

State/Region

Bell rings up \$\$\$ with special numbers

By CAROLYN DOUGHERTY
Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

Attention yuppies: If you already have personalized license plates, luggage and bath towels, but still yearn to put your name on something, Mountain Bell has your number.

But now, you'll have to pay for it.

Until Jan. 1, Mountain Bell customers could request a specific phone number for free, said Ron Bowers, who helped create the TeleMarque service.

Subsidies lost because of the AT&T breakup forced local phone companies to charge for such optional services, he said.

Charges for the special numbers are a one-time fee of \$50, plus a monthly service charge of \$3. Business customers pay \$250 plus \$10 a month.

For the individual home number, many customers want a phone number to match their license plates. That technique is especially popular among singles, Bowers said. "They know that if they can get a number that

people can remember, they're going to get a lot more calls."

"A friend of mine here at work has a phone number 555-SEXY," Bowers said.

"An adult bookstore offered him \$1,000 to give up that number."

Bowers asked that the first three digits of his co-worker's number be changed for this story, and declined to identify the man.

"He's a very good-looking guy," he added. "He gets a lot of calls anyway."

"It's not uncommon for customers to call our office and take half an hour to 45 minutes just to find a number they like," he said. "We're still willing to do that, but we have to cover our costs."

Requests for special numbers have not dropped off significantly since the charge was instituted, Bowers said.

The biggest demand for specific numbers comes from businesses. For instance: 636-CARS for a Phoenix auto leasing firm; 432-ROSE for a Cheyenne flower shop; 545-HAIR for a Pueblo beauty salon.

Car dealers are especially prone to numbers that spell something: 555-JEEP, 555-FORD. (Numbers have been changed at Mountain Bell's request.)

The vast majority of national advertising is done with ciphers," said Bowers. "Now local businesses are catching on."

Advertisers say that including a phone number in a TV or radio ad is "the kiss of death," Bowers said. People rarely stop to write down a phone number, but find it easy to remember words.

A personalized number also helps children remember their home number. Many people match their number to their birthday, street address or name.

"We'll give any number they like, unless it's already in use," Bowers said. There is no policy to deny requests for numbers that spell obscenities, he added.

"There are certain words, like the ,F word that we'll still give out, but only when the service rep. is sure it's not going to show up on the side of somebody's van," Bowers said. "We

don't want Harry's Pornshop to have the ,F word."

The phone company cannot revoke a phone number if some finds it in poor taste and complains, Bowers said.

"We can't make people give up their phone numbers. They are considered a national resource, and the phone company administers them," he said.

Obtaining an easy-to-remember phone number can become competitive.

Yellow Cab, which had 292-1212, was losing customers to Metro Cab, at 333-3333.

Yellow Cab offered the Denver carpeting company of Martin & Peterman Inc. \$50,000 for its phone number, 444-4444.

Martin & Peterman refused to give up the number, but Yellow Cab finally won its own distinctive number, 777-7777, from Mountain Bell.

"Now their ads say ,seven times seven equals Yellow Cab, and it works," Bowers said. Added to that are the cab company's billboards with a huge picture of John Elway, wearing his No.-7 Broncos shirt.