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Messaging service expands to nation

Web posted Thursday, January 4, 2001

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By John Bankston
Staff Writer

An Augusta-based automated telephone message service is going national.

CallingPost Communications, formerly called Virtual Volunteer, will retain its core mission, which is to provide volunteer groups with free instant messaging.

“Starting January 20, we'll focus on 13 of the largest cities in the nation, and shortly thereafter we'll go (to other markets) nationwide,” said Phil Alexander, an Augusta engineer who developed the computer-driven voice messaging system in 1995.

He began franchising the service two years ago for organizations in Atlanta and in Muscle Shoals and Birmingham, Ala.

The service allows one person to relay telephone messages to thousands of people by making just one phone call.

For the past year, Mr. Alexander has been working on the technology needed to go national.

“Cost was the big obstacle,” Mr. Alexander said. “We needed a way to deliver messages in remote locations without paying long-distance charges.”

In order to make the move feasible, Mr. Alexander developed proprietary software and is using the Internet for much of the data transmission.

Before going national, the service was sponsored almost exclusively by local businesses, which received advertising space on each message delivered.

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“The Augusta community has written literally hundreds of letters to sponsors,” Mr. Alexander said. “They should really be held up as models of the community for helping to provide this service.”

Now, companies such as Coca-Cola and The Home Depot are signing on, creating a mixture of local and national sponsors.

The message board started as a free service for volunteer organizations. However, the service has expanded to include several private companies that pay for the system.

“A business such as SouthTrust Bank might want to send messages to all its employees,” Mr. Alexander said.

About 80 percent of CallingPost Communications is still sponsored.

The official national launch will take place Jan. 20 at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta. Until then, Mr. Alexander will concentrate on fine-tuning the company's new Web site, www.callingpost.org, based on user input.

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