

The ticketbuster

Westlake Village firm fights for its clients

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Staff Writer

TicketBust has crafted a company by helping to get California's accused speed demons off the hook.

The Westlake Village-based firm, founded in 2003, claims to have been the first of a handful of online companies that have sprung up offering money-back guarantees for getting clients out of speeding and red-light tickets.

The firm, which said it has processed more than 27,000 California traffic tickets since its inception, calls itself a "legal document filing" service. It's careful not to claim to be a law firm or legal service, which would require bar association oversight, but does say that it's competing against ticket-fighting attorneys for what appears to be an ever-growing market.

"I figured there are a lot of people out there who have no clue about how to contest a ticket," said Steve Miller, a former accountant who started TicketBust after he created an interactive advertising agency that went under in the dot-com crash.

"People, a lot of times, are confused about what to do when they get a traffic ticket," he said. "Look at your options. There's a lot of ways to legally fight a ticket."

Miller said he became a ticket-busting businessman after his brother came to him and explained how he'd managed to get out of a traffic ticket. "He got rid of his ticket without even going into court. It was all done in writing, through something called a 'trial by written declaration,'" Miller said.

He decided he could make an online application that processed large volumes of written declarations for people who couldn't or didn't want to deal with the hassle of paperwork themselves, but who also didn't want to pay expensive attorneys' fees, fight the ticket in a courtroom, or just pay up and let it go.

"The moment for us, when we realized we were on to something, was this: Over 16 million tickets are being given out in California every year. And nobody has even heard of a trial by declaration, which is something every driver has a right to do," Miller said.

A big chunk of the firm's revenue comes

from the commercial sector — taxi, truck and limousine drivers who can't afford to get points on their licenses.

Traffic tickets aren't cheap. Fines can often top \$400, and TicketBust says that according to its research, drivers see their insurance premiums increase an average of 27 percent for a single ticket and up to 40 percent for a second offense.

"People are fed up with the price of a ticket," Miller said. "They believe that the governments, state and local, are just gouging them."

TicketBust charges \$100, refundable if the ticket is not dismissed, plus a \$149 non-refundable "document processing fee."

Miller estimated that his firm gets 60-80 percent of its customers' tickets dismissed, but he said not all clients report back with the results after their case is over.

THE ART OF TICKET BUSTING

The TicketBust model isn't entirely welcomed by the legal community. Jay Leiderman, a criminal defense attorney with Leiderman Devine LLP in Ventura and the information officer for the Ventura County Criminal Defense Bar, said that while online traffic ticket-fighting sites rarely bite into an attorney's business, he tells clients to be wary of such services.

"We attorneys tend to view these types of Internet-based corporations with a bit of distrust until they sort of prove otherwise," he said. "I would proceed with caution with a company that's making guarantees and has hidden fees."

At the same time, a service like TicketBust isn't competing with most criminal defense firms. "I don't see it as something that cuts into my business. I would only do a traffic ticket for a friend of mine for free. It's just not cost-effective for us to do a traffic ticket. Someone isn't going to pay \$500 or \$1,000 for us to spend three to four hours fighting a ticket," Leiderman said.

But there are attorneys who do make their living from fighting traffic tickets, he said. Like TicketBust, those lawyers have generally found a way to process large volumes of tickets in a relatively short amount of time.

"There's an art to fighting a traffic ticket," Leiderman said. "There's no question about that."



LORA WEREB PHOTO

TicketBust founder Steve Miller with a ticket his company had dismissed.

'BUSTO MI TICKET'

Drivers who use TicketBust's site start by clicking a big button that says, "Bust my ticket now!" — or, on the Spanish version of the site, "Busto mi ticket ahora!"

The customer submits some information about the citation and signs off to its accuracy. The eight-member TicketBust staff researches the case and files the necessary documents with the court. Meanwhile, the court looks through the written declaration filed by TicketBust and makes its decision. The officer who wrote the ticket has to dispute the points made in the declaration — failing to do so can get the ticket dismissed, Miller said.

If TicketBust customers lose with the

written declaration, they can still go to court to fight the ticket in person.

After seven years in business, TicketBust is expanding its offerings and breaking into new demographic markets.

The firm recently launched a Spanish-speaking division, www.CombateSuTicket.com. "I see that as a huge market," Miller said. "It seems like a lot of people like to speak in their native language whether they can speak English or not. We wanted to cater to that Latino market."

Since launching the Spanish service in fall 2010, TicketBust has hired two bilingual employees. The company will be also launching Chinese and Korean sites in coming months, Miller said.