

New hope, help to stop unwanted phone books

Posted by Shelby Wood, The Oregonian October 17, 2008 05:00AM

Categories: [Eat Your Greens](#), [Living Top Stories](#), [PDXgreen in print: Friday columns](#)

The economy is circling the drain, or at least it was last week. We're at war in two countries. The high-pitched presidential race is making people crazy.

If that's not enough to make you feel tiny and powerless against the forces that shape our world, here's a big fat yellow reminder:



The phone books are back, whether you want them or not.

Thunk.

A decade or so ago, a household could expect to receive one set of phone books once a year from the phone company.

These days, it isn't unusual for a city resident to receive six or more phone books each year, from multiple publishers, dribbled out every few months.

The phone books don't care if you call them dinosaurs because they are made from paper, and you find what you need online. They aren't offended if you pick them up from the driveway or porch and immediately deposit them into a recycling cart or, worse, the garbage.

They just keep coming -- and a whopping 80 percent will end up in a landfill.

Oregon is broken out with phone books, according to a study by David Allaway, a waste prevention specialist for the state Department of Environmental Quality ([download study](#); see Appendix B, pg. 21).

If every household in Oregon received one phone book (one "set" of yellow and white pages), and one additional phone book were provided to every person in a private, non-farm job (not just desk jockeys, but every pizza delivery person, nurse and assembly line worker, too), 2.7 million directories would do the trick, his study showed.

But more than twice that number -- 6.5 million phone books -- were actually distributed in Oregon in 2003, when Allaway examined the issue.

From the industry's perspective, more phone books are a sign of a thriving economy -- and evidence that Google and other search engines haven't killed the phone book. Stephanie Hobbs, a spokeswoman for the [Yellow Pages Association](#), says industry research shows that Americans referred to the print yellow pages [13.4 billion times](#) in 2007.

Simply put, if you get a lot of phone books, it's largely because enough businesses are buying enough listings for multiple publishers to make money churning them out. And until recently, there has been virtually nothing you could do to stop them.

Plenty of folks are willing to acknowledge that one set of phone books can be pretty handy. For example: In homes without Internet access, during power outages, and when you want an alphabetical listing of plumbers, and you want it now.

It's the multiple, unwanted phone books that make people crazy, partly because of the waste. Publishers emphasize that [they use recycled-content paper](#) and that phone books are recyclable in most communities. Nationally, about 19 percent of phone books get recycled, according to the Environmental Protection Agency; the rest end up in landfills ([download EPA data](#); see Table 4). All of which is beside the point, if you didn't want the phone book in the first place.

My bet is that the bigger rub is our powerlessness, so far, to stop them. Phone books remain the toughest foe in the fight against junk mail, that endless wave of unwanted credit card solicitations, [catalogs](#) and -- yes, I'll say it -- free newspapers that clutter our lives.

In the last few years, however, ticked-off residents have [spurred some states to try to force publishers to stop delivering unwanted phone books](#). Those proposals stalled, but the pressure got results: Industry organizations representing the majority of publishers have pledged to [begin allowing people to opt out](#) of receiving phone books. They don't make it easy, but it's doable (see [how-to box](#), below).

"We want it more verifiable, we want to make sure they work," said [Tom Watson](#), a recycling specialist for King County, Wash. who helped coordinate [a national effort](#) to encourage publishers to adopt opt-out systems. "But this is great progress."

GET FEWER PHONE BOOKS

Several Web sites claim to be able to remove you from phone book delivery lists, but there's no guarantee publishers will honor any third-party request. For now, the best way to reduce or eliminate deliveries is to contact each publisher.

DEX/Qwest: Go to [dexknows.com](#); select "directory options" at bottom of page; click through screens until you see "personalize your directory order." Under "available directories in your area," choose 0, 1, 2 or 3 from pull-down menus. Or call (800) 422-8793, press 2 to speak with a person

Yellow Book: (800) 929-3556, press 3 to speak with a person

Idearc/Verizon: (800) 888-8448, remain on line to speak to a person

Other phone books: Check for a phone number for customer service or "to order directories" on front cover or inside page

Recycling: Outdated or unwanted phone books can be included in curbside carts

More information:

- [Yellow Pages Association](#)
- [Product Stewardship Institute's Phone Book Project](#)

--*Shelby Wood*; shelbywood@news.oregonian.com.

Sign up for **Eat Your Greens** and get a brief blast of *PDXgreen* three times a week -- in an email delivered to your inbox, phone or CrackBerry.

Click [HERE](#) to get on the mailing list (under "Lifestyle," check Eat Your Greens, then enter your email address).
