

Columnists

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EcoConsumer

Few people recycle small electronics, but it's easy

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Americans do everything with their cellphones now except recycle them.

It's not that we can't. Recycling programs for cellphones abound, including hundreds of collection locations in the Seattle area.

But the percentage of cellphones that get recycled or reused is estimated at a paltry 10 percent nationwide. This compares with impressive recycling rates for many other products, such as 89 percent for newspapers and 96 percent for auto batteries.

Recycling rates are equally dismal for other small, personal-electronics equipment such as MP3 music players. And in the next few years, lots more small electronic devices will be tossed out as new multipurpose "smartphones" make music players and other single-use devices obsolete.

Cellphones and small electronics should be recycled because they usually contain toxic substances. Extending the life of these devices, by using them longer or getting them to others who can use them, is even better than recycling because fewer resources are consumed to make new products.

Q: Why are so few small electronics recycled?

A: More than half of all unused cellphones are estimated to be stashed in people's drawers. At least they did not go straight to the landfill, but those forgotten phones are always in danger of being tossed in the trash eventually.

Environmental advocates say most electronics manufacturers, retailers and cellphone-service providers haven't done enough to promote recycling. As an example of what companies can do, Sprint recently began an aggressive recycling campaign with the goal of collecting nine cellphones for reuse or recycling for every 10 phones it sells by 2017.

Q: So where can I recycle my small electronics?

A: Most cellphone-service providers and many retailers including Bartell Drugs, Goods for the Planet, Staples and McLendon Hardware will take your old cellphones at no charge. See King County's "What Do I Do With?" website at seati.ms/ptSv2m for locations (under Electronics). Some recyclers offer postage-paid mailing labels for sending in your cellphone.

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The Call2Recycle.org program, funded by manufacturers of rechargeable batteries and cellphones, provides the most extensive network of cellphone-collection locations. Enter your ZIP code on the website to find a nearby site.

Recycling locations for nonoperating MP3 players and other small electronics are harder to find. Washington state's electronics-recycling database lists a few locations for some counties.

Call 1-800-RECYCLE 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Friday or visit 1800recycle.wa.gov for those listings, or ask your retailer if they will take back those devices. Target sets a great example by accepting old MP3 players and cellphones at all its stores.

Q: What happens to the collected cellphones?

A: More than 60 percent are refurbished and resold domestically and worldwide. When phones and other small electronics can't be reused, the cases, guts and batteries go through various processes to separate the metals and other components for recycling.

Q: How do I make sure the information on my old phone gets erased?

A: The cellphone industry recommends using the website seati.ms/of5ALO, hosted by the recycling company ReCellular, to find data-erasing instructions for different models of cellphones.

Q: It seems so wasteful that each type of cellphone or device needs a different type of charger. You shouldn't have to get a brand-new charger every time you buy a phone or lose your charger. Why isn't there a "one charger fits all" system?

A: The industry has finally begun to address the tangled proliferation of chargers. As of January 2012, the same charger will fit most new smartphones sold in the U.S., according to an industry trade association.

Ultimately, the environmental impact from small electronics can be significantly reduced if manufacturers use fewer toxic materials and design products for easier recycling. This is starting to happen, but in the meantime let's recycle all those cellphones in our drawers and hang up on waste.

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