

Old cell phones make new businesses

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The hundreds of millions of cellular phones cast aside each year worldwide have spawned a booming recycling industry.

In the U.S., the average phone is replaced after just 12 months, The New York Times reported Sunday, while in China, about 200 million phones per year are discarded.

Some businesses have capitalized on the waste bonanza by breaking down such electronic waste into its valuable basic components.

Umicore, a Belgian company, has developed a smelting process that extracts 17 metals -- including copper and gold -- from the phones and other waste, the Times reported. By some estimates, each phone contains \$1 worth of precious materials.

Other phones are gathered by recycling companies such as ReCellular and sent for refurbishment to the developing world, where three-quarters of all telephones are mobile but new phones are too expensive for the average person, the newspaper said.

But while these options are better than simply throwing a phone -- and its many toxic components - into a landfill, they still create their own environmental problems. Smelting creates harmful emissions, while even refurbished phones are often thrown away in their destination countries, creating environmental hazards there.

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