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**Philippine Call Center Expanding**

By HUGH R. MORLEY, STAFF WRITER

Cyber City Teleservices Ltd. will soon be helping people who want their MTV.

The call center operator whose U.S. office is in Hackensack is training workers to handle customer calls for MTV's new music downloading Web site, URGE, which opens later this year.

The calls won't ring in Bergen County, however. Most will be answered by low-paid college graduates employed at Cyber City's call center in the Philippines.

MTV is the latest in a growing roster of U.S. companies to hire Philippines-based Cyber City, which was founded eight years ago by Warren Golden of New York and Jonathon Rosenberg of Fort Lee.

Back then, there were few offshore call centers in the Philippines. Over the years, the industry has grown dramatically, and so has the company.

It now has 60 clients, 2,500 employees most of them in the Philippines and 2005 revenues of \$23 million, Golden said. He expects revenues to top \$30 million this year. And the company has begun to use its expertise managing low-cost workers in other areas.

In February, Cyber City forged a joint venture with a Hong Kong animation company that makes video clips for cellphones. The pair are building a 75,000-square-foot animation studio to house 100 computer animators, which Cyber City will staff and help run.

The same month, Cyber City opened another joint venture project, a 120-seat Spanish-language call center in Barranquilla, Colombia. It serves companies selling to the fast-growing U.S. Hispanic market.

The key to Cyber City's success is its commitment to train and treat employees well, which avoids the high turnover found in U.S. call centers, Golden said.

"It gives you dedicated employees employees that if they work for a particular account today will be the same employees on the account in two years," he said. "And they will be very experienced."

That kind of reliability has helped the Philippines compete with India as one of the world's top call centers.

Filipino industry officials say the number of call center seats doubled to 80,000 from 2004 to 2005, and they expect the growth to continue in 2006. Like India, the Philippines offers low business costs, rock-bottom wages and an educated pool of English speakers.

"It's the up-and-coming Asian alternative," said John Boyd, president of The Boyd Company of Princeton, which has studied call center operations around the world.

One of its studies found it costs \$4.2 million to operate a 45,000-square-foot call center with 500 employees in Manila, compared with \$4.4 million in India and upward of \$16 million in the U.S. The average Filipino call center worker earns \$2.13 an hour, about one-fifth of the pay for a similar American worker, the study found.

Another key issue for American clients is the quality of the workforce. The Philippines' long relationship with the U.S. means that Filipinos speak English with a softer accent, which is more understandable to Americans than the harsher accent of British-type English spoken by Indians, Boyd said.

For the same reason, Filipinos understand American culture and personality, said Bobby Ferrante, managing director of ePLDT Ventus, another Philippine call center company with a North Jersey presence.

"Their culture is more in line with American culture," said Ferrante, whose company opened its U.S. office in Mahwah six months ago. "Their dialect, how they sound to the North American customers seems more plausible."

Both Ferrante and Golden said their clients pay about half the cost they would pay in the U.S. for call center services.

Goldberg said he and Rosenberg got the idea for Cyber City in 1998. At the time, they ran a call center for a children's clothing catalogue company that serviced Japanese customers, with a hot line answered by Japanese-Americans in California.

"The folks in Japan thought they were talking to Japan," Golden said. "We thought, 'Well, if it works that way, there must be a way to make it work in reverse.'"

The pair secured investment and began searching the world for low-cost countries where the workers could handle call center work. They picked the Clark Air Base in the Philippines, which was vacated by the U.S. Air Force in 1992 and has since been converted into an enterprise zone.

The company opened a call center school in 1999 to train Filipino graduates. A year later, Cyber City opened for business with 80 workers serving its first customer, a skateboard catalog.

Company clients now include Dell, Lane Bryant Catalogs and Cable Shopping Network. The company also has begun doing back office work such as legal transcription and data entry.

Clients like the fact that all Cyber City employees are college graduates, Golden said, adding that the Hackensack office makes it easy to manage the client relationship.

"American companies that we deal with feel much more comfortable if they can pick up the phone and call someone [locally], as opposed to having to constantly deal with another country," he said.

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