

Crocker speeds ahead as it celebrates 50 years

By RICHIE DAVIS, Recorder Staff

When Marie MacNeil took over Barrett's Answering Service in 1963, her daughter, Regis, says she couldn't have imagined what lay ahead. What began in 1956 as just 10 black telephones on the desk of a Fort Square house, with \$12,000 in annual billing seven years later, in 1963, has become a regional communications giant poised to offer its own phone service as well as the Internet service it provides around western Massachusetts. Crocker Communications, with \$4 million in billings, has grown beyond the wildest dreams of Anna Barrett, who started it in 1956 to handle calls for doctors in an era of house calls and party lines.

It's been at the nexus of sweeping technological changes as well as a regulatory revolution that's allowed 64-year-old Regis MacNeil Johnston to turn the tables on what was once "the phone company." With this summer's planned rollout of Voice Over Internet service she'll become a "Ma Bell" in her own right.

What became Crocker Answering Service in 1973 and has grown into Crocker Communications has operated 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for half a century, as patients tried to reach their doctors and police and fire departments called emergency workers to accident scenes and to fix disruptions around the region.

The Old Days

Six weeks after Barrett's business switched to MacNeil's ownership, it had to summon a cab to deliver 22 pages of Associated Press teletype news stories to The Greenfield Recorder-Gazette about the Kennedy assassination, and later brought telegrams to the families of soldiers wounded in the Vietnam War.

The business, complete with its 500-pound, 100-line Western Electric 557B switchboard and 44 phone lines connecting to New England Telephone Co.'s Church Street offices, moved to Conway Street in 1968. When the younger woman took over the business from her ailing mother in 1973, business spread onto the porch of her Crescent Street home, and the business adopted the daughter's married name, Crocker.

With only 11 new customers added in a decade, recalls Johnston, who had mostly done bookkeeping for her mother's business until that point, "I had to make the business grow." The growth came in the 1970s from Detectoguard, a Greenfield alarm company, as well as from volunteer fire departments around the county, which had depended on dedicated "red phones" in members' homes to ring in case of emergencies.

'Bells are Ringing'

That turned the "Bells Are Ringing"-style answering service into a full-fledged private dispatch center, with Crocker operators relaying calls for help to cruisers, using radios as well as phones. These were the days of round-the-clock Lily Tomlin-like operators

summoning police, fire and ambulances to Franklin County's hinterlands — before 911, before the Franklin County dispatch cooperative that took over the centralized emergency call function and eventually gave way to Shelburne Control dispatch run by the state police.

“When it snowed out, or there was holiday traffic or an accident, or we had a storm going through, there were police calling you, from Northfield to Sunderland and Erving, to tell us the (electric) wires were down,” said Johnston. “They were all talking over one another, giving you pole numbers, and we had to call Western Mass. Electric. The phones were ringing off the hook, and then you could hear alarms going off in the background when the power came back on.”

Police stopping a speeder would radio in with a license and registration number to an operator, who would phone in a background check to the Registry of Motor Vehicles and set a five-minute timer to radio back to the cruiser to check on the officer's safety.

A Pioneer

Crocker also pioneered the use of mobile phones, long before the advent of cell phones. Veterinarians had some of the phones, and that attracted plumbers, funeral parlors, physicians and heating oil companies — all of which required 24-hour coverage to their customers.

The Crocker porch was becoming a virtual spaghetti factory, with 320 answering service customers, plus 20 police and fire departments requiring four of the switchboards and 600 pairs of cables running from the Church Street telephone exchange. A backup generator bought from a tobacco farm provided power when the electricity went out during storms. In those days, a storm blowing through the area might mean that Johnston and a bookkeeper would have to supplement the four operators working during a shift, with the boards lighting up and forcing them to reach over one another to plug the color-coded cables to keep up with the flurry of activity.

“One would be doing the calls coming in, one would be doing alarms and one handling the police,” Johnston said. “In the middle of the night, they'd call me to help during storms or accidents. It was beneficial having it in the house then, because Matthew was only 2½.”

Matthew Crocker, now company vice president at 36, would play a pivotal role in growing the family business.

Stretch South

Trying to reach further south, the company brought in 50 phone lines from South Deerfield, with three refrigerator-sized mechanical “concentrators” in the cellar to dramatically cut costs. But if the technology was changing, so were the regulations. When the Telecommunications Act of 1986 broke up the AT&T monopoly and allowed private firms to begin competing and owning trunk lines, Crocker set up a Northampton office the following year.

