

Rochester man runs CellularMD to get cell phones working again

Tom Tobin • Staff writer • July 17, 2009



John Stevens of Rochester, left, owner of CellularMD, fixes a BlackBerry phone for William Creary Jr. of Pittsford on Wednesday at Creary and Creary Attorneys and Counselors at Law in Pittsford. (CARLOS ORTIZ staff photographer)

Your Blackberry's down. Your well-ordered world spins toward chaos. No calendar. No e-mail. Nothing to read and nothing to send. Your indispensable ride along the fast lane needs a high-tech tow truck, if there is such a thing.

Not really. But there is in Rochester something — or, better yet, someone — who can make dormant cell phones hum again; who can recover lost data and contacts; who can, often with a tiny part or a large measure of expertise, put the life back into what has become a lifeline for millions of Americans.

John Stevens is the owner, operator and brains behind CellularMD, which was launched last year in Rochester. His business is predicated on the idea that cell phone users are left rather helpless when the phone goes dark, the warranty is defunct, insurance wasn't purchased and the options begin and end with a time-consuming trip to a retailer to beg for a repair or, often, to buy a replacement.

"I came out of a big telecom company, Verizon, so I know how hard it is to get these things repaired," Stevens said. "I pick up and deliver for a lot of small businesses and some individuals. These are people who like the phones they have and want to keep them."

If the clunker needs a few days in the shop, Stevens said, customers get a free loaner set up with the same phone number. Repairs start at \$19.99 and, when he can't turn bad news into good, Stevens offers refurbished phones for \$35.

He is challenging the myth of the disposable phone. According to a survey last year by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, only 38 percent of cell-phone users even try to get professional advice on repairs.

Some phone retailers have a person to call on when a customer has a cracked cover or small problem that seems readily fixable. But most customers either have insurance that allows them to buy a new phone or have bought an option allowing them to upgrade to a new phone after a couple of years.

"Many of our customers either make a claim or go back to an old phone if one breaks," said Matt Hennard of Verizon Wireless Zone in Penfield. "We don't have anyone in the store who fixes them regularly, but we do occasionally send them out to a gentleman who works with us."

Cell-phone users harbor some misconceptions about the permanence of damage done, especially when water is involved. Stevens has worked on a lot of phones that had taken an unscripted bath or shower and brought them back to life.

"I can't do anything with a phone that's been run over," Stevens said. "But sometimes what looks to be permanent damage isn't. With water, the key is not to turn it back on right away after it's gotten wet."

Stevens is running a one- or two-person shop out of an office on Airport Way in Rochester, making most of the house and office calls himself.

On Wednesday he was in Pittsford, answering a distress call from an attorney, William Creary Jr., whose BlackBerry had gone south.

Many times, Stevens said, BlackBerry users wear out the trackball — the device by which a user moves from place to place on the screen — so he carries a bunch with him when he makes a visit.

"He's great," Creary said of Stevens' house-call approach. "Who has time to wait on line at the store?"

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DID YOU KNOW

- As of 2008, almost nine in 10 American adults had a wireless or cell phone.
- In 1980, the number of cell phones in the world was a mere 11.2 million, or just two cell phones per 1,000 people.
- On average, a person in the United States buys a new cell phone every 18 months, in Europe every 15 months – and in Japan every nine months.