

Connecting with customers

Max Ratner's Phones-N-Things is a haven for those who remember when dialing a number actually involved dialing.

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Max Ratner's customer is the telephone user who loves that old rotary dial.

It's the customer who rejects the ephemera of a throwaway society, where telephones are more cheaply replaced than repaired, and cherishes instead the weightiness of a 40-year-old handset. It's the woman who's thrilled by the true-bell ring of an old phone, or the man accustomed to the zup-zeeee, zup-zeeee melody of numbers literally being dialed.

Max Ratner's customer, in other words, often is a senior citizen.

"The seniors have had these phones for 30 years and want to keep them going," said Ratner, 50, of New Brighton, who owns a telephone retail and repair shop in Roseville called Phones-N-Things. "Obviously, I get younger people, too, but at least 50 percent are seniors."

While Ratner says his specialty is fixing rotaries from the 1950s and '60s — decades that many of his customers remember well — he helps other customers with different telephone needs, too.

From a workbench in the back of his Rice Street storefront, Ratner tinkers with everything from wooden antiques that hang on the wall to Trimlines from the 1970s and '80s that have been sidelined by sticky buttons. On the retail side of the business, he sells everything from phone systems, individual phones and answering machines to miscellaneous gift items such as soaps and candles.

If Ratner's repairs help elderly customers sustain their old phones, he's also the one helping them confront the brave new world of cellular phone technology. Prepaid mobiles are among the non-rotary phones he sells on the retail side of the 22-year-old business.

"I cater to the seniors, and I guide them through the process," he said. "When they leave the store, the phone is a working entity."

In some ways, Ratner's business operates in a slice of the retail universe that is growing by leaps and bounds.

Stores operated by mobile phone companies have become ubiquitous in shopping plazas, and mega-retailers stock shelves that are crammed with phones. Scan a phone book and find scores of firms that will service telecommunication systems used by businesses.

Ratner's store works with some of these business customers, too. But the focus on repairing and selling old phones is rare, according to others in the trade.

"I'm one of the few that does that, and I don't do it that much," said John A. McDonald, the owner of Telephone Repairman Inc., an online telephone repair service in Chelmsford, Mass.

McDonald worked for more than 30 years as a repairman with New England Telephone, AT&T and Lucent Technologies, and saw during his career a degradation of quality in telephones. Before deregulation in the 1980s, phone companies leased telephones to customers. Because the companies provided repair service for the phones, they had an incentive to build them well in the first place, McDonald said.

Nowadays, the niche business of selling and servicing rotary phones is enjoying something of a resurgence, said Richard Marsh, owner of the Chicago Old Telephone Company, which is located in North Carolina.

Marsh has sold rotary phones for as much as \$150, depending on the color — some of the old hues can't be found on modern phones. Rotary phone buyers like the idea of being able to place calls even when the power's out, he said.

"Very recently, the phones that we thought were useless and just threw away — the rotary dials — are becoming very popular," said Marsh. "People recognize the quality — there were really no pitiful rotary dials ever made."

Ratner, a 1974 graduate of Henry Sibley High School in St. Paul, started his business in 1984 after visiting another phone shop in town and deciding he could do it better. At the time, he owned a carpet-cleaning business but was looking for a change.

The original shop was in Maplewood and was strictly retail. Ratner soon branched out into phone repair and installation of business phone systems — a decision he credits with keeping the business afloat when other small retail shops failed. Repairs account for about 50 percent of annual revenue, he said.

Having never worked for a phone company, Ratner learned telephone repair "on the fly." Even after two decades of repair work there's still more to learn, he says, adding that he still farms out some jobs to subcontractors.

"There's a knack to it, like anything. You have to learn the theory," Ratner said. "You take the cover off and you have to diagnose the problem — troubleshoot it, isolate it, test it. I do a lot of testing, testing all day long."

Since opening in Maplewood in 1984, Phones-N-Things has moved several times, most recently from a location in Vadnais Heights that is destined for closure because of highway construction. At one point, Ratner also operated stores on Grand Avenue in St. Paul and in the Uptown neighborhood of Minneapolis. Now, it's just a one-man business in one location.

When Ratner goes home at night and picks up the phone, he doesn't trace arcs with his index finger in a rotary dial. He pushes buttons.

Even so, Ratner appreciates the allure of the old phones. "They're all mechanical — so anything that goes wrong with these phones can be repaired," he said. "You can get 50 years of service out of these phones."