The emergency dispatch and Detectoguard service was getting ready to leave the Crescent Street service behind, but in 1987 Johnston set up a Northampton office with the hope of attracting 100 customers. Using a new computerized switchboard instead of the cable-dominated antique equipment, Crocker could automate enough that the nighttime shift could be handled remotely from Greenfield. It bought blocks of Holyoke telephone numbers that rang into Northampton, opening the answering service to Hampden County business as well as those around Hampshire County.

“The only reason we were able to open up in Northampton was that Ma Bell allowed it to happen,” Johnston said. “Otherwise, we were stuck in Greenfield and weren’t growing. We had 90 percent of the market share in Greenfield. That allowed us to expand anywhere within the 413 area.”

Seizing the Net

Matthew Crocker, who’d been playing with the business’s IBM billing computer from the day it arrived in 1982, was a computer science major at the University of Massachusetts a decade later. Together with his older brother, Christopher, at a 1992 family dinner he broached the idea of entering Internet business.

“I said, ‘We’re a communications company, and the Internet is the next wave in communications,’” he said. Although he was used to hooking up to the UMass Internet connection, his mother hadn’t yet heard of it, and she said no. At the airport on her way to a conference soon afterward, she saw a Time magazine cover story touting the Internet as changing the way the world does business.

Matthew had begun in the business along with other family members, stuffing and licking monthly billing envelopes and then manning the switchboard ever since filling in at 17 for an operator who’d called in sick. But at 21, he began reinventing the family’s answering service. Bankers balked when he said he wanted to build an Internet business based on free software that ran on the unheard of Linux operating system. They favored a more expensive Sun Solaris system.

“That would have cost us a lot more money,” the 36-year-old company vice president recalls. “We didn’t want to take on more debt. I refused to do it.” Using a \$50,000 loan from the Small Business Administration, Crocker launched its Internet business from the Northampton office, which had been equipped with plenty of copper wire for the answering service but was being used only as a sales office since merging with the Greenfield office in 1990.

With the young Crocker as the startup’s sole employee for six months in 1994 as one of three Internet service providers in the Pioneer Valley, he started with 10 modems and “an unheard of operating system” with no competition in a town that seemed ripe for the new technology.

Net Exploded

“Then the Internet exploded, and I was buying modems and hardware as fast as I could,” he said. After about a year, he installed a 1½-megabit-per-second T-1 line to connect with Sprint long-distance telephone service in Springfield.

A decade later, Crocker is the largest privately owned Internet provider in western

Massachusetts and is gearing up to set up three 1,000-megabit-per-second connections — 3 billion bits a second — to its 11,000-square-foot operations at the Springfield Technology Center — an entire floor of the former Springfield Armory.

“We saw our dial-up modem customers were itching for more speed, and they would be migrating to DSL (digital subscriber lines),” said Crocker, whose brother, James, is vice president of network installation. “We wanted to be there when they did. We had to be able to access the higher speed Internet, and the only way to do that was move to Springfield.”

With the help of leased lines to downtown Manhattan and Boston, as well as its installation of a fiber-optic connection to Greenfield and Turners Falls last year as part of a nearly \$2 million investment, what followed was a 2004 endorsement of the company by Pioneer Valley Connect to build a high-speed network in the Pioneer Valley.

As the Internet service grew, first to the Northampton Industrial Park and then beside the Springfield crossroads of long-distance lines, the answering service moved from Johnston’s home to the Greenfield Corporate Center on Munson Street in 2000. Plans to develop a full-fledged call center stalled, because call-center interactions tend to take twice as long as answering service-calls, the company hasn’t tried to push that part of the business.

Growth Anew

About 30 of Crocker’s 44 employees work in the Greenfield headquarters, but the Springfield center is the hub of expected future growth. It’s there that a half-dozen chains with 1,600 hotels regularly send their backup data — which Crocker then backs up at another center in London — and it’s through there that Harvard University sends its data for daily backup. UMass, where Crocker got his first taste of the Internet’s potential, routes its network through the Springfield facility, as do connections for virtually all of Franklin County’s public schools.

Crocker, which has a Sept. 13 anniversary celebration planned, has already begun testing a “voice over Internet” phone service that it expects to be up and running this summer throughout western Massachusetts.

With Crocker instead of Verizon providing integrated local and long distance phone service that’s touted as saving its customers money and giving them added flexibility over their communications, the 36-year-old vice president says the “explosive growth” the company saw a decade ago should seem slow by comparison. Customers will need to

have some kind of high-speed DSL or broadband connection, with Crocker offering a variety of price-competitive packages. But residential customers won't even need to have a computer for the service.

"We'll own the network right to your door," said Crocker, who recently solved the problem of Verizon turning off its pool of 672 dial-up modems by turning on its \$500,000 worth of switching equipment in Springfield — essentially its own phone service. "We can guarantee the quality of service. ... Technically, we can reach anywhere."

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