

The King of E- waste Recycling



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John S. Shegerian is the Co- Founder, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer of Electronic Recyclers.

Fresno, CA —John Shegerian is a guru of green. Shegerian carries around half-size business cards printed with green soy ink on recycled paper.

The first thing that greets the visitors to his recycling business in south Fresno is a green-lettered quote by him saying "Every minute counts" on the wall — a dose of his waste-free philosophy.

He's had his company's "Green is Good" slogan trademarked. He prides on his office fixtures being all eco-friendly. The man even wears a green tie.

His only sin in public, perhaps, is the Mercedes that he drives, but that won't stop him from preaching green.

"We can practice good environmental practices and not affect the quality of our life whatsoever," says Shegerian. "Being in a business like this and making it successful is a DNA issue. You have to not only talk the talk, but you have to walk the walk."

If there is a hall of fame for e-waste recyclers, Shegerian has found his place: He has built a sprawling recycling empire in just five years.

Shegerian, 44, is the chairman and CEO of Electronic Recyclers International, whose plant is located in the bustling industrial area near Jensen Avenue. Five years ago, Shegerian — an entrepreneur who created Financialaid.com as well as CampusDirt.com and even the Bulldog Brewing Co. — got into the recycling business. He took over an ailing recycling company in San Diego and quickly turned it around.

His company, which moved to its current location in 2004, has grown to be the largest e-waste recycler in California. Just this April, he has expanded his reach to Massachusetts, allowing the company to now cover from coast to coast. Shegerian says he's already in negotiation with several other sites in the country as well as Europe and Asia. Its ambition is to become the largest e-waste recycler in the world.

"It's not just a California problem. It's not just a United States problem. It's an international problem," Shegerian said. "Electronics is the fastest growing waste stream in the world. It's a problem, and it's a crisis that was born out of the technological revolution. And we have a chance to create jobs to clean up the environment, and the greatest part of the story is, virtually everything in your electronics gets recycled."

Fancy demanufacturer

The inside look of the plant provides a rare glimpse into how old electronics are recycled.

Inside the facility at 2860 S. East Ave., incessant banging noise permeates and forklifts crisscross the warehouse packed with pallets full of high-value junks. Workers are constantly disassembling old cathode-ray tubes in one corner, while others recover computer chips from computer for gold and silver in the other. Still, others engage in ripping out metals, tossing parts and sifting miscellaneous recyclables.

"We are a fancy demanufacturer," Shegerian described his company. Operations at the Fresno plant go way beyond those of its predecessor in San Diego, where only computers were recycled.

Here, Electronic Recyclers International receives some 6-7 million pounds of discarded electronics from all over California each day, and its 300 employees process about 200,000 pounds a day of e-waste around the clock, according to Anthony Borges, plant manager.

"We prepare these materials for recycling," Borges said. What sets his company apart from other recyclers is the automated equipment that separates metal and glass in CRTs, Borges said. An assembly line of men and women prepare CRTs for separation on a conveyer belt, and another assembly line awaits behind the giant crusher. The machine catches about 80 percent of metal, but the rest must be recovered by hand.

Then there is a computer hard drive shredder in the back. Aluminum and magnesium are recovered, and the whole process is being recorded by an overhead camera to provide assurance to the customers that things are done right at the plant, Borges said.

Analogue cable boxes are also disassembled here.

And here is the little known fact of e-waste recycling: Computer motherboards are further processed for the recovery of aluminum and copper, and memory chips are removed for gold and silver recovery. Computer chips are valued at \$12 to \$65 a pound, Borges said. Virtually nothing that comes into the plant — aluminum and other metals, while plastic, and black plastic — goes to landfill.

Business to advocacy

With the success of his company, Shegerian has fallen into the role of somewhat of an advocate for the potential economic development potential of the green sector as well as the environmentally sustainable economy.

He has visited China four times already this year and 10 times last year, including once with Gov. Schwarzenegger. China, where most of original equipment manufacturers are located, is the next goldmine for e-waste recycling industry, he says.

"China is going through its industrial revolution and technological revolution at the same time," Shegerian said. "They have an unquenchable thirst for all of our commodities — metals, glass, and plastics."

Aside from his business interest, Shegerian spends much time advocating for environmentally sustainable economy and the economic development potential of eco-friendly businesses.

This year Shegerian has made more than 30 speeches across the country and spoke at the United Nations, hoping to enlighten politicians and the media, he said.

"Tsunami is coming, and we have to be prepared to create good recycling opportunities across the world to recycle the products appropriately," Shegerian said. "The electronics are part of our lives and they are going to stay part of life. When they come to the end of their life, we have to handle them responsively."