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David Moore / Boeing Co.

Boeing's Art Rosales has worked on satellites that lasted more than twice their expected life span. He says problems planners anticipated never occurred.

who built it.



Satellite reaches its 41st year

### TECHNOLOGY

## With vintage satellites still in orbit, sales are grounded

Their longevity surprises manufacturers but is bad for business. Upon retirement, they join the mass of space junk.

By Peter Pae  
December 1, 2008

If only cars could last so long.

This month, a satellite resembling a shiny spinning drum and orbiting 21,156 miles above Earth celebrated its 41st birthday, astounding engineers and scientists, some of them the children of those

For years, the satellite has served as an emergency communications link for rescue operations, including the 1985 Mexico City earthquake and the 1980 Mt. St. Helens volcanic eruption. It was supposed to live for only three years when it was launched in 1967. That's when Lyndon B. Johnson was president and bell-bottom pants were the rage.

But the spacecraft, known as ATS 3, isn't alone. Many satellites are operating well past their life expectancy, so much so that manufacturers are hurting from lack of demand for new, replacement satellites.

And those who are buying are asking for guarantees that the new satellites, which can cost as much as \$300 million each, will last two to three times as long as the early birds.

"It's a mixed blessing," said John S. Edwards, a space industry analyst for Forecast International. "It says great things about your product, but the satellite-making business is floundering because there are hardly any sales."

Engineers at Boeing Co.'s sprawling satellite-making plant in El Segundo know about the sales drought only too well.

Of the 245 Boeing satellites that have been launched into service, 166 have exceeded their design life. That's more than two-thirds of the spacecraft built at the facility since the 1960s. A third of all satellites have lasted at least twice as long as expected.

That has been the bane of the sales department. With the telecom bust early this decade and consolidation in the satellite services industry, Boeing has sold only one

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