

BRANDWEEK

Recycling Becomes Electric for CE Brands

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By Steve Miller



EWaste management has gone from being a headache to a marketing tool. Electronics manufacturers and retailers are attempting to address the problem and give themselves a green halo by encouraging consumers to recycle old TVs, computers and other devices.

Sony, Hewlett-Packard, Office Depot, Best Buy and even 1-800-Flowers.com are among the many companies promoting recycling in their marketing efforts.

Obsolescence and trading up in consumer electronics generates up to 1.9 million tons of discarded electronics per year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. The refuse jams landfills with toxic ingredients and emits hazardous gases.

The issue will take a higher profile as the government-mandated switch to all digital TV signals in February approaches. The shift should accelerate the move away from analog TV sets and make the mound of cathode ray tubes that much higher.

Sony, which last week announced the availability of its lower cost Bravia M line of LCD TVs, has paired with Waste Management, Houston, for a series of events around the country. The "Take Back Recycling Program" invites consumers to leave behind their unwanted devices for no charge.

Sony will plug the program with a national ad campaign, via BBDO, New York, this summer. New TV, print and online promotes recycling by recycling old ads for once cutting-edge products. "It really does help the brand," said Stuart Redsun, svp-corporate marketing, Sony Electronics, San Diego. "We've found that consumers who have dropped off their products have even stronger ties to the Sony brand, being that we did this for them for free. It also makes them feel good about themselves."

1-800-Flowers.com is launching a nationwide computer recycling program, starting with a June 4 event at its Carle Place, N.Y. headquarters in which donors receive a 15% off coupon.

Hewlett-Packard and Staples partnered with NBC Universal during Earth Week to launch the company's "Green is Universal" initiative. The kickoff event featured Matt Lauer and the NBC Today crew hauling in junked computers and cell phones for recycling. Electronic Recyclers International (ERI), Fresno, Calif., handled disposal of the items.

Consumers were invited to also bring their old equipment to participating Staples stores. HP offered \$50 off its more energy-efficient printers and \$150 off select computers in exchange for old models.

"It begins to feel strange when you've always had this focus on the environment before and now all of a sudden it's fashionable," said David Roman, vp-marketing communications for HP's personal systems group. "Now we have to find a way to gracefully fold it into the marketing."

But recycling is of growing importance to consumers. A recent Consumer Electronics Association report found recycling electronics devices has increased 9% in terms of importance to consumers since 2005.

In all, eWaste is an eco-tragedy that offers both peril and potential for a marketer. "It's one of those things that you have to get involved with because if you don't someone will call you out," said Rob Enderle, principal at Enderle Group, San Jose, Calif. "Things like recycling and energy use are a big concern to both vendors and individuals, and they do take these things into consideration [when selecting a] brand."

Best Buy claims to have among the most expansive recycling programs going, from weekend eWaste roundups at its stores to its "Tech Trade-in" program where consumers can trade in gently used electronics for a Best Buy gift card.

Office Depot also offers in-store recycling bins, which gives the retailer a chance to engage the consumer in its line of green office products like recycled printer ink cartridges and printer paper, said Yalmaz Siddiqui, director of environmental strategy for Office Depot, Delray Beach, Fla. "There is a great cross-sell opportunity. People can go from the recycling service in the stores to the green products we offer." There's a risk when brands are competing to be greener than the next, said Roman. "I don't see it now, but it would trivialize things if it started to happen."

Even though it is in its infancy stage, ERI CEO John Shegerian said getting on the e-recycling bandwagon is an important opportunity. "Brands don't want to blow this."

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