

the DEATH of the yellow pages

By Tom Wadsworth, Editor

On Nov. 11, an Associated Press news story splashed across the continent. The news: Some 15 states have now granted or are considering granting the requests of telephone directory publishers to stop the mass printing of residential phone books.

You read that right. *Phone book companies are begging regulators for the right to stop publishing phone books.*

Why? As the AP story put it, "Telephone companies argue that most consumers now check the Internet rather than flip through pages when they want to reach out and touch someone."

White Is Out, But Yellow Is In?

Does that mean they will stop publishing the Yellow Pages?

Of course not. The fat yellow book is still a gold mine that absorbs massive amounts of money from businesses that are stuck in the 1980s. (*Is that you?*) Yellow Pages reps continue to let door dealers think that Yellow Pages ads are constantly consulted by consumers.

Out of one side of their mouths, the phone directory publishers are saying that "most consumers now check the Internet rather than flip through pages." Out of the other side, Yellow Pages reps will tell you that millions of people regularly refer to the Yellow Pages.

You can't have it both ways.

When Linda Holmes of NPR reported this same story, she commented, "It's not hard to imagine a day when the Yellow Pages, too, will no longer be able to justify their existence."

The Battle in Seattle

That day is already coming. The battle has started in Seattle, and the Yellow Pages companies are lawyering up.

On Nov. 15, 2010, the Seattle Times reported that the Yellow Pages Association and Yellow Pages publishers Dex Media West and SuperMedia sued the city in federal court, seeking to overturn a new ordinance that would *let residents decide* if they want to receive Yellow Pages directories.

The ordinance also requires Yellow Pages distributors to pay fees for each book and each ton of books delivered. Seattle citizens are now reportedly paying \$350,000 a year to recycle Yellow Pages, and the city is trying to recoup those costs.

"Die, Phone Book, Die"

That's the title of a Nov. 11 story in the business trend-watching magazine *Fast Company*. "These days your fingers are likely walking on iPad touchscreens, not dead tree pages," writes author Addy Dugdale.

U.S. publishers reportedly continue to crank out 550 million residential and business directories every year. A half-billion fat directories raise an obvious question: If people aren't using them, isn't that creating a massive waste of paper?

Yellow Page Mountain

The same question hit media producer Aimee Davison when she recently came home to her Montreal apartment and found a huge pile of Yellow Pages books blocking her path. Disturbed by the waste, she launched "Yellow Page Mountain," her mission to stop the senseless distribution of a massive publication that few people use.

Armed with a video camera, she and Kyle MacDonald drove around Montreal collecting as many unused Yellow Pages books as possible in a few hours. (See their compelling 6-minute video at www.yellowpagemountain.com.)

A Taste of Their Own Medicine

They concluded their collection efforts by dumping 500+ Yellow Pages books at the head office of the Yellow Pages in Montreal. The video shows a Yellow Pages official telling Davison that the pile of books is a fire hazard and that they're dropping the books on private property where children are present.

As Davison notes, that's exactly what the Yellow Pages companies are doing.

What did the Yellow Pages officials do with the 500+ fat directories? They dumped them in the trash for recycling.

A Trustworthy Source

My advice for door dealers? Don't trust your Yellow Pages reps' claims about the popularity of their book. Their motivation to stretch the truth is much too great.

Instead, start asking every customer and every caller how they learned about you. Make sure your advertising budget is based on facts, not on tradition or slick sales pitches. ■



Photo by Kyle MacDonald