

Vista company smashes computers for recycling

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By Nicole Reino

Bob Erie is in the computer business. But he doesn't manufacture them or reconfigure their hard drives. He destroys them.

His company, Computer Recyclers of America, takes apart computer monitors, among other electronics products, and prepares them for recycling.

"Old computers to server equipment to printers to satellite equipment – you name it, we destroy it," said Erie, the Vista company's president.

Before opening CRA last year, Erie spent 12 years working at computer companies. In that time, he heard the same complaint from his clients: They were sick of sending their e-waste long distances for recycling, because the shipping was so expensive.

CRA, a \$1.5-million-a-year electronic waste recycling company, crushes the glass in cathode-ray tubes, or CRTs, found in computer monitors and televisions.

"That's our claim to fame. That's what our machine does," Erie said.

The machine he is referring to, the CRT Crusher, is one of six in the country. The "\$350,000 wonder," as Erie calls it, is a conveyer feed machine that smashes computer monitors and television tubes in a hermetically sealed environment and separates them into two parts – metal and glass.

Once the crusher does its job, CRA sends the materials to glass smelters and metal recycling companies. Ultimately, the materials are mixed with asphalt and used to make roads.

Because the crusher only handles CRTs, other equipment that comes to CRA first must be taken apart by hand and then separated according to commodity.

Erie said most customers don't just drop off CRTs that have been removed from computers. Many bring entire computers – keyboards, hard drives and all – and his employees have to separate everything by hand.

All the plastic, copper, aluminum and wires get separated, put into different bins and then shipped to companies that recycle each commodity. CRA recycles 1.2 million pounds of electronic waste and processes 550,000 to 600,000 pounds of glass a month.

"The demand for this kind of recycling has increased because of the legislation that has gone into effect," said Charles Corcoran, chief of the waste identification and recycling section for the state Department of Toxic Substance Control.

In 2001, a law was passed making it illegal to dump cathode-ray tubes into landfills in California. CRTs contain large quantities of hazardous material, such as lead, and the heavy machinery used to crush waste in landfills can release this hazardous material into the area.

"You can't throw this stuff away, because it's polluting our landfills," said Cindy Erie, Bob Erie's wife and vice president of CRA. "The general public really hasn't caught on to this yet, but many corporations have known this for a while."

Most of CRA's clients are large corporations such as Qualcomm and Sony. Bob Erie said about 60 percent of his business comes from companies that are either based in or have offices in San Diego County.

From January to April of this year, CRA received 126,000 pounds of Sony's electronic scraps, said Don Boronkay, environmental engineer for Sony Technology Center in San Diego.

The company charges 30 cents a pound to destroy electronics, but has a bulk rate for big customers.

But while CRA's business is growing, Erie said the company still is recouping its start-up costs.

"We're nowhere near starting to retrieve any profits," he said. "It hasn't been around that long, so it's going to take some time to get the revenue generated."

Erie said that because of the new electronics trends and laws, he is confident CRA will be profitable in the future.

A new state law that goes into effect in July will require Californians to pay a recycling fee when they purchase electronics with cathode-ray tubes and video-display screens of 4 inches or larger.

Erie said many companies and consumers are replacing their cathode-ray monitors with liquid crystal displays, also called flat-screen monitors, and that means all the unwanted cathode-ray monitors will have to be recycled.

The CRT machine is not set up to crush flat screens. But the company is looking into a machine that has LCD capabilities, said Aaron Blum, CRA's chief operating officer.

"In the foreseeable future, more things are going to be coming out," Blum said. "It's just going to become a bigger and bigger industry."

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