

green briefs:

What's really under all that Sustainability Marketing



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John Shegerian, Co-founder, Chairman & CEO, Electronic Recyclers International
Tatyana Kjellberg, Manager of Strategic Programs, Product Take-back, Hewlett-Packard
Brenda Mathison, Director of Environmental Affairs, Best Buy

This presentation took place against the backdrop of a June 2, 2008 press release from Best Buy, announcing an electronics take-back test program being launched in 117 stores.

The session was well-attended, and hands competed to ask questions.

Best Buy has been around since the 60's, and that leadership is still there today. When Brenda Mathison started there 6 years ago, there was no formal sustainability plan. But the leadership never said no, and now she and 4 people form a compact corporate sustainability team at Best Buy. But in her words, "We also have the largest team at Best Buy."

Regarding their new take-back plan, Mathis compares the consumer electronics situation with the re-thinking of the medical waste stream the 80's. It's not a new model. Consumer electronics is the fastest-growing waste segment in the world, and it would cost 300 times the value to mine these resources from the earth. This makes these corporations the new urban miners. But this initiative will fail if the H-P's of the world don't participate, if marketers don't participate, and if recyclers are not on board.

Tatyana Kjellberg pointed out that as a manufacturer, HP is not necessarily a recycling expert. They have to talk to recyclers to learn their processes and understand how they work, and make sure the recycling is happening thoroughly and responsibly. Not just e-trash being shipped to the third world as an exported toxic disaster. (See Green Briefs article, e-Waste, a Toxic Time-Bomb) They are also making progress on the product design front, with simple things such as ensuring the use of screws is minimized, and that the same kinds of screws are used as much as possible to help easy disassembly.

John Shegerian, CEO of Electronic Recyclers International also offered some thoughts. "California has recycled 200 million pounds of e-waste in 2007. What needs to happen is a landfill ban, and then an export ban to keep it from just being shipped overseas." But he's not optimistic, given the current demands on Washington, that this type of legislation will be coming any time soon.

Attendee Richard Franklin, from Envirobrand asked a HUGE question. Will the recyclers and retailers be ready for the avalanche of response?

Mathis shares his concern. On the warehouse side for Best Buy, 14 Distribution Centres across the country feed 942 stores. This means trailer-loads of stuff going back to recyclers, which is good. But it's not without its challenges. Material flow is one of them, including avoiding a land-rush to drop off items, (as might happen with a time-limited event-based program) Best Buy works very carefully with their messaging to ensure people think of dropping off whenever it's handy. In some cases, they are enabling customers to circumvent the warehouse, or even recycling, entirely. On the Best Buy web site customers can find out if there is re-use value in the item. If so, Best Buy will actually pay them for the product. If not, they can print off a label and send it directly to Best Buy's recycler.

"We're not perfect." Says Mathison. "We've learned a lot in 4 days, and we appreciate the accolades, but we still have a lot more to learn."