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SPECIAL REPORT: BUSINESS OF GREEN

Bring Out Your Dead (TVs)

By ERICA GIES

SAN FRANCISCO — Moore's law, which has held true for more than 40 years, states that the number of transistors that can fit on an integrated circuit doubles approximately every two years. The world economy has reaped the benefits of this maxim, with ever-sleeker and more powerful electronics. But the phenomenon has also created up to 50 million metric tons annually of obsolete waste, according to the United Nations.

In February, Best Buy, the largest electronics retail chain in the United States, upgraded its take-back and recycling program to make it one of the most comprehensive in the country. The chain's 1,028 U.S. stores now accept televisions with screens of up to 32 inches, or 81.3 centimeters; products with cathode ray tubes; monitors; laptops; cellphones and other consumer electronics. Items are accepted for free or the store levies a \$10 charge, against which customers receive a \$10 gift card.

A pick-up program takes larger items like console TVs and appliances.

While Staples, Office Depot, and other U.S. chains take back some electronics, they do not accept televisions. "It's not comprehensive if you're excluding an entire category of electronics, particularly one that is so challenging to recycle," said Barbara B. Kyle, national coordinator for the Electronics TakeBack Coalition, which promotes responsible electronics recycling.

Manufacturer responsibility is also on the rise. A year ago, Sony was the only TV maker to take back its old sets: now five others do so — LG, Samsung, Panasonic, Toshiba, and Sharp. But most take delivery at their recycling partners' locations, which are usually in industrial parts of town.

Best Buy's program is likely to be more popular because takes back televisions at its stores, which are more convenient for most consumers. The chain currently accepts the cost of recycling these TVs, although it is negotiating with manufacturers over who should pay.

Accepting the waste is just a start. Electronic waste is often shipped to developing countries for recycling, a practice that environmentalists tried, with limited success, to outlaw in 1995 through the so-called BAN Amendment to the Basel Convention, an international treaty on hazardous waste disposal.

"We think export is not legitimate and needs to stop," said Jim Puckett, executive director of the Basel Action Network, or BAN.

On May 12, the computer manufacturer Dell announced that it would not export any nonworking equipment to developing countries. "Dell is drawing a very sharp and bright line," said Ms. Kyle. "It just cuts through the confusing jargon and nuance. That puts them at the head of the class."

Still, Dell does not disclose its recycling partners. The TakeBack coalition is pushing for greater openness in recycling programs because “in an arena where there’s so much cheating going on, transparency helps improve some of that,” said Ms. Kyle.

Best Buy’s export policy is not as strict as Dell’s, but it has published on its Web site both its standards and its recycling partners.

Ms. Kyle said she was pleased to see the company’s efforts toward openness but was concerned about the vagueness of some statements, which, she said, left “wiggle room.” For example, she takes issue with Best Buy’s statement: “The dumping of electronic waste on developing countries should be prohibited.”

“Is Best Buy going to prohibit that?” she asked. “That’s a very different statement than saying, ‘We will make sure that our exports from our program do not go to developing countries.’”

A Best Buy spokeswoman, Kelly Groehler, clarified the published statement. “We do not condone the illegal dumping of materials in other countries,” Ms. Groehler said. “We will cease a relationship with any vendor that practices that.”

Auditing is vital to tracking waste on its path through multiple handlers. Best Buy recently hired the Shaw Group to conduct audits on its recycling partners. But these will be internal, rather than independent, third-party audits; and Best Buy does not intend to disclose the auditing methods.

“We’re not perfect at this,” Ms. Groehler said. “we realize we have got a long ways to go.”

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