Since Max doesn't have a credit card — credit markets have tightened — I gave them my name and number. A few weeks went by and, snap, Max is proudly displaying his new honor.

I gather the Consumers' Research Council of America wouldn't actually consider Max one of America's top financial planners, but they should.

■ During 2008, Max made \$99.3 billion more than the combined brilliant financial minds at AIG.

■ During March, when top financial planners on CNBC's "On the Money" were telling viewers that "cash is king," Max wasn't advising any investors to get out of the market. Those who listened to the other planners missed out on a 50 percent stock market gain.

■ He never charges his clients exorbitant fees or commissions. His services can be retained for the paltry sum of a single Milk Bone.

Since I first wrote about Max's award in a couple of columns for CBS MoneyWatch.com, William Barrett wrote a couple of columns in Forbes about how the council doesn't like me. Yeah, well, they can get in line behind the LEAP financial planners who threatened me a couple of years ago.

While the council never actually contacted me, a Forbes column noted they would be filing complaints with the Colorado Division of Securities and the CFP Board, the entity that licenses Certified Financial Planners.

Unfortunately for them, Fred Joseph, commissioner of the division, also was quoted in the same Forbes article as applauding Max's plaque. Later, the CFP Board wrote a column about Max's award and warned consumers about credentials not quite as legitimate as they sound.

A method to my madness

Why did I shell out money for my dog's award?

Sure, part of it was to have something to write about, yet there is actually a learning opportunity here.

Financial planners, like anyone, will do things to win your trust. Some awards and designations are legitimate, but there are more than a hundred financial designations, some taking only a few days to obtain.

My current favorite happens to be the Certified Retirement Financial Advisor designation that is claimed to be the second most respected designation by seniors.

If designations aren't enough, I can appear to be a media expert for a fee.

For example, I received a call informing me that I was a finalist to be on a special segment of video from "The Today Show" that would run on United Airlines flights. They claimed it wasn't a paid advertisement, despite the \$29,500 "filming fee" I'd have to pay.

There also were the radio stations, and even one TV station, that approached me with the flattering offer of becoming their official financial planner. The only catch — you guessed it — was that I had to pay them for the privilege. Is the business talk radio show you are listening to really a paid advertisement?

Legitimate awards are great and I congratulate all the winners of the CSBJ "Best of" awards. Real people, including me, made real votes.

There are, however, subtle ways that the financial services industry tries to win your trust that are quite misleading. Check out those credentials and always make sure you understand what your planner is doing with your money.

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