

The Afterthought of Electronics

E-Waste Mounting

The rapid rise of Brazil, India, China and other developing nations has created an expanded demand for consumer electronics that rivals our own domestic consumption. Annually, Americans dispose of more than ten million tons of electronic waste. Corresponding to this increased demand is a dramatic increase in subsequent waste. The absence of recycling regulations and rules in most developing nations consequently leads to an increased production of electronic waste.

Compounding this problem is the fact that computers and other types of new technology contain dangerous toxic materials including heavy metals like mercury and cadmium. These hazardous materials pose a direct threat to individuals when consumer electronics are disposed of improperly.

To address the myriad problems resulting from electronic waste, the State of Texas passed a producer responsibility law during the 2007 legislative session. The law came into effect this September 1 and requires producers to provide free and convenient recycling for their products. Currently four states have such laws and at least a dozen more are expected to come into effect in the next year. While these producer responsibility laws are a successful first step, they are not a complete solution.

Packaging Explosion

In America, a patchwork of local and state laws has begun to address the scourge of e-waste, but there is no current comprehensive standard. Indeed, the proliferation of increasingly inexpensive consumer electronics has tracked a similar increase in product packaging. A computer, television, or speaker system today may be packaged in shrink wrap, packing peanuts, hard plastic, cardboard and an excess of tape. Only a small percentage of this packaging is ever recycled and the remaining waste ends up clogging local landfills.

Consumers are both the fundamental source of this problem and also the most likely source for a solution. Currently, producers perceive customer demand for redundant packaging (presumably for additional protection of the goods), and therefore continue to use excessive packaging which enters the waste stream.

While states are starting to evaluate legislation to address packaging regulations, the immediate burden is on consumers to demand less excess with their purchases. The dollar remains the most influential tool for consumers, and customers can vote with their purchases. A broad consumer preference for appropriately packaged goods can influence the market immediately.

Changing Consumer Preferences

Governments, non-profits and activists can influence consumer preferences through incentives and education. In Austin, recent successful efforts to reduce plastic bag waste, conserve drinking water, and protect environmentally fragile areas have all been driven by a combination of community activism, non-profit leadership and government regulation or incentives.

This confluence of actors can shape consumer preferences by highlighting the environmental costs of electronic waste and excessive packaging. A successful effort should start with passionate citizens who identify and attack the problem. At that point complimentary non-profit organizations can lead and collaborate with stakeholders and state and local governments to develop programs that lead directly to solutions.

Ultimately, these efforts require the moral commitment of citizens and elected officials. The costs of addressing the problems presented by e-waste are significant. Certainly corporations have minimal interest in expending funds after their products have left their direct stream of commerce. Given this reality, local governments and activists must remain diligent and committed to the cause. In Austin, Texas Campaign for the Environment has served as the model for successful environmental advocacy, and succeeded in persuading a conservative Texas Legislature to pass a producer responsibility law.

We Are All Responsible

Technology producers have an obligation to address the waste resulting from their products. Modern technology uniquely contains dangerous chemicals and materials that must be disposed of in a proper way because inappropriate disposal poses a threat to the health and safety of humans.

Consumers have a similar responsibility to other members of society to properly dispose of their e-waste. Indeed, we are the keepers of our brothers and sisters. On the individual level, it can be easy to justify sloppy disposal of waste. Who really gets hurt? Indeed, the environmental impact of a single act of dumping or wasteful discarding of technology may not be obviously harmful. But such an attitude shared by billions of global citizens would have terrible consequences. Ultimately, we each are personally responsible for our choices and the effects of those choices on others. And that responsibility means making environmentally conscientious choices on a daily basis be we environmental activist, corporate tycoon, consumer or media scholar.

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