

# Junking old electronic equipment does not compute

July 31 2009, By Mac Engel

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The box is about 4 feet by 4 feet, and stuffed inside are a few thousand dollars worth of "trash."

There is a Hewlett-Packard combination printer/[scanner](#)/fax/copier resting against a copy machine, which is nestled against a paper shredder. The HP machine is less than a year old and cost about \$450. But replacing a part was deemed too expensive, so the machine was tossed, to be stripped for all usable parts, if that.

"I'd say this box is full once every two months, and that's when we ship it to our warehouse," said Jana Agee, a store manager at the Staples in University Park Village in Fort Worth, Texas.

This is just one box. In one store. In one city.

Multiply that by the number of desktop and [laptop](#) computers, DVD players, TVs, fax machines, copiers, printers, shredders, cellphones, MP3 players, and other electronics discarded around the world every year, to be sent somewhere other than a landfill.

The technology revolution has created an unthinkable amount of trash. Electronics are no longer built to last; they are upgraded or replaced on a regular basis by the next big thing.

Remember when a TV lasted a decade or two? Now, people change them like they do socks.

Your cellphone may fit in the palm of your hand, but according to the Natural Resources Defense Council, more than 100 million are tossed every year in the U.S. alone, along with 130,000 computers daily. And given that these devices have the potential to leak mercury, cadmium, arsenic and other substances into water streams if simply put in the trash, you can see why there is concern over where they end up.

So, as badly as you'd like to junk the "old" [television](#) sitting in your closet for the latest flat-panel high-definition LCD, those "dinosaur" TVs also contain lead, mercury, [cadmium](#), arsenic and other toxic elements that can damage your health and the environment.

Eco-conscious consumers are trying to do the right thing. They hang on to their outdated phones, TVs and all things electronic in an effort to ensure that they are disposed of properly, and retailers are giving them the opportunity to do so. But it takes patience, effort and a little faith.

"People bring stuff in all the time. One guy brought in a 23-inch LCD TV, and it was less than a year old," said Brian McCartney, a supervisor at Best Buy near Ridgmar mall.

Every retailer has specific rules for accepting your e-junk, and most even offer rebates, gift cards or discounts. Some outlets, such as Verizon, take your old cellphones and donate them to HopeLine, a resource for victims of domestic abuse, or other charities.

Most stores take your e-junk and send it on a truck bound for a warehouse. After that, the machines may be stripped for usable parts. Or perhaps they are donated to other charities, such as Susan G. Komen for the Cure.

"Staples charges \$5 to accept the (e-trash)," Agee said, "and people do it because they want to do the right thing."

Doing the right thing and the right thing actually happening, however, is not guaranteed.

Earlier this year, "60 Minutes" aired a chilling piece on e-trash that is essentially destroying the town of Guiyi in southern China. According to Metech, a company that disposes of e-waste, as much as 50 to 80 percent of the U.S.' e-junk is exported to Third-World countries, where the items are handled with little regard to human or environmental concern.

Impoverished areas take the international e-waste in return for corporate money, or smuggling dollars. Meanwhile, low-income workers and citizens are exposed to deadly substances as the materials from the electronics that cause brain damage, mutations and cancers are extracted.

Despite your best intentions, once you drop off your electronic equipment, it requires a leap of faith that it will be disposed of properly once you drop it into a bin.

"The current legislative landscape is a haven for waste-cowboys that use developing countries as global dumping grounds when there is a profit to be made," said Jim Puckett, the executive director of the Basel Action Network, a foundation based in Seattle that monitors the toxic trade.

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## WHERE TO DISPOSE OF ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT

### Cellphones

All cellphone providers feature recycling programs. AT&T, Verizon and T-Mobile allow you to drop off unwanted cellphone equipment at their stores to be refurbished for sale with proceeds going to charity.

Best Buy and Office Depot also feature free recycling kiosks for cellphones, batteries and chargers.

## Computers

Dell offers free recycling for all of its products, and customers can trade in non-Dell computers with a purchase. Hewlett-Packard features a similar program.

## iPods and [MP3 players](#)

Apple accepts any iPods, and customers receive 10 percent off their next iPod purchase.

Staples features recycle bins for any type of MP3 player or hand-held electronic.

## TVs, DVD players, stereos

Since these are usually the heaviest and "deadliest" items, most retailers have specific rules about what they accept. To find the nearest e-recycler in your area, visit [www.mygreenelectronics.org](http://www.mygreenelectronics.org) .

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## HELPFUL WEB SITES

[www.earth911.org](http://www.earth911.org)

[www.call2recycle.org](http://www.call2recycle.org)

[www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org)

[www.cellphonetradeins.com](http://www.cellphonetradeins.com)

[www.ban.org](http://www.ban.org)

[www.electronicstakeback.com](http://www.electronicstakeback.com)

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