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Nearly 12,000 stores shift to Cingular overnight

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No, that AT&T Wireless store down the block didn't blow away overnight.

Cingular Wireless, which completed its \$41 billion acquisition of AT&T Wireless in October, is to have finished today its makeover of 226 company-owned stores that were former AT&T Wireless locations, a job that started Sunday night.

Overnight, more than 14,000 employees across the U.S. converted 11,500 additional stores, kiosks and other locations, replacing more than 38 million phones and other products with new ones bearing Cingular's logo. Another 10,000 independent dealers will complete the transition in the coming weeks.

"It is a logistical nightmare," Susan Knox, Cingular's new vice president and general manager for the Rocky Mountain market, said last week.

AT&T customers aren't expected to notice any difference in their service, nor will they have to do anything to assure its continuation, said Knox, who is responsible for Cingular's operations in Colorado, Utah and southern Idaho.

The launch of the beefed-up Cingular, based in Atlanta, makes the company the country's largest cellphone provider, with 46 million subscribers.

Verizon, the closest competitor, has 42 million wireless customers.

Verizon seeks to siphon customers from Cingular's swelling subscriber base during the transition period. Verizon has launched an ad campaign targeting disgruntled AT&T Wireless customers. The ads, running mainly in newspapers in the Northeast, say, "Attention AT&T Wireless Customers: As long as your wireless carrier is changing, why not change to the best?"

Early this month, Verizon opened a Denver office as well, though company spokesman Bob Kelley said the timing has nothing to do with Cingular's expansion. The Rocky Mountain region was formerly included in Verizon's desert mountain region, headquartered in Phoenix, he said.

In the third quarter, Verizon Wireless added 1.7 million customers. The new office will make it possible for Verizon to provide better service to its expanding base, Kelley said.

Verizon's new regional president, Jeff Mango, will be responsible for Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Montana and Idaho.

Cingular's sudden growth doesn't threaten Verizon, Kelley said. "We are just continuing to focus on our business," he said.

Cingular's acquisition allows the company to operate its own wireless network and open stores for the first time in several major markets.