

Nothing phony about this store

Competitive bells toll for Ma

By **BRENDA THORNTON**
Of the Emerald

Ma Bell, move over. After a 1977 Federal Communications Commission ruling forced the American Telephone and Telegraph Company to separate its service and equipment charges, the standard home telephone began to change. And the independent phone store was born.

The black and white desk phone gave way to technicolor Snoopys and svelte attache-case phones. Suddenly there was a distinction between a rented phone and an owned phone.

Apparently the rental models are headed for extinction. Newsweek magazine reported earlier this year that while only 5 percent of the nation's 110 million telephones are customer-owned, the number will jump to 96 percent by 1986.

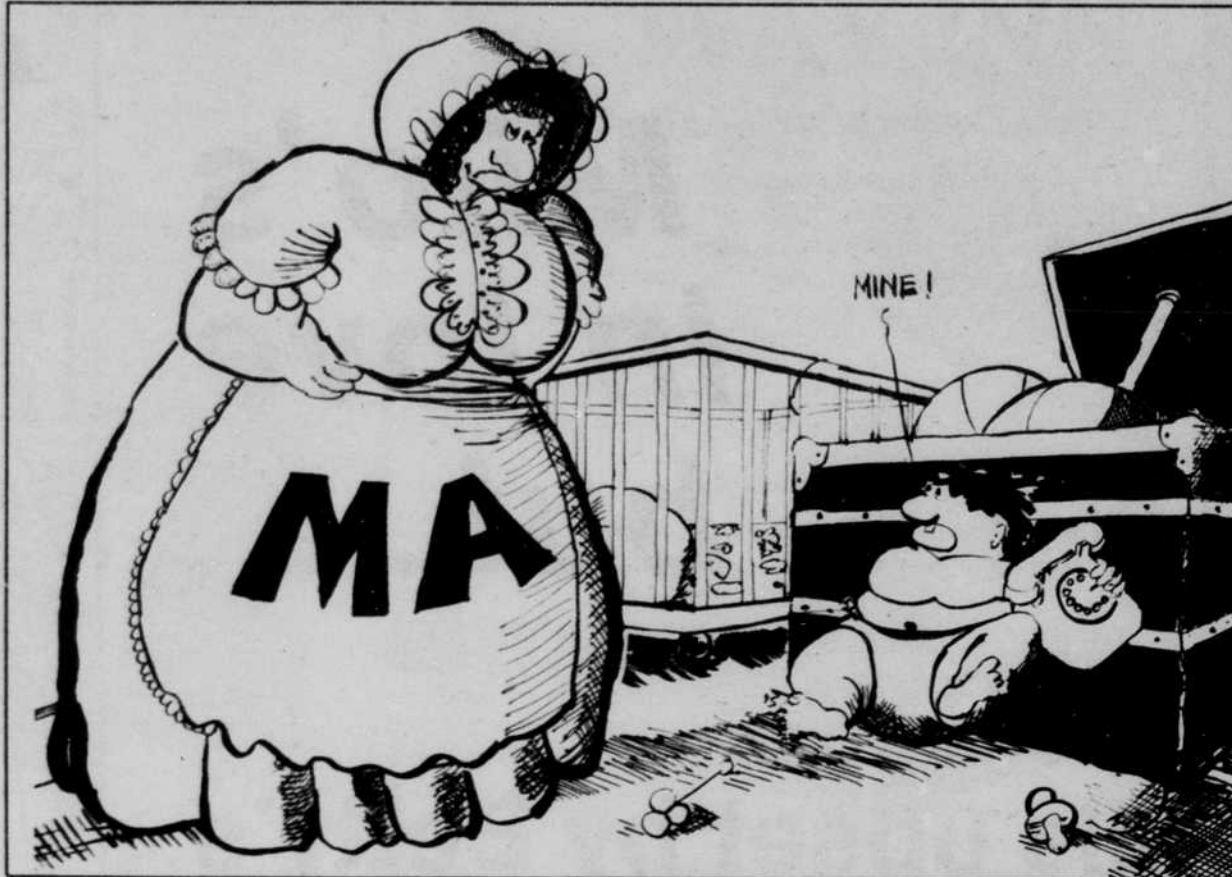
Chuck Heuser, owner of Phones Plus, Oregon's only independent phone store outside of Portland, says he is ready for the jump.

Although Phones Plus, at 656 Charnelton St. in Eugene, has only been open for a year, Heuser says the sales growth has been "incredible."

He declines to reveal his profits ("I don't want Ma Bell to know just how well we're doing"), but since April 1981, sales have grown every month. And September sales doubled August's figures, he says. As a result, Phones Plus has widened its marketing area considerably.

"Initially our market was mainly the Eugene-Springfield area," Heuser says. "Today it is anywhere south of Salem, including Medford and the coast."

Heuser speculates that recommendations from satisfied customers are responsible for his success. "At first there was skepticism, but we've established ourselves in the past



Graphic by Max DeRungs

year," he says.

Heuser says he wants people to know that an option exists. "I feel that the customers should have the opportunity to compare and then make their decision. I don't tell them why they should not buy from Bell, but why they should buy them (telephones) here."

The primary reason that customers frequent Phones Plus is to buy a phone that the telephone company's store will only rent, Heuser says. "Most customers want to buy a standard phone, like the ones that have been in homes for years."

But the phone company does not sell this model, he says. Instead, a customer must rent it from them.

Prices at Phones Plus start at \$39.95. Heuser says his phones usually pay for themselves within two years through savings from monthly phone bills. And Heuser says his

phones work just as well as Ma Bell's. In fact, he buys his phones from the same manufacturer as the telephone company.

Bell Telephone is "not very happy" with the emergence of independent phone stores across the nation, Heuser says.

"Bell tries hard to keep people from buying elsewhere. They will tell customers that phones not bought from Bell will be difficult to repair or have no guarantee."

"When we're selling the same merchandise they're selling, it's the same guarantee."

Heuser urges customers to bring in phones for repair, whether they were purchased at Phones Plus or not. Unlike Bell, Phones Plus loans the customer a phone for free while their phone is being repaired. "We even repair Bell phones, often at a lower cost."

Heuser says he thinks many phone customers do not like the service provided by Bell Telephone.

He refers to an October 1980 issue of the Pacific Northwest Bell newsletter, where a headline told PNB Phone Center employees to "Take A Bow" for high service ratings from customers. The article stated that 46 percent of the Phone Centers' customers gave the service representatives a "good" or "excellent" rating, whereas in 1979 only 40 percent gave the representatives high marks.

"That means that 54 percent thought that they (PNB Phone Store representatives) were doing a poor job," Heuser maintains. "In any other business that would be a disgrace."

"That's one of the reasons that I decided this was the right thing to do."

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