

PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS

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Personalized service rings true

Providence telephone company answers the call for a variety of customers

BY ANDREA CROCE

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It's the start of a new year, and Carolyn Bouchard of **Abbey Telephone Service Inc.** is ready to ring it in.

This is the 19th year Bouchard has owned the answering service. She bought the company from its former owner in 1987 and has worked hard to make Abbey a name her customers trust.

Bouchard said the backbone of her business is personal service. Abbey isn't automated: Callers won't get a voice recording during regular office hours (8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.), causing them to hang up.

Her employees are live operators, trained to answer calls on a customer's line, with the company name (or any greeting a customer prefers), as if the operators are at that company or office location. But Abbey is more than an answering service. Bouchard and her staff can also handle book-keeping, typing, word processing and large mailing.

The company could be anywhere, but was started in Providence by its founder. Bouchard has kept it here since taking over. She says its location in the financial district is desirable because a variety of her customers – attorneys, lawyers, health care professionals and even plumbers – are located there as well, giving them easy access to pick up mail delivered to Abbey for them, among other things.

Bouchard said most of her customers have small offices and either can't afford a full-time secretary or can't afford more than one secretary. Others are just starting out and want someone to answer their business phone in a professional manner.



PBN PHOTO/BRIAN MCDONALD

CAROLYN BOUCHARD runs Abbey Telephone Service Inc., a Providence company that provides personalized answering services.

If a customer wants voice mail, Bouchard offers it after business hours. But Bouchard stresses personalization is her main selling point.

"No matter how much voice mail is out there, people like personalized attention," Bouchard said. "They still just like speaking to someone – a live person."

Richard Hegeman, owner of Hegeman & Company, a Providence jewelry store, wholeheartedly agrees. He was a customer of Abbey long before Bouchard was owner; and stayed loyal after Bouchard took over.

"It is important," Hegeman said, "to have someone who can answer a phone from time to time and take an accurate call. I could have an answering machine here, but it's not the same. For the nominal fee it costs me, [the service] is well worth it."

Bouchard would not disclose how many customers she has. But she is proud that many of them

"It rubbed off on me," she said. "I always had a desire to be a small-business owner, and this was the perfect opportunity."

She was taught how to answer phones and handle different types of paperwork. When Abbey became available, Bouchard used savings to purchase the company.

Despite her youth, Bouchard was determined to make her business venture work. She knew the key to her success would be long hours, responding to customer needs, providing any service requested – even if meant creating new ones she didn't offer. She developed a customer base through different avenues, like mailings and word-of-mouth. Early on, she learned never to lose sight of the value of personalized service, and spent hours meeting her customers one on one.

In recent years, she has added a Web site and company brochure.

Change is also coming from the outside. The introduction of the T1 phone technology could spark a growth spurt for the company.

The possibilities of Voice over IP technology are endless, Bouchard said. She could answer a phone for a customer in California, and the caller would not know Bouchard was in Rhode Island.

While the bulk of her customer base is in Rhode Island, Bouchard says about 25 percent is out of state. She answers for customers in California, New Jersey and Vermont, among others.

In the coming year, Bouchard is excited about the prospect of expanding her customer base even farther and is optimistic about Abbey's future.

"There's no limit to what I can do," she said. ■

COMPANY PROFILE

Abbey Telephone Service Inc.

OWNER: Carolyn Bouchard

TYPE OF BUSINESS: Personalized answering service for small businesses

LOCATION: 56 Pine St., Providence

EMPLOYEES: 3

YEAR FOUNDED: First answering service in Rhode Island, opened in 1950; bought by current owner in 1987.

ANNUAL SALES: WND

have been with her since the beginning, a period that had its challenges. She was only 22 years old when she took over Abbey. Her employees didn't like the change in ownership, and customers knew she was young and inexperienced.

Despite those factors, however, it seemed only natural for Bouchard to take over. She knew how Abbey worked – her aunt was an employee of the company and enjoyed the work, while Bouchard frequently went there to help out.