

What You Need to Know About the Moving Industry

Other than seeing the occasional moving van rumbling down the highway, you probably know very little about the moving industry – and what you do know is likely colored by stories of unscrupulous movers.

The moving industry is comprised of thousands of moving companies (large and small) that give high levels of service – they can't afford not to, with the Internet's ability to spread stories of dubious companies wide and far.

As you start investigating movers, you will come across terminology that might confuse you; this article is a start to understanding the industry.

In April 2008, the American Moving and Storage Association (AMSA) announced the "ProMover" designation. To become a ProMover, AMSA will screen applicants for any applicable state and federal felony convictions; to verify compliance with state incorporation laws, the moving companies must sign an agreement pledging compliance with applicable state and federal laws, as well as AMSA's Code of Ethics.

The ProMover designation is reviewed every year, and movers who don't measure up will be expelled from AMSA membership and stripped of their ProMover designation. The companies that meet the high standards will be found on AMSA's website, <http://www.promover.org>.

But as with anything nowadays, being an informed consumer is still the best way to avoid the bad apples. So let's get started with some terminology that you've probably seen but might not be familiar with. As you start your search for a mover, you'll come across 4 primary players, and it's crucial you know what they do and who they are.

Van Lines – This is just another word for a large moving company. They're usually distinguished by their long tenure in business, and they provide a full scope of moving services both across the country and internationally.

There are approximately 25 van lines, and each is owned and operated separately with corporate structures that include both public and private companies. The two largest van line companies in the U.S are United Van Lines and Mayflower Van Lines (both owned by Unigroup) and Allied Van Lines and North American Van Lines (both owned by Sirva, Inc).

Van Line Agents – As you get quotes you probably think you're dealing with a van line, but you are actually dealing with one of its agents, which operate as independent companies. There are approximately 4,500 van line agents, and they can be either single office agents or have a large, national office structure. These agents have agreed to abide by certain quality guidelines established by the van lines in order to operate under their licensing authority, much like a franchisee of a franchisor.

Many of these agents have long histories in their communities and are multi-generation family owned and operated businesses. Because they are part of a van line, there is a high level of checks and balances built into its processes, with access to a variety of training programs and best practices.

Independent or "full service" carriers – These independent carriers don't have a van line affiliation. There are over 1,200 independent moving companies providing interstate service under their own licenses and more than 5,000 providing intrastate service only.

Many of these independent companies can provide you a high degree of personal service, including direct involvement in your move by company owners. However, due to the lack of affiliation with a van line, there can be a higher degree of risk associated with an independent moving company -- do some additional research and ensure that you will be able to get the level of service and experience that you want for your move.

Moving Brokers – You will sometimes come across moving brokers who find a moving company to move you. Be wary dealing with brokers, because you'll have little idea if the moving companies they use are insured and meet high standards. If you use a broker, at a minimum make sure you ask for the identity of the mover; if you can't get it, find another mover.