

Where does your mobile phone go to die?

There are almost 800 million mobile phone subscribers in Europe. As much as that says about a technically advanced European population, it also also raises environmental issues of waste and recycling. Fortunately, there is already a “going green” market that can turn dated phones into new goods.

There are approximately 794 million mobile phone subscribers in Europe who replace their mobile phones on average every 18 months. That’s about 500 million handsets a year. These statistics place mobile phones in a unique category, as no other consumer electronic device has as high a replacement rate. Why the high turnover? A report issued by the GSM Association indicates, “The replacement cycle is driven by the evolution of technology and the tendency of consumers to want a device with more applications.” As an example, just think how many of today’s mature mobile phone users would be satisfied with a mobile that didn’t offer access to the Internet.

But this trend raises another question: where do all the unwanted mobile phones go?

“Fortunately the research we have conducted together with the Mobile Takeback Forum reveals that very few people throw their used mobile phones away,” comments Sarah Bond, Head of Marketing and Communications for Regeneris, a UK-based company that manages the entire lifecycle of high-end electrical products. “There is a perceived value associated with these devices and we find that people are natural recyclers when it comes to mobile phones. They end up in one of three places: they go to a home landfill, which is basically a desk or dresser drawer, they’re passed on to friends or family or, in a small percentage of cases, they’re returned to the mobile operator for recycling.”

While it’s a relief to know that the majority of unused mobile phones are not thrown away, many organizations, including some of the larger mobile phone producers, have launched campaigns to increase the percentage of phones that are actually recycled.

Getting with the program

“More and more we’re seeing companies offer incentive schemes to encourage mobile phone recycling, basically targeted at the large percentage of phones languishing away in dresser drawers in homes across Europe. There is also a new crop of mobile phone and telecom companies that are offering incentives to encourage consumers to keep their mobile phones longer,” observes Bond.

European legislation works to set consistent standards

On July 1 2007, the first Compliance period for a new European law known as the WEEE Regulations (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) came into force. It means that producers of electronic and electrical goods now have the financial responsibility for the collection, treatment and recycling of their WEEE, and distributors must now provide a free-of-charge take-back solution when consumers are disposing of their WEEE on a like-for-like basis.



One person’s trash: an example of mobile phone cover art. Phone covers are pressed into plastic sheets and used as tabletops, display panels or hung on walls as art.

An example of this new breed of mobile phone company can be seen in Green Mobile, a UK-based mobile phone operator. They work with both residential and corporate business segments and offer incentives for keeping mobile phones an extra year, while at the same time offering highly competitive rates that often make “going green” an economically-viable option for businesses and consumers alike.

“We understand that enterprises need to have phones that work. There’s also the image factor, for some companies it doesn’t fit with their overall brand and customer segment if their representatives walk around with out-of-date phones,” comments Johan Thomsen, Sales and Marketing Manager for Green Mobile. “But despite these factors, we’re still making headway in convincing them to keep their mobile phones longer. If we don’t succeed in that, we offer them to purchase refurbished handsets instead of brand-new ones.”

Before you go green...

Before you decide to submit all of your company’s old mobile phones for recycling, be sure you have an organized way of deleting sensitive company information. A good device management system can enable you to wipe all devices prior to recycling. In that way you’re saving both your company, and the environment.

No other consumer electronic device has as high a replacement rate as mobile phones. Statistics show that they are replaced every 18 months.

According to Thomsen, it ends up being good business for everyone as they offer companies the ability to make gains in the corporate social responsibility area, while still saving money.

Regeneris also offers an end-of-life solution, where they take phones back once the company or consumer is ready to purchase new models.

Used, not useless

“These handsets have an inherent lifespan of 5-7 years, so there is usually a lot of life left in a phone once it’s turned in. Given the fact that a new handset can cost as much as one year’s salary in developing countries, there’s a huge cost savings in taking these slightly used handsets and distributing them to other parts of the world,” comments Bond. >>>