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When is it worthwhile to get things repaired rather than replaced?

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Is repair dead?

In the throes of another frantic holiday-shopping season, it sure seems like no one fixes anything anymore. For most of us, it's easier to just get new stuff.

But with perseverance we can still find plenty of ways to save money and reduce waste by repairing things, even if we can never completely return to the "fix it up or do without" ethic our grandparents knew.

Q: Why would I even want to repair something now? New and better products are always available, sometimes at prices cheaper than the cost of fixing the old product.

A: The trick is to figure out when repair makes sense financially and environmentally. For instance, repair is no longer feasible for most small appliances, but should definitely be considered for major appliances and expensive electronics.

Q: Is there a financial rule of thumb for when you should have a product repaired?

A: Appliance repairs that cost more than half the price of a new product should be avoided, advises Consumer Reports. That's a useful guideline for other products as well.

One exception is for appliances that consume a lot of energy.

An efficient new refrigerator will save money on your electric bill and help reduce global warming, even if your ancient energy-hog fridge was repairable.

Also consider your time, which can be more valuable than money. Buying a new product instead of fixing an old one does not always save time. With today's complex digital products, it may require more time to research a purchase and then learn a new product's intricacies than to get an old one repaired.

Q: Isn't it tough to find good repair people now?

A: Not necessarily. Seek referrals from friends and trusted retailers. If you find local repair shops through the phone book or online directories, check Internet reviews of those shops. As with any online reviews, disregard the extreme best and worst ones, which are more likely to be biased or fake.

Don't hesitate to shop around. Several dozen businesses in the Seattle area repair appliances and electronics.

Q: What about fixing things myself?

A: Making your own repairs of certain appliances is easier than ever, thanks again to the Internet. Just do an online search for your problem, such as "water in bottom of refrigerator." For that one, you would learn from several sources that it's probably just a plugged drain hose in back, costing nothing to quickly resolve.

Online parts retailers can supply any part you need for appliances or other equipment. Some repair shops also sell new or used parts for do-it-yourself repairs.

Q: Should I consider repair for nonmechanical products?

A: Repair is worth exploring for any item you love, from shoes to luggage to camping equipment to furniture. Local repair options exist for all of those.

Q: Wouldn't it be better to just buy products that don't break so quickly?

A: Absolutely. Before you buy, research repair histories of manufacturers by product category (a company may make reliable dishwashers but lousy microwaves). Consumer Reports is a great source for this info, although you need a paid subscription.

Q: Other than buying high-quality products, what else can I do to make my stuff last longer?

A: Regular preventive maintenance, especially on something that gets lots of wear and tear like a lawn mower, will help keep you out of the repair shop and the retail checkout line.

Seek out repairable products, such as shoes that can be resoled. Since appliances and electronics with many fancy features are typically the hardest and most expensive to repair, ask yourself if you need all those extras.

So no, repair isn't dead. Just look around and you'll see cool examples like the Bikery (www.thebikery.org), a volunteer-run bicycle-repair shop in Seattle's Central District that shows how young people have embraced repair.

The fix is in, and there's hope for the future.

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