

Affordable opens 3rd shop

Computer repair, refurbishing become mainstay for PC seller

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By:

[Ellis Smith](#) ([Contact](#))

Internet usage in the United States has grown a whopping 151 percent since 2000, according to Internet World Stats, turning more than 239 million Americans into Web surfers.

This makes Steve Flegal, owner of Chattanooga-based Affordable Computers, a happy, busy and profit-making man.

Personal computers, like any machine, wear down and break. That's where Flegal's army of 102 computer technicians comes in, with their average industry experience of 12 to 15 years.

His technicians stay so busy that Flegal will open a third location Oct. 15 on Hixson Pike, next door to Buddy's Shoe Repair.

"These guys rarely get time to even sit down and eat," Flegal said of his employees.

The company fills a niche in the computer world by building custom machines and rebuilding used Dell PCs, which he sells inexpensively.

But it's in-house tech support and service that keep customers coming back.

Dave Houseman, director for Aurora Management Partners, said Affordable Computers "treats me right," and as a result he hasn't bought a new computer in 12 years.

"I've probably bought 30 used computers in the last two or three years from them for my clients and my family," Houseman said. "I've had situations where a machine they gave me didn't work out and they just replaced it quickly."

Flegal contrasted his approach with the less personable service he says some retailers provide.

"What you get from the big-box stores is a Chinese computer with Indian tech support," Flegal said.

He claims to turn repairs around in an average of three to five days, half the industry standard 10 days.

But that's not the only bone he has to pick with his larger competitors. He said most customers buy more computer than they need and spend more money than necessary to accomplish their computing goals.

"Ninety-nine percent of Americans just use their computer to surf the Internet, send an e-mail and use Word for Windows," he said. "You don't need a quad-core PC for that. You need something reliable."

Customers seem to agree with his analysis. Through the recession in 2008 and 2009, business increased 1.4 percent, and is on track to increase 5.6 percent this year.



Staff photo by Tim Barber/Chattanooga Times Free Press -- Sep 8, 2010 - Affordable Computers lead PC technician Tyler Hill replaces an LCD screen on Wednesday. Owner Steve Flegal is considering opening a third Chattanooga area location of his business.

The addition of a third store could increase revenue an estimated 25 percent, he said.

Part of the growth in his business could be attributed to quick, friendly and reliable service, but the recession's effect on customers' budgets could also be responsible for increased revenue, Flegal said.

"There are always more poor people than wealthy people, and we have a PC for anybody's budget," he said, noting that many of his customers are single mothers and retired Chattanoogaans.

"I don't care if a customer bought the cheapest computer in here, they get the same service as the person with the most expensive computer," he tells employees like Tyler Hill.

The 33-year-old Hill, who's been with the company since 2002, started working with computers at age 14.

"The chemical company where my mom worked would auction off all their computers every so often, so I would buy a room of computers to work on," Hill said.

These days he helps repair about 15 to 20 PCs per week, an occupation that keeps him constantly busy, and occasionally entertained.

"When I open a computer case panel, and stuff's looking back at me, I always just set those outside, because the customer clearly has a bug problem," Hill said.

Having actual bugs in the computer, according to Hill's co-worker, pales in comparison to the story of the hapless user who misunderstood the function of the DVD tray.

"We had someone come in saying their cupholder wasn't working right," Charlie Leonard said. "We don't see much of that anymore."

As customer complaints have changed from broken cupholders to advanced virus infections, the PC business continues to evolve as well, with some analysts predicting the imminent demise of the personal computer because of the popularity of tablet devices.

However, Flegal isn't interested in the growing "handheld gadget" market, as he calls it, so as PC sales decline in the future, he plans to increasingly focus on the service side of his business.

"If they have a tech support Olympics, my guys will win the gold medal," he said.

Contact Ellis Smith at esmith@timesfreepress.com or (423) 757-6315.

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