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Beware business rate cowboy offers

Helen Loveless, Financial Mail
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Cowboy surveyors are looking to profit from the revaluation of business rates.

From next month rates for small firms will rise after the reassessment of companies' rateable value by the Valuation Office Agency.

These assessments were carried out in 2008, just before property values and rents slumped and many firms believe their new rates are unfairly high.

This has led to a rise in firms offering to reassess businesses rateable value with a view to appealing for a reduction.

While most offer a legitimate service, the Forum of Private Business says there has been a surge in calls from members complaining about rogue operators charging large fees with little-or no success in bringing down business rates.

Philip Moody of the FPB says: 'Every five years after a rates revaluation, cowboy firms spring up and start cold-calling firms and promising to get big reductions. In reality, any savings are often minimal and dwarfed by the fees charged.'

City-based Leaseholders-United offers an online service to help small businesses keep down property costs without paying professional fees,

Chartered surveyor Andrew Bacon of LeaseholdersUnited says: 'It can be difficult to check the accuracy of your rateable value if you don't know what you're looking for. But this also allows cowboys to take large upfront fees on the back of spurious claims of success.'

Bacon says surveyors manage to achieve a reduction in rates for at least a third of clients on average and Leaseholders-United publishes a list of surveyors with at least this success rate on its website.

Richard Johnston, 66, owner of Fingals Hotel in Dittisham, Devon, was cold-called last December by a firm offering to get him a reduction on his business rates.

With the rateable value set to rise from £19,000 to £35,000 next month, Richard agreed to see a surveyor. But when the man arrived Richard was not happy with his credentials nor his claim to be independent.

After trying repeatedly to contact the firm Richard wrote to head office cancelling the potential contract and also stopping a £400 [cheque](#) for future services. He has received letters threatening recovery of the money.

Richard says: 'The surveyor did not appear independent and there were mistakes with the business cards and material, so I cancelled the contract. I then contacted the Valuation Office Agency to ask it to look again at the rateable value and it will now go up to only £29,000.'

•• *Unsure about your rate? Go to voa.gov.uk/2010, put in your address and check what information is held on you and how the rate has been calculated.*

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