

A Three-Tiered Approach to Tackling E-Waste

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The Consumer Electronics Association estimates that as of April 2008 the average American household owned approximately 24 electronics, ranging from computers and mobile phones to traditional television sets. As the holiday season creeps closer, the latest iPad, laptop, smartphone, etc. to hit the shelves will undoubtedly top holiday wish lists across the nation. Electronics companies are constantly competing to produce the next most sought-after product and continue to manufacture more and more merchandise. The influx of all these new and improved products begs the question, where are the old ones going? Many people simply put their old electronics away in a drawer to serve as a back-up for lost or damaged devices. While designating back-up devices and/or donating unwanted gadgets prolongs the life of electronics, eventually they are discarded. The EPA reports that the United States generated over 3.1 million tons of e-waste, defined as discarded electrical or electronic devices, in 2009, a figure that continues to increase.

According to a New York Times article by Leyla Acaroglu, the majority of retired electronics end up in piles of e-waste in developing countries. The piles are then set alight by locals in an attempt to retrieve the valuable pieces of gold and silver embedded within phones, computers, etc. While contract exportation of electronics is legal in the United States, the practice heightens the risk of exposure of individuals to the potentially dangerous elements within the discarded electronics. As it is often women and children who collect the scrap metal, they are at a higher risk of exposure to the toxins. For this reason, there has been a recent push by legislators and nonprofits, as well as some private businesses, to find alternatives to current electronics disposal methods.

Legislative Initiatives

In regards to national regulation, approximately half of U.S. states have laws on the disposal and recycling of electronics, however many individuals want to put forth a national act, as well as oversight guidelines, in order to prevent the export and/or improper disposal of electronics. Despite the push for domestic

recycling, domestic companies find themselves at a financial disadvantage to those businesses that export e-waste to overseas recyclers, where there is little to no waste disposal infrastructure in place and there are few restrictions regarding worker safety and pollution standards.

The Responsible Electronics Recycling Act (RERA) introduced in the Senate in March 2014, establishes a set of guidelines for the proper disposal of electronic waste. Specifically, the bipartisan bill restricts the export of such waste to certain nations and establishes criminal penalties if restricted electronic waste is improperly exported. According to the Coalition for American Electronics Recycling (CAER), the bills would promote fair and responsible trade and encourage investment in American recycling capacity. Other aspects of the bills include:

- The creation of seven well-paying jobs in recycling for every one job currently involved in the e-waste broker/exporter trade.
- The promotion of fair trade in tested, working electronics and recycled commodities.

Supporters of the bill include electronics manufacturers, retailers, electronics recyclers, and environmental groups. CAER is reportedly confident RERA will pass in the next year.

At an international level, the Basel Convention is an international treaty intended to reduce the transportation of hazardous waste between nations, especially to least developed countries (LDCs) that often bare the impact of such practices. The treaty pushes for the disposal of hazardous waste as close as possible to the site of generation, as well as offers assistance to LDCs in the management of imported and domestic waste. According to the act, hazardous waste is defined as materials that are explosive, flammable, toxic, and/or corrosive. The treaty opened for votes in 1989 and as of February 2014, 180 nations, as well as the European Union were party to the Convention. While the United States and Haiti both signed the Convention, it was not ratified in either country.

Private Initiatives

Many computer, television, and cell phone manufacturers, as well as retailers, offer take-back programs and/or host recycling events. Eric Renshaw, service manager at MacDoctors says, “There are places that do cellphone repairs that might use [a cell phone] for parts or they might sell it outright if it’s a good phone.” The following list includes just a few examples of companies that offer such programs.

Best Buy – The electronics company offers consumers the option of bringing in old devices which can either be recycled or traded in for value toward a new device or a gift card.

Apple – Similar to Best Buy, the technology powerhouse will compensate consumers for the trade-in of an old Apple phone with value that can go toward a new device or a gift card to the store.

Gazelle.com – This company buys back used modern electronic devices for cash and offers free shipping for the exchange.

eBay.com – An advantage of using eBay’s online marketplace is that the website aides its vendors in adequately pricing the device by allowing the user to compare it to similar items currently on offer. To resell on eBay, however, the device’s condition is crucial.

Other companies offering buy-backs, trade-ins, and recycling programs include Dell, LG, Panasonic, Sharp, Sony, Staples, and Samsung Electronics.

Nonprofit Initiatives

Various nonprofits have been founded to aid with the movement toward responsible e-recycling.

Cell Phones for Soldiers – This nonprofit accepts “gently used” phone donations and then sells the phones to ReCellular. Proceeds from these sales go toward calling cards for soldiers.

E-Stewards – A nonprofit based in Seattle, Washington, was founded as an extension of the Basel Convention intended to fight the growing threat of e-waste despite the lack of widespread legislation. The website, www.e-stewards.org, provides a map of certified electronic recyclers nationwide, as well as abroad.

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

(NCADV) – Similar to Cell Phones for Soldiers, NCADV has a partnership with a cell phone recycling company, Cellular Recycler, which gives a portion of

the profits from the sale of refurbished cell phones to NCADV in order to support its programming that helps stop violence in the home.

Tips for Trading in Old Phones

Industry experts advise consumers to always wipe all information off an electronic device before donating, selling, or recycling it. CAER reports that many brokers and exporters claim to provide data erasure, but often lack the resources to do so properly. The export of technology that has not been fully cleared of stored information can make the user vulnerable to data breaches and identity theft. While some cell phone trade-in programs, such as NCADV, assure their donors that they wipe the cell phones themselves, it never hurts to personally ensure that the job is done properly.

Furthermore, when reselling an old phone do so expediently, as the value of electronic devices tends to deteriorate faster than other products. ◀