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Phonebooks Highlight New Orleans Changes

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On a recent hot day, the new phonebook landed with a thud on the stoop of a house that one year ago lay under water, a notable sign of normalcy.

The phonebook's arrival is a mark of progress here, but it's also a window into how much has changed. With nearly half the city's population gone, two swollen books have shrunk to one, following a decision by the phonebook's editors to fold the white pages into the rest of the book. Meanwhile, the yellow pages now include far larger ads for contractors, electricians, roofers and others crucial to the city's rebuilding.

Lay the old and new editions side by side and the resulting contrast is a microcosm of a transformed metropolis.

It's one in which people need help repairing their homes, but don't have time to fuss with their hair the 'Contractors - General' section jumped from six to 14 pages and 'Roof Contractors' from 15 to 32, while listings under 'Beauty Salons' declined 42 percent from 541 individual businesses to 316.

"Every single thing that people need to rebuild their lives is literally in that book," said BellSouth Corp. district sales manager Gayla Meilleur, who worked on the New Orleans phonebook.

Which is exactly the point: In a city in tatters, where a majority of homes still don't have electricity, the focus is on making whole what was destroyed. It's businesses that help people do that which are seeing a spike in sales and are now represented with larger, splashier ads. People need to buy mattresses and couches to replace their soggy ones, but they can't afford to do so with antiques: The 'Furniture' heading leaped from three to over four full pages, while 'Antique Dealers' is thinner, having shed 26 out of 145 businesses.

Businesses that offer luxury goods, or else services that are not essential, are struggling and so scaling back their presence in the new book. So are those catering to tourists the 'Gift Shop' category dropped to 139 listings from a pre-Katrina high of 167.

"Everything is housing right now. Nothing else matters," said window installer Sam Criscione, owner of Classic Vue Exteriors Inc., who's installing three times as many windows as he did before the storm. His lean, rectangular ad didn't change size, but instead he added a splash of aquamarine blue to the lettering a way to call attention to his 44 years in business and to differentiate himself from out-of-town "storm chasers," he said.

Windows are one of the first items to get replaced as are roofs. Within a month of the storm, one of New

Orleans' oldest roofing businesses was fielding 10,000 calls a month, up from around 1,000 at the same time the year before.

"It was overwhelming," said Robin Trupiano, manager of Robertson Roofing & Siding Inc.

The call volumes tracked by BellSouth offer a portrait of frantic rebuilding: Businesses under the 'Roofing Contractor' heading saw, on average, an 833 percent increase in calls. Those under the "Contractors-General" were up 333 percent. "Gutters & Downspouts" leaped 483 percent.

Analysts had predicted the construction industry would thrive in the wake of the destructive storm. But they had also forecast that nearly all other sections of the economy would shrivel.

The spike in calls to other headings in the phonebook reveals they were largely wrong: Calls to businesses under the 'Attorneys' tab jumped 183 percent. 'Chiropractic Physicians' spiked 108 percent, a result of people throwing out their backs as they struggled to repair their homes. and in spite of the burden of rebuilding, families still needed to see the dentist calls leaped over 107 percent.

Thousands of businesses provided goods and services that are not rebuilding-oriented, yet are still essential to the day-to-day life of the city. Because many of them flooded, those that managed to reopen are now reaping the bounty their competitors left behind.

"We have a tremendous amount of new patients because a lot of dentists east of us were flooded," explained Veronica Brown, manager of Elmwood Dental Center, which went from a half-page ad in last year's phonebook to a full-page one. The practice is seeing a third more new patients than before Katrina and has hired more employees.

Those that don't provide essential services changed their business model to cater to the new economy, like high-end landscapers, who pulled out the chain saws and joined the ranks of tree cutters. Calls to businesses under 'Tree Service' ballooned 488 percent.

"Who's interested in putting in flowers after the storm? That's more of a luxury," said Ted Anthony, owner of Anthony's Landscaping.

The part of the economy that's limping are shops like the one in the French Quarter that sells "chapeaux" dressed in vintage brocades and South African feathers.

"Some of our ladies will come in, try on the hat and make plans to buy it after the house is finished. We're struggling to stay open," said Katherine Madere, the head saleswoman at Fleur de Paris, a New Orleans institution. Sales have plunged 50 percent. To stay afloat, the boutique has slashed costs by letting go all but one of its 14 employees.

Unlike cashing a check or getting a pair of new glasses, a hat is a frill. So are attempts to pamper oneself 'Massage Therapists' has 21 percent fewer businesses listed than last year. And between tearing out wallboard and battling insurance adjusters, many have fallen off the diet bandwagon 'Weight Loss' has 39 percent fewer listings in this edition than in last year's.

Yet one can deduce from the new phonebook that large swaths of the economy are doing better than expected. It has 44,579 individual businesses listed just 1,046, or 2 percent, less than last year. It's not cheap to advertise in the phonebook a quarter-page, full color ad costs over \$960 a month, according to BellSouth so it stands to reason that businesses making that kind of investment are up and running.

At the same time, the fact that the white and yellow pages have been consolidated into a single phonebook is a testament to how much this once vibrant city has shrunk: To date, only 235,000 people, or around 45 percent of the city's original population of 485,000, has returned, according to state estimates. It's an estimate which jibes with the rate of utility hookups so far only around 47 percent of customers in New Orleans have resumed their electric service.

One of the paradoxes of post-Katrina New Orleans is that if just under half its population has returned, how can it support nearly the same number of businesses?

The answer can be found in the calls BellSouth tracked for T.J. Lee, the owner of a fancy reception hall in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans. Lee expected his business to wither, but he was barraged with calls from brides-to-be wanting to reschedule their weddings, for anniversaries, from groups planning reunions.

When he received his call volume report from BellSouth, Lee noticed the calls were no longer preceded by 504 the New Orleans-area prefix but instead by 713, 404, 214 and others.

"What that was telling me is people were taking their books to Houston, to Atlanta, to Dallas," said Lee, who came into BellSouth's New Orleans office to discuss ramping up his presence on YellowPages.Com to reach those that left their phonebooks behind.

The call volume from out-of-towners was so high, Robin Trupiano called her telephone company to upgrade the Robertson Roofing's calling plan to unlimited long distance. "We just never needed it before," she said.

It's, after all, a sign of hope yellow pages are now in the hands of a diaspora spread like seeds across the country. The fact they're still calling means, maybe, they're coming home.

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