

Mobile industry eyes savings by recycling

March 1 2012, by Hui Min Neo



A Lebanese woman throws her mobile phone into a box for recycling during the launch of a campaign organised by Nokia in Beirut in 2010. More than a billion mobile phones are made every year but fewer than one percent are recycled, experts say, noting that billions of dollars could be saved if consumers go green.

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"Sometimes the size of a phone is deceiving for the [perception](#) of the impact it does to the environment," said [Sprint Nextel](#) vice president of product, Fared Adib.

The value of the materials in each device is also often underestimated.

A typical [mobile phone](#) weighing less than 150 grams contains valuable material such as gold, silver and rare minerals -- highly sought after elements critical in [high technology](#) manufacturing.

"Given today's low collection and recycling rates, nearly all of this material is lost," said the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, a research institute.

In Europe alone, 160 million discarded phones result in a loss of about \$500 million every year, it said in a report.

Bertrand Villie, who is in charge of [sustainable development](#) at Sony Mobile France, confirmed the trend.

"Very few people bring their mobile phones back, unless they are defective. We have tried to stimulate this, but rates of returns are very low," he said.

Analysts argue that there is a strong economic case for recycling and reuse, not to mention an environmental one.

If the most reusable components such as the camera, display and battery and charger were stripped out, and used in the production of new devices, the costs of remanufacturing low-cost mobile phones could be slashed by 50 percent.

With a 95 percent collection rate for reuse and remanufacturing, the industry could save over \$2 billion on material and \$160 million on [energy costs](#) every year in Europe alone.

While some phones are indeed at the end of their [lifecycle](#) and need to be scrapped completely and recycled, many others can be re-used.

A movement is now underway to push for greater re-use.

Sprint Nextel has formed an alliance with three other firms in the industry to get more people to bring their old phones back for refurbishing, so that others who may not be able to afford brand new phones, can reuse them.

"This is an opportunity for a product that is out of reach to some, that costs maybe \$400 to \$500. We're taking these products and putting them in emerging markets" where technology remains scarce, said Adib.

Besides offering a financial incentive to consumers, the group called Device Renewal Forum is establishing a certification standard for refurbished phones that ensures that only properly functioning devices reenter the market.

"The highest use of [recycling](#) is reuse -- to use it until it's functionally obsolete rather than perceptively obsolete," stressed David Edmondson, chief executive of eRecyclingCorps, a founding member of the forum.

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