

Homes & Real Estate

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When it comes to electronics, consumers' choices matter

As consumers, we influence manufacturers and retailers through our purchasing decisions. Understanding environmental considerations can help us make the best choices, personally and for the planet.

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

Ecoconsumer

Electronic devices are all about convenience, which helps to explain why we don't spend much time considering the environmental impact of our smartphones, tablets, laptops, TVs and all the rest.

That shouldn't be our job, anyway. When it comes to environmental stewardship, the companies selling us the products bear the primary responsibility.

From production to usage to disposal, personal electronics contribute significantly to global pollution and climate change, and can adversely affect public health.

Although a few companies have made positive strides, recent reports from global nonprofit organizations indicate these problems are not going away, and might be getting worse.

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Hidden problems

Since 2006, Greenpeace International has issued detailed reports about environmental impacts of the electronics industry. Although toxic chemicals and metals in electronics continue to be a major issue, the latest Greenpeace report, published in September, also emphasizes grave concerns about the electronics industry's energy consumption.

In East Asia, where many components of electronics are manufactured, "dirty coal power still dominates energy production and is the leading cause of climate change," the report states.

As an alternative, Greenpeace proposes the electronics industry should make "a large-scale switch to renewable energy to power their supply chain, set aggressive targets for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, and support clean-energy policies, alongside ensuring our devices are as energy efficient as they can be."

One major challenge in determining environmental impacts from electronics is that the producers use numerous, often largely anonymous subcontractors and suppliers. Apple, for example, reported in 2013 that 748 companies supplied its materials, manufacturing and assembly; more

than 600 of them are based in Asia.

Subcontractors on the lowest tiers of the supply chain have reportedly been difficult to audit and regulate. The Electronics Watch Consortium, funded by the European Union and others, says the worst environmental problems and working conditions are often found at those companies.

The consortium has asked major electronics brands to take more responsibility for the labor and environmental practices of their subcontractors.

Bright spots

The outlook isn't all bleak. Compared to 2006, "considerably" fewer electronics products today contain the worst hazardous substances, says Greenpeace.

Apple, Nokia and Sony have eliminated the use of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic and brominated flame retardants (BFRs) in their mobile phones, and Apple has also removed PVC and BFRs from additional products.

Other companies that Greenpeace lists as making progress in its efforts to reduce toxic materials in their products include Acer, BlackBerry, Dell, HCL, HP, Lenovo, LG, Philips, Samsung, Toshiba and Wipro.

Work needed

In the report, Panasonic is listed as a "laggard" in reducing hazardous chemicals in all three of Greenpeace's main product categories (mobile phones, PCs/tablets and TVs). Sony is listed as a laggard for both PCs/tablets and TVs, and Samsung and Sharp received that designation for TVs only.

Major brands making progress on environmental issues and working conditions must constantly fight off competition from smaller companies without the same standards. Emerging manufacturers of low-cost smartphones such as Huawei, Micromax and Xiaomi have not yet adopted plans to eliminate hazardous substances, the Greenpeace report points out.

Consumers' role

For our part, we can use online searches to look into a company's environmental and labor practices before we make a purchase, and we can let manufacturers and retailers know if we're dissatisfied.

We can make sure to recycle our electronics properly through the state's E-Cycle Washington program (ecyclewashington.org), which requires manufacturers to pay the costs of recycling and proper disposal for major types of electronics.

Most crucially, we can re-evaluate whether we need those shiny new devices quite so often. Could we instead purchase more durable or upgradable products, or used or refurbished devices? Collectively, we still have economic and environmental power, and the future is right there in our hand.

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