

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

August 6, 2007

Consumer Smarts: Calls go out to stop phone book waste

PHUONG CAT LE
P-I REPORTER

Tom Beale dreads this time of year, when phone books are dropped by the pound at his small condo complex in Queen Anne. There are multiple books, he said, enough for every resident to have at least two or three.

Each time the new ones come, he ends up carting many of the untouched directories to the recycling bin, wondering if there's a way to stop what he considers junk mail.

"What am I going to do with this stuff?" asked Beale, a retiree who has complained to the city about the problem. "Nobody wanted it and (they) weren't going to use it. Here we have all these trees being felled so these people can get their names listed in the recycling bins."

It used to be that he'd get just one phone book from the company he had service with, but now others have jumped into the competition, he said.

"What a colossal waste. There should be a way to stop the dropping of unwanted books."

Q: Is there a way to opt out of getting phone books?

A: No, but national efforts are under way to find a way to reduce phone book waste, and King County is at the forefront.

Tom Watson, a project manager for the King County Solid Waste Division, said his agency, plus Seattle, Snohomish County and other city governments, such as Portland, Omaha and San Francisco, have helped fund an effort to cut back on unwanted phone books. He said they're working with the non-profit Product Stewardship Institute. According to that organization, about 660,000 tons of telephone books are thrown out each year. In recent years, the number of phone books delivered to households and businesses has increased, with two or more competing companies now publishing and distributing books in similar or overlapping geographic areas.

Watson said the average Puget Sound household gets between three to five phone books, often in multiple copies.

"We feel people should have a choice of whether they get the 8 pounds of waste on their front porch," he said.

Stephanie Hobbs, a spokeswoman with the Yellow Pages Association, an industry trade group based in New Jersey, said phone books serve a useful purpose for consumers.

Areas with multiple phone-book deliveries point to a growing economy, she said, adding that "people are using these phone books to advertise."

She and others say the industry has worked hard to promote the recycling of old directories, even setting up special recycling programs in certain cities.

On its Web site (advertisewithdex.com), DEX lists recycling stations and it notes that it has helped recycle more than 222,000 tons of phone books since 1991.

"They are recyclable. (But) that doesn't address the resource issue," Watson said. "You can recycle them in Seattle and King County, and a lot of people do. But there's still a lot of resources used, and local governments and ratepayers pay. It's still a burden on the system."

Legislation was introduced in North Carolina last year allowing consumers to opt out of getting phone books, but no state has passed such a law yet.

Beale said he doesn't have a problem with getting one set of books from his phone carrier, but he resents getting multiple sets and wants a local ordinance that requires companies to get his permission before leaving the books on his doorstep.

CONTACT US

If you have a consumer question, we'll try to get it answered. Call 206-448-8390 or e-mail consumersmarts@seattlepi.com.

JUNK IT

You can't opt out of getting phone books, but you can stop junk mail.

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- Register for the Direct Marketing Association's Mail Preference Service, which takes your name off new mailing lists. Do it online at dmaconsumers.org/cgi/offmailing or send a letter to DMA Mail Preference Service, P.O. Box 282, Carmel, NY 10512.
 - To remove your name from mailing lists used for credit offers, contact the toll-free number operated by the major consumer credit bureaus: 888-567-8688 (you must provide your Social Security number).
 - Remove your name from specific mass marketers' lists by contacting these companies: Acxiom, 877-774-2094 or acxiom.com; Advo, 888-241-6760 oradvo.com/consumersupport.html; Abacus Alliance, e-mail optout@abacus-us.com or write Abacus, P.O. Box 1478, Broomfield, CO 80038.
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Consumer Smarts runs every Tuesday. Contact Phuong Cat Le at 206-448-8390 or consumersmarts@seattlepi.com.