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White Pages May Go Way of Rotary-Dialed Phone

By [PATRICK MCGEEHAN](#)

The digital age may claim another victim.

The residential White Pages, those inches-thick tomes of fine-print telephone listings that may be most useful as doorstops, could stop landing with a thud on doorsteps across New York later this year.

Verizon, the dominant local phone company in the state, [asked regulators](#) on Friday to allow it to end the annual delivery of millions of White Pages to all of its customers in New York. The company estimates that it would save nearly 5,000 tons of paper by ending the automatic distribution of the books.

Only about one of every nine households uses the hard-copy listings anymore, according to Verizon, which cited a 2008 Gallup survey. Most have switched to looking up numbers online or calling directory assistance. The phone book for many people, it seems, has gone from indispensable tool to unavoidable nuisance.

“Phone books have been a very visceral issue,” said Scott Cassel, executive director of the [Product Stewardship Institute](#), an environmental group in Boston. “They do tend to pile up, particularly in apartments. More and more, people are finding that they don’t need them, but they can’t find a way to make them stop.”

When residential directories were delivered this year to the Ivy Tower, an apartment building on West 43rd Street in Manhattan, Ramon Almanzar, a concierge, kept 28 copies in case residents wanted them. Not a single occupant of the 320-unit building claimed one, Mr. Almanzar said.

“We end up throwing them away,” he said, as he greeted residents and opened a glass door. “Everyone goes online anyways.”

Customers who prefer to look up phone numbers the old-fashioned way or, like Steve Martin’s character in “The Jerk,” get a thrill from seeing their names in print, would still be able to have the White Pages delivered to them in book form or on compact disc.

Verizon hopes that regulators will waive the requirement that it deliver White Pages to all New Yorkers before the end of the year, said John Bonomo, a company spokesman. He said he did not know how many copies of the White Pages were distributed annually, but said the total was in the millions in New York City alone.

James Denn, a spokesman for the state's [Public Service Commission](#), said that it had not received a similar petition from any other phone service provider.

Verizon has a similar request before regulators in New Jersey, Mr. Bonomo said. In some states, including Florida, Ohio, Oklahoma and Georgia, AT&T has already received approval to stop delivering White Pages to all residents.

But Mr. Cassel, whose group's causes include reducing the production of unwanted telephone directories, said AT&T had withdrawn a proposal to end annual distribution in North Carolina after advocates for the elderly complained that some people might lose contact with friends and neighbors if they did not receive updated directories.

In its petition to regulators, Verizon is emphasizing the environmental benefits of the move. Most of the cost savings would be realized by SuperMedia, the publisher of the directories, which once was a division of Verizon but is now a separate company.

Scott W. Klein, the chief executive of SuperMedia, which is based in Dallas, declined to say how many directories his company estimated it would still deliver in New York if distribution was no longer mandatory — or how much it would save. But, he added, “We’re not talking about millions and millions of dollars.”

SuperMedia would continue to print and distribute the real money-maker, the Yellow Pages, which charges businesses that want prominent display, and the business White Pages, which also generate revenue from display advertising, he said. Those directories would include listings for government offices.

Verizon's proposal reflects technological progress and a new way of thinking in the telecommunications industry, Mr. Klein said.

Not long ago, he said, the industry's attitude was, “By gosh, we’re going to deliver this book to you whether you want it or not.” Even if the Public Service Commission rejects Verizon's proposal, New Yorkers who do not want the White Pages can notify the company that they want delivery halted.

“We made a conscious decision to make it easy for people to not get the book,” Mr. Klein said. “We only want to create and provide products that people want to use.”

Bao Ong contributed reporting.