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PhoneTel sues 14 companies, says patents infringed

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PhoneTel Communications filed patent-infringement lawsuits yesterday against 14 companies that supplied telephone equipment to Tandy Corp.'s Radio Shack stores.

The lawsuits claim that the 14 companies included PhoneTel's technology in their products but didn't pay for it. Sprint Communications of Kansas City, Mo., is the best-known defendant in the case.

Fort Worth-based PhoneTel says it inherited the rights to more than 1,000 telecommunications patents from Japanese inventor Kazuo Hashimoto when he died in 1995. Those patents include circuitry used in some types of phone answering machines, caller-identification devices and cordless telephone systems.

The 14 companies in-

cluded in the lawsuit were dragged into court after Tandy settled similar PhoneTel claims in another lawsuit.

In that case, PhoneTel is suing several of the world's largest telecommunications and computer companies. Ten of those companies, including AT&T, Lucent, Southwestern Bell and Uniden America, are still fighting PhoneTel's allegations.

When Tandy settled, the company said it agreed that each PhoneTel patent is "valid and enforceable." Tandy executives declined to comment yesterday.

PhoneTel then contacted the 14 Tandy suppliers, offering each an option to use PhoneTel's technology. The companies reportedly ignored or refused the option, so PhoneTel sued.

Sprint spokesman Bill White said the company doesn't manufacture telephone equipment. It is the nation's third-largest long-

distance company, and it sells local, wireless and data-transmission services.

White declined to comment on the lawsuit, saying the company's lawyers haven't had a chance to review it.

The other companies named in the lawsuit filed yesterday are Cidco Worldwide of Singapore; Cybioelectronics, IDT Communication Technology, National Telecommunication System, Primatronix, Tele-Art, and V-Tech Communications, all of Hong Kong; G-Tek Electronics Corp., Mytech Electronics Co., Sincoa Enterprises Co., Wards Overseas, and Zeny Corp., all of Taiwan; and Takacom Corp. of Japan.

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