

VOICES

Turn off those annoying Ringtones

Many people say they aren't appropriate for office

By MAUREN MILFORD
Gannett News Service

At a recent meeting with his lawyer, boxer Smokin' Joe Frazier's cell phone rang. The sound of cheering filled the room. Then came the resounding voice of boxing announcer Michael Buffer: "Let's get ready to rumble!"

The former heavyweight champ's lawyer never tires of that ringtone.

"It's so appropriate," said Michael Kelly, of McCarter & English in Wilmington, Del. "Nothing Joe Frazier does bothers me — and if it did I'd be afraid to tell him."

That's not always the case with other working relationships. In a 2006 survey by workforce solutions company Randstad USA, nearly a third of employees listed cell-phone ringing as their greatest pet peeve.

With mobile phones an increasing part of life at work, businesses are using different strategies to cope with the irritation.

"I think everyone who buys a cell phone should have to take an etiquette class," said Kelly Dougherty, 38, a sales associate at Sheila's Party World in Wilmington. She's been jolted more than once by the sound of a fire engine siren coming from a customer's cell phone.

"It is so obnoxious," she said. "You see other customers rolling their eyes."

Millions download

Michael Hemphill, owner of Michael Christopher Designs hair salon and day spa in Wilmington, said the most annoying tone he ever heard was the sound of a kid screaming, "Pick up the phone. Pick up the phone."

"Sometimes you want to just throw it in the shampoo bowl," Hemphill said.

The ringtone market is huge. Not only are there 213 million mobile-



BUSINESS 101 FILE PHOTO

Cell phones have a variety of ringtones out of the box. And for a small charge you can add just about any tune you wish.

phone users in the country, but 19.8 million of them downloaded ringtones in May, according to M:Metrics Inc., a Seattle-based research firm. Nearly half of those who downloaded a ringtone were employed full time, said Jaimee Minney, director of communications with M:Metrics.

The number of cell-phone users who downloaded a tone doesn't count the people who personalize their ringtone without paying for one, by taking a song from a music collection or recording a child's voice. Many people have several ringtones to identify different callers, such as a tone for parents, another for friends and a third for a significant other.

Unlike the traditional telephone, a cell phone can have any ring imaginable. Most people think of melodies,

such as popular songs, TV show and movie themes and commercial jingles. But the ring also can be anything from a baby's laugh to a foghorn blast.

Offices seek to mask tones

Downloaded ringtones can range in price from less than \$2 for a single ringtone to monthly or yearly subscriptions for unlimited tones.

The growing objection to ringtones on the job is in response to some major shifts in the working world, such as open workspaces and an influx of young people who have grown up with cell phones, said Eric Buntin, managing director of marketing and operations at Randstad.

Businesses are trying to find ways to deal with the issue, balancing the requirement that employees be instantly accessible against the need for a work environment that minimizes distractions, Buntin said.

As workplaces have become more open, some companies have resorted to "white noise" to mask the surrounding sounds, said Lou Rosenberg, principal of Mitchell Design, an architectural, interior- and graphic-design firm in Wilmington.

The giant DuPont Co. does not have a policy regarding cell phones in the office. Meeting participants, however, are told to put their phones on vibrate, company spokeswoman Tara Condon-Tullier said.

At Sheila's Party World, a sign tells employees that cell phones or other communication devices are not to be used on the sales floor, Dougherty said.

James A. Fuqua Jr., 59, a senior partner with Fuqua and Yori in Georgetown, Del., said he hasn't had to deal with ringtones in his law office: "But I'm the wrong one to ask, because my ringtone is the theme from the Clint Eastwood movie, 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.'"



my breast pocket. I'm very respectful of others. Among lawyers, I see a good compliance here. Everyone turns off their phone when they're in court, or they go

outside and take the call. In my office, we have no stated policy, but it's on the honor system. My staff doesn't sit and take personal calls during office hours. I have noticed when someone's phone goes off, but it's not too distracting. When we're doing business, we stick to that business."

Miguel Hernandez,
Salinas attorney

"My employees know they should have their cell phone on vibrate or go



outside to call. As a business owner, it's important to be connected. I was at golf tournament with a contract photographer when he got another assignment, so I had

to be both the photographer and the assistant. Any old ringer-style ring tone is extremely annoying because I hear it go off in restaurants all the time. That's my pet peeve."

LuAnne Hutchings,
co-owner,
Sultry One Studios, Marina

"It's become such a part of how we communicate. It's one additional way to communicate, so if



we were to outlaw it, that wouldn't work. I don't have a problem with it, but it's a privilege that can be abused. Any musical ring tones can be

distracting if you're conducting business or giving a speech."

Victor Mehia,
director,
Salinas United Business Association