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Still answering phones, since 1964

Tony Greenfield went into the telephone answering business with five employees, 35 customers, and a one-room office with a switchboard in downtown Mount Holly.

It was 1964, and Greenfield was 22, an immigrant who battled polio as a boy in wartime London, earned a New Jersey vocational high school diploma, and inherited entrepreneurial talent from his parents.

A half-century and a telephone communications revolution later, the genial Moorestown resident is the president, chief executive officer, and sole owner of Ansercomm, a telephone-answering service with 50 employees, 1,000 customers, and operations in Maple Shade and South Florida.

"I had that itch to build my own business," Greenfield, 72, says from behind the modest desk in his tiny Main Street office, where a framed copy of his 1962 U.S. citizenship certificate is on display.

"I knocked on doors and asked (prospective customers) "How about using a telephone-answering service?" Greenfield continues his smile wide, British accent still strong. "I learned by doing."

When Greenfield bought the Mount Holly answering service in 1964, such businesses had existed for 40 years, but were not widely used outside of medical practices.

Some prospective customers whom he cold-called had no sense that unanswered phone calls could mean lost business. "I spoke to real estate companies about the value of phone calls," he says, "and having them taken efficiently" after hours.

Greenfield rented switchboards from New Jersey Bell, which connected the devices to its local offices. His "telephone secretaries," most of them women,

Anthony Greenfield

answered calls, wrote messages on paper "tickets," and slipped them into the customer's box, or "pigeon hole." Customers called in for messages, which were read to them.

"I was fortunate to get in at the beginning," says Greenfield, who expanded to Cinnaminson and later to Cherry Hill, Vineland, N.J. and Philadelphia, eventually buying about 50 smaller answering services in the region. By the mid-1980's, Ansercomm was earning more than $1 million annually and had constructed its own building in Moorestown.

Soon came video terminals to display incoming calls, fax machines to send messages, and pagers to transmit callback numbers. Subsequent decades brought the voice-mail systems, e-mail, smartphones, call centers, texting, and e-commerce that enable (and mediate) so much contemporary commercial and personal communications.

Answering services have embraced the technologies.

"Today, the information from the caller is typed into an electronic file that's immediately sent by e-mail or text or smoke signal- just kidding- to the customer," Greenfield says. "It's like an electronic finger, tapping you on the shoulder."

But the core of the answering service business hasn't changed since the Mount Holly days: one person speaking to another.

"It's stunning to people when they get another person on the line," Greenfield says. "My customers are all over the nation, and they get a breathing, thinking person on the other end who understands vernacular English."

One such person is Charlene Perkins, 63 of Runnemede, who has worked for Greenfield for 30 years and still answers calls. A bank of monitors enables her to remotely supervise the Florida operation as well.

"I love Mr. G, and I love helping people," Perkins says. "You have to have a heart for people in this work."

About one-third of Ansercomm's business involves medical practices, with the rest consisting mainly of utility companies, municipal response teams, and sales organizations- in Greenfield's words, "anything that needs a human interface."

During Hurricane Sandy notes Ansercomm Account Executive, Michele Moken of Pennsauken, the company provided free service in North Jersey and New York to customers of disabled answering services for medical practices and emergency services.

Greenfield personally has been involved in humanitarian efforts through the Garden State Rotary of Cherry Hill and Rotary International, a leading advocate for polio eradication.

"The effort to make the world polio-free is very important," says Greenfield, who was just a baby when he was stricken in 1942. He wore braces on his legs until he was 8.

Surgeries later gave him enough freedom of movement for cycling, sailing and other activities. But on-set of post-polio syndrome 15 years ago ultimately left him unable to walk. He now uses a scooter to get around the office.

"I don't know whether polio made me more competitive or less," the married father and grandfather says. "But I did have the feeling I could be as good as anybody else."

He has no plans to retire, saying he would feel somewhat "aimless" without his job.

"It's wonderful," Greenfield says. "I don't have to ask anybody for a day off."

Answering service evolves with his life

Ansercomm's Headquarters in Maple Shade, NJ