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Be fix-it friendly

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Getting things fixed was once a way of life in America. In today's fast-paced, shopping-obsessed society, that's a distant memory.

But repair isn't totally dead. You just have to pick your battles.

For small appliances, unfortunately, the battle ended years ago. Repair lost. With the wave of inexpensive imports, you can buy a new coffeemaker or microwave for less than it would cost to fix it. And repair shops don't make any money fixing small appliances, so they won't even mess with them anymore.

The solution — for the environment, and for your wallet — is to make sure you buy durable, high-quality items. Just as the best waste management strategy is to prevent waste in the first place, the best repair strategy is to avoid the need for repair. If you pay more up-front for better-made items, they will last for years and never need to be fixed.

Check Consumer Reports publications to learn which brands have the best history of durability. Small appliances do not have to be disposable. For example, we received a coffeemaker as a wedding present 15 years ago. We use it every day and it's still going strong

Now the trend toward cheap, disposable merchandise has expanded into clothing and furniture. But you don't have to buy into it. Purchase well-made products, and take advantage of the repair options still available. Here are four types of products it makes sense to repair:

Shoes: Why not repair or resole your favorites and save time and money? In King, Pierce and Snohomish counties, you'll find more than 55 shoe repair shops, from modern mall shops to the old, nostalgic cobbler-style storefronts. The shoe repair industry keeps 62 million pairs of shoes out of landfills annually, according to the Shoe Service Institute of America. But the number of shoe repair workers is declining, the U.S. Department of Labor says, as more people buy cheaper shoes, or buy new shoes instead of repairing old ones.

Don't buy shoes if they can't easily be resoled or repaired. Shoes with Vibram soles are a good bet for repair.

Zippered items: People often toss out purses, backpacks and other accessories and clothing just because the zipper broke. Many shoe repair shops and tailors will fix zippers for just a few dollars. It's also not that hard to repair a zipper yourself: Do an Internet search for "zipper repair tips."

Furniture: If you love it, get it fixed or reupholstered. Sometimes just a touch-up works wonders. For



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scratches and deep nicks in wooden furniture, use wax sticks, available in a variety of shades from the hardware store, suggests the Hardwood Manufacturers Association.

A friend in California who worked at a garbage-transfer station taught herself upholstery because it made her so angry to see beautiful old furniture with torn upholstery thrown away. Even if you don't want to learn a new skill, you have many local upholsterers to choose from. But don't wait too long — the Department of Labor says upholstery is another profession in decline.

Major appliances and electronics: If you buy well-made appliances, you should not have to worry about repair for many years. Average life spans are 17 years for a refrigerator, 13 for a washer, 14 for a dryer, 17 for a stove and 10 for a dishwasher, according to Seattle City Light. The life of electronics products varies greatly, due to technology upgrades.

The number of electronics and appliance repair shops in the U.S. plummeted 64 percent and 37 percent, respectively, since 1992, says Consumer Reports. But you can still find dozens of local repair shops for major appliances and larger electronics — check the Yellow Pages. For appliances, consider tackling minor repairs yourself. The Internet offers a wealth of appliance repair guides and sources for spare parts. One established resource: www.repairclinic.com (or 800-269-2609).

In some cases, it may make sense financially and environmentally to forgo appliance repair, and replace an older model with a more energy-efficient one. Look at your refrigerator first, since it uses more electricity than any other appliance — about 15 percent of the total home electric bill, according to the Alliance to Save Energy.

For all products, repair and durability may yet make a comeback, as more people realize newer doesn't always mean better — just more expensive.

